

**REMARKS TO THE ANNUAL MEETING OF THE INDEPENDENT SECTOR
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Perhaps the best way to begin to describe the Bradley Foundation's approach to the issue of faith-based initiatives is to tie it to a recent incident in one of Milwaukee's neighborhoods. Several weeks ago the city's Merrill Park Neighborhood Association, located in a low-income area facing a particularly savage outburst of crime and violence, re-christened its Community Resource Center the Fred Green Community Center. Fred Green, who was described in news accounts as a "tree trimmer," died a little over a year ago, after falling from a ladder while cutting tree branches for a friend.

But according to neighbors, Mr. Green was a great deal more than a tree trimmer. He had been active in the neighborhood organization and his local church; he pruned shrubbery and cut grass for free, when residents couldn't afford it; he faced down drug dealers in the streets, in spite of death threats and the fire-bombing of his garage; above all, he looked out for the community's children, recruiting them for a local karate school and taking them on camping trips. His Merrill Park neighbors sorely miss this man of faith and action.

At this point, I'd like to say that the Bradley Foundation proudly supported this pillar of civic commitment, who labored no more than five miles away from our offices in downtown Milwaukee. I'd like to say that, but I can't. We only heard about Mr. Green when we read an account of his admirable life written by Eugene Kane, a local columnist, published the day of his funeral.

This was a failure on the part of Bradley's grant-making program. Mr. Green is precisely the sort of person we wish to find and support under what we call our "new citizenship" agenda. This agenda arises from our mounting concern that Americans today tend to play an ever smaller role in public life. The everyday, local civic institutions by which they once governed themselves – associations rooted in religious affiliation, neighborhood, ethnicity, or voluntary impulse – have gradually been displaced by experts sporting "scientific" credentials in public policy, located in the remote, bureaucratic reaches of government, corporations, and the non-profit sector. Americans today, in our view, are encouraged to consider themselves not as self-governing citizens, actively shaping their daily lives, but rather as passive consumers or clients of service providers.

The major American foundations have done little to discourage this tendency. In spite of the professed commitment by many grant-makers to civic renewal, we nonetheless continue to direct most of our grant-making toward complex, large-scale programs aimed at testing out the latest social science theories, designed and run by academically

credentialed experts. Foundations increasingly tend to dictate precisely what those programs will look like, through painstakingly specific requests for proposals, advice-dispensing program officers, exhausting application requirements, elaborate design specifications, burdensome outcomes measurements, or -- our most recent means of cooptation -- "venture philanthropy," in which we load up a successful project with so much technical assistance, funding, and board involvement that it becomes basically a wholly-owned subsidiary of the funder. Only the largest and most sophisticated non-profits can hope to compete in this complex and demanding funding environment. Clearly, from most of our major foundations, the word is: amateurs -- everyday citizens tackling immediate problems -- need not apply.

Our view at Bradley, on the contrary, is that a solid foundation of amateurs is the indispensable condition for a healthy civic life -- one in which everyday citizens, organized in their local, grassroots civic associations, come to have a significant say once again in the public affairs that concern them most. And a great many of those civic associations, especially in low-income neighborhoods, are rooted squarely in religious faith. At Bradley, we opened the doors to faith-based funding not because we were promoting a particular faith perspective, but rather because we considered it the most effective way to cultivate a stronger civic life. As long as such a large number of citizens become civically engaged because they understand themselves to be answering a call from God, or Jahweh, or Allah, then foundations wishing to cultivate civic renewal, while refusing to fund faith-based organizations, are simply spinning their wheels.

Perhaps I can illustrate our approach to faith-based funding by constructing a hypothetical grant -- by imagining that we had in fact found Mr. Green and begun to assist his battle against crime in Merrill Park, before his untimely death.

Usually, with crime mounting in a neighborhood, the first thing city agencies, major non-profits, and foundations do is to gather themselves into a consortium and solemnly vow that nothing less than a comprehensive, collaborative, community-based coalition -- the magic "hard c" words -- will do to solve the problem. And so they pool their substantial resources and open program sites in the neighborhood, announcing that they intend thereby to seek lots of "community input." In truth, of course, the program site really isn't about listening to the neighborhood, but insuring that the neighborhood listens to the program staff, who are bent on testing out the latest theory in social intervention. Not entirely coincidentally, it usually turns out that this is a theory a major national foundation is now promoting -- and funding handsomely -- in the familiar six-city expanded demonstration project.

That's not typically our approach. We take as our first task figuring out what's already going on in the neighborhood that's good, by conferring quietly with the rather eclectic but thoroughly street-savvy group of community organizers, store-front preachers, and neighborhood elders whose judgments we've come to trust over the years. Had we asked them about Merrill Park, sooner or later they would have pointed us toward Fred Green.

We would have called Mr. Green and asked if we could drop by and talk to him. Initially, no doubt, he would have been suspicious. After all, Bradley is the largest foundation in Wisconsin, and if he had previously entertained any hope that the downtown foundations might be interested in his lonely struggle, experience would have long since disabused him of that notion. But we would have persisted, asking him to show us what he does in the neighborhood, perhaps by driving us around and pointing out his handiwork. As the newspaper article suggested, for Mr. Green this would have comprised an idiosyncratic mixture of free tree-trimming, trips to the zoo and pizza for neighborhood kids, and keeping an eye on the street-corners where the latest wave of dealers had set up shop -- hardly the basis for a new social science theory or a major multi-city demonstration project.

At some point, we would have asked, what makes you do this? What helps you to persist in the face of what seem to be overwhelming odds?

When we become this direct with grantees, the responses are always a bit hesitant and vague at first. But often we catch the shy, barely audible suggestion that *faith* makes them do it. At this point, reassurance from us is often necessary, and forthcoming. "It's OK to talk about God," we say. And usually, that moment of permission triggers the most passionate and insightful explanation of what drives neighborhood activists -- what compels them to put their lives on the line day in and day out to minister to the children and families of the community. Asking them to describe what they do and why they do it *without* talking about God, would be like asking them to make bricks without straw.

When it comes to the actual grant proposal from a qualifying non-profit, all we ask is a brief, straightforward description of the activities the grantee has underway in the neighborhood. We are neither surprised nor dismayed when, as it often turns out, the application contains more references to the Bible than to the latest issues of the leading social policy journals. Our reporting requirements are likewise designed to be as unburdensome as possible, with only simple, semi-annual program and financial reports requested.

Grants in our "new citizenship" program are typically modest -- twenty to fifty thousand dollars per year -- but are usually very flexible, directed to general operating support. We give away some \$3 million a year to local neighborhood projects in Milwaukee, and we're open to renewals as long as the projects continue to do solid work in the community. I should add that we could not have developed this program without the assistance of the National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise's Bob Woodson, who has not only articulated this approach's principles with clarity, tenacity, and courage for twenty years, but who also came to Milwaukee and helped us find and invest wisely in our first batch of grassroots grantees.

In short, our "new citizenship" approach is designed to locate those neighborhood leaders, like Mr. Green, who have quietly, patiently carved out enclaves of peace and hope even in the most troubled neighborhoods, usually without the slightest notice or assistance from the larger society. Perhaps because they're so busy doing the next right

and necessary thing, they really don't have time to sit down with that collaborative coalition assembled downtown to discuss the problem -- even if they were invited, which they usually aren't.

As we look for these neighborhood leaders, we try to abide by these operating principles:

- I. We try to listen to *their* goals and dreams; we don't lecture them about *our* plans and theories.
- II. We aren't troubled when their often seemingly random collection of undertakings fails to fit neatly into pre-existing program categories convenient to program officers, but alien to everyday neighborhood life.
- III. We understand that they are usually most inspired and most energetic when working on their own, self-designed projects, and so we don't insist that they join coalitions that require them to spend more time in committee meetings than on the streets.
- IV. We believe that it's a waste of time to ask neighborhood leaders to describe efforts to meet the unpredictable daily crises of an inner city neighborhood by artificially jamming them into power-point presentations, outcomes-based evaluations, or bulleted benchmarks. We try to find grantees whom we trust enough to spend general operating support wisely -- to tackle the unanticipated emergency roof repair, or buy the used van advertised in today's classifieds -- without worrying about getting advanced clearance for shifting funds between budget line items.
- V. We do not regard our grantees as temporary, three-year demonstration projects, but rather as stable, enduring institutions of neighborhood life, meriting our consideration as long they continue to contribute effectively to the life of the community.
- VI. Finally, we honor the fact that many of our grantees do what they do because their faith demands it of them, not because they carry credentials in some social science profession.

Perhaps the most frustrating aspect of this approach is that, while it *sounds* so simple and "common-sensical" -- find grassroots leaders and groups who are bringing life to the neighborhoods, and give them money to do it -- but in fact it's so rare, it's so easy to become distracted by peripheral issues. Putting it bluntly, when the goal is to cultivate civic activity at the grassroots, what results is by no means neat and tidy, from the obsessive-compulsive program officer's point of view. Neighborhood efforts instead *appear* to be amateurish, duplicative, inefficient, professionally understaffed or unstaffed, overly ambitious, vaguely defined, inadequately budgeted, insufficiently documented,

poorly reported, and justified in a language involving spirits and angels and souls and other absurd intangibles.

But those qualities are in fact key indicators of a vigorous civic life sustained by everyday, self-governing citizens. As foundations, we should accept -- no, we should embrace and celebrate -- the messy, inefficient, chaotic, glorious amateurism of civic life. While so often we *say* we *value* civic vitality, nonetheless we almost immediately throw ourselves into vigorous efforts to *suppress* it -- to force it into the mold of a neater, cleaner, more amenable professionalism.

We say, “of course, we want to fund faith-based, neighborhood projects, but just a few things first.” *First*, they must attend endless leadership training seminars, so they can get beyond a shaky reliance on personal charisma and reach the high plateau of routinized managerialism. *First*, they must fill our workshops to learn how to write slick grant proposals, studded with all the right social science buzz words and accounting terms. *First*, they must replace the neighbors on their boards of directors with appropriately impressive but only ambiguously committed outside directors. *First*, they must merge their unique visions and identities into the vague banalities of a foundation-mandated collaborative coalition, and learn to follow the lead of its professional staff.

Above all, *first*, they must douse their evangelical fire in the lukewarm bath of ecumenicalism. By the time neighborhood leaders have attended to just these few details *first*, before the funds can flow, they’re usually no longer recognizable to their own neighborhoods.

When the Bradley Foundation didn’t find Fred Green before his untimely death, our “new citizenship” program failed. The fact that we failed -- the fact that this good and decent man was active every day in his community a mere ten-minute drive from our offices, without our being aware of him -- is itself an indication of just how difficult it is to construct a grants program truly devoted to grassroots, faith-based civic revival. Even the most determined foundation, it seems, faces an uphill struggle to escape the cultural predilections of the philanthropic world in order to build its work instead on the “local knowledge” of a neighborhood, even when that neighborhood is in its own backyard.

By way of consolation, I suppose, we at Bradley can tell ourselves a couple of things. First, if we had found Fred Green, at least we would have tried to listen to *his* dreams, fund *his* work, respect and honor *his* spiritual calling. Second, we won’t rest until we’ve found the next Fred Green, and the next.