

NONPROFITS

21st century philanthropy is about what you are willing to give up: Ford Foundation's Darren Walker

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The Ford Foundation is working to strengthen social justice. Image credit: The Ford Foundation

By DIANNA DILWORTH

Philanthropy will not save the American Dream, but it can help support the people who are doing good work to make change happen and realize social justice, said Darren Walker, president of The Ford Foundation.

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Mr. Walker joined filmmaker Ava DuVernay at [Town & Country's Annual Philanthropy Summit](#) this week to discuss how philanthropy is evolving in an ever-changing world. He said that the mantra of the United States has been all about giving back, going back to the Carnegies and Rockefellers, but writing a check is as much about the donor as it is about the person it supports, as it gives them a brain rush of feeling good.

"The harder question is not what am I giving back, but what am I willing to give up," Mr. Walker said. "If the 20th century was about what am I giving back, the 21st century is about what am I willing to give up to ensure we live in a just society."



Filmmaker Ava DuVernay interviews Darren Walker, president of The Ford Foundation at Town & Country's virtual Philanthropy Summit. Image credit: Town & Country

Reconciliation

The murder of George Floyd and the subsequent protests against racism that have taken off across the globe has shown that the United States is in a moment of reckoning about racism, White supremacy and White privilege.

"Deniability of racism is no longer an option in this society," Mr. Walker said.

Philanthropy can help, but it alone cannot solve every problem. Instead, it is time for society to look at the underlying structures and systems and to address these issues.

"This is no longer time for amelioration or token approaches at systemic challenges, we must have fundamental reformation and transformation," Mr. Walker said. "And philanthropy has a role to play in that. We can be a partner. But it is the work of the people in a democracy through its government to find those solutions."

A half-billion dollars has been raised for civil rights social justice organizations this year in a field that typically raises 10 percent of that number.

"The good news is that Americans and American companies are being very generous," Mr. Walker said.

While these donations are great, now is the time to move beyond these guilt grants and virtue signaling to actually engage in the concrete, and sometimes difficult, work of reconciliation.

"I am a hopeless hopeaholic," Mr. Walker said. "I believe in this country and even on its darkest days, and there is no doubt that the murder of George Floyd was among the darkest days, there is still light."

"We now know that racism is systemic in America," he said. "We are not going to debate that. We are having the reckoning. We are not interested in recrimination, now is the time for reconciliation."

How can people with good intentions participate in this reconciliation? The first thing to do is to do the hard work to ask about one's own privilege and acknowledge how privilege has helped those who have succeeded in the country get ahead.

Companies should be interrogating themselves as to why there are so few African-American CEOs there were more five years ago and why the number of corporate C-suite positions held by African Americans is minimal.

"Our policies need to be examined," Mr. Walker said. "Why do we have a tax code and system that privileges people like me over working class people? Why are admissions policies at elite universities privileging those that need it the least and not supporting working class regular Americans whose children have aspirations too but don't get the leg-up."



Darren Walker is president of The Ford Foundation. Image credit: The Ford Foundation

Solidarity instead of charity

To be equitable, something has to be given up. And while this may be uncomfortable, it is important for philanthropists today to seek solidarity over charity.

Progress takes time. Black Lives Matter was seen as militant five years ago. Today, Disney is taking on the issue, Ms. DuVernay pointed out.

Philanthropists who want to make a difference should evaluate their objectives. If you do not have time, but have money, you may want to donate to a number of charities doing the work you would like to see done. If you have time, it might be more satisfying to focus on one charity and donate time and money to join the process.

"We are not going to be able to get through this time without grace, compassion, and love," Mr. Walker said. "We have to live with that every day because we are going to be challenged by greed and corruption and audacity."

"We are going to have to, as a society, extend to each other compassion and grace and dignity, the dignity to have the view that may not be your view, my view, but that it is legitimate and should be acknowledged and recognized," he said.

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