

GIVINGDONERIGHT-S4-EP2

Darren Walker [00:00:02] If you believe that the issues of justice are going to be contested, the thing that is most important is that there be institutions fighting to protect and promote justice. And so if you believe that, then you have to invest in institutions.

Grace [00:00:23] Welcome to Giving Done Right, a show with everything you need to know to make an impact with your charitable giving. I'm Grace Nicolette.

Phil [00:00:30] And I'm Phil Buchanan.

Grace [00:00:38] Today we're welcoming to the show a giant in philanthropy. Darren Walker, who is president of the Ford Foundation, a \$16 billion foundation headquartered in New York City and with offices around the world.

Phil [00:00:49] Darren is someone that we've known and worked with at CEP for many years, he's widely respected for the vision and leadership he's brought to the sector. I met him way back when he was at the Rockefeller Foundation. He's certainly been a mentor and a friend to me. He even wrote the – and I highly recommend it – forward to my book *Giving Done Right*, which of course ultimately led to this podcast. Darren has recently announced that he will be leaving the Ford Foundation at the end of 2025. We wanted to have him on the show to share his wisdom with donors about how to think about large-scale social change and about combating inequality.

Grace [00:01:29] Welcome, Darren.

Darren Walker [00:01:30] Thank you very much.

Grace [00:01:32] So you recently announced that you'll be stepping down, as Phil mentioned, that will be more than 12 years after you were appointed to the role in 2013. And you are someone who has set many new norms within philanthropy and many people watch what you do. I'm curious, what is the one achievement of the Foundation during your tenure that you're most proud of and why?

Darren Walker [00:01:55] Thank you very much, Grace. It's such a delight to be with you and Phil. I have such admiration for the work you do, and it's an honor for me. I feel humbled by the invitation. I think the thing I'm most proud of might come as a surprise, because it's not a program, a project or an initiative. It is the bringing to an end a very unfortunate part of the history of the Ford Foundation. In 1976, Henry Ford II who was the grandson of Henry Ford and the son of Edsel Ford, the founder of the Ford Foundation, left the board of the Ford Foundation and quite publicly rebuked the foundation. It began a period of, in many ways, an unfortunate time when there was recrimination and some negative feelings expressed on both sides, the Ford family and the Ford Foundation. I found this deeply regrettable when I became president of Ford, and felt strongly that we needed some sort of a rapprochement with the family. The opportunity, unfortunately, of the bankruptcy of the city of Detroit, the largest municipal bankruptcy in American history, created the chance for me to begin a dialog with the Ford family. And that dialog led ultimately to a reconciliation with the family and the election in 2018 of Henry Ford III as a new trustee, which some 50 plus years later, brings us full circle to have a member of the family on our board, I think is a very good thing. In some ways, I think the fissure with the

family diminished the Ford Foundation, and I know for the Ford family, it was a time of sadness and disaffection with the very institution that Edsel and Henry created.

Grace [00:04:14] Hmm, that's very powerful. You invited them back into speaking into the way that the foundation is run. I'm wondering, you know, even looking back as well, like, do you have any particular regrets or things that you wish could have happened differently?

Darren Walker [00:04:30] I have many regrets. I think one of the things I regret, quite candidly, is that there were times when I did not follow my gut, when I was talked out of something because it might offend. It might be moving too fast. This hire might have the wrong demographics, or not be progressive enough or whatever. The things I look back and regret. I just have learned that yes, as leaders, we need to listen. We need to be inclusive and participatory and consultative in decisions. But at the end of the day, we're leaders, in part because, certainly at my age, we have some wisdom, the wisdom of lived experience, the wisdom of managing people. And we have to bring that to bear in our decision making and not become too overly sensitive to the need to listen more. Yes, we have to listen, but we also have to follow our gut sometimes too.

Phil [00:05:47] I find that so interesting because I think you're widely regarded, and certainly I see you personally as one of the gutsier leaders in philanthropy, particularly given that you are, you know, running a massive institution. I see you as someone who has gone out there and taken stands, for example, on racial equity, on inequality, that have had a lot of influence. And yet here you are saying that at times you feel like you held back too much. Can you say a little bit more about exactly what was holding you back?

Darren Walker [00:06:22] I think what leaders are challenged by today is the demand to be vulnerable. The need to be authentic and to hear the perspectives of everyone, of stakeholders. And it's sometimes hard to manage when you have stakeholders who have very different views of what decision you should take or what strategic focus you should have. And so I'll give you an example: When I laid out our strategy for inequality, one of the reasons I wanted us to focus on inequality was because it would reframe our work to include more people, because as we looked at the issue of poverty, which had been the frame of the foundation in some form or another for many decades, poverty remains a challenge. But I believed, given our mission to strengthen democracy, that poverty was a subsidiary issue of the larger issue of inequality, which was affecting more people than just the poor. And that as we looked more expansively and to truly be more inclusive, we could see that inequality was affecting people who had never been affected in a negative way by our economy or by the economic system as much, certainly in our lifetimes. And what I mean specifically by that is inequality was not just something affecting Black and brown people. People who had traditionally been marginalized, which was the frame of the Ford Foundation before. It was affecting white Americans. It was affecting rural communities that had been stable, but had been destabilized by the opioid epidemic and a changing agricultural economy. It was affecting middle and working class white, Black and brown families who one in poverty. But they were finding that their economic mooring, if you will, was becoming unmoored. That we were seeing for the first time in American history, certainly in modern American history, a transformation of our economic system that was producing less shared prosperity and more inequality. And so I wanted inequality to be a way to include what was happening to rural America, what was happening to working class white Americans, because at the end of the day, inequality is the enemy of democracy, because inequality is the enemy of hope, and hope is the oxygen of democracy. And what I regret is that we haven't done enough until more recent years to do the outreach to

include what was happening in rural America, for example. What has been happening with working and middle class Americans in ways that are destabilizing our politics and ultimately represent a threat to our democracy.

Phil [00:10:20] That's really interesting Darren and I hear, and you can correct me if I'm wrong, underneath what you're saying a sense of frustration, maybe with orthodoxies that might lead folks to talk about an issue in this way or that way. I don't know if that's right or not or if I'm reading too much into your words, but I certainly see some of that even in how we talk about the practice of philanthropy, that things can get almost dumbed down or oversimplified into binaries and one I wanted to ask you about in particular, given your work at the Foundation, which has emphasized really supporting the strengthening of organizations, working with nonprofits in a supportive way, that sometimes gets positioned as on the opposite end of a continuum from strategy, where, you know, for example, people say either you're trust based and you work with organizations in a certain way, or you're strategic and you care about end impact, it doesn't make sense to me as a binary, it seems to me that actually they fit together and that your efforts at Ford are an example of that. But do you agree with that? Do you think strategy and a trust based approach work together or that they're different?

Darren Walker [00:11:41] I very much agree with your observation that we create unnecessary, even harmful binaries. It seems that we have become a society that sees things without the complexity and nuance, and that we have a need to create these oppositional frameworks for understanding problems that are highly complex and require nuanced responses. So in the context of philanthropy and how we do our work, the practice, this false narrative of you're either strategic or your trust based is actually harmful. I think for a foundation, certainly like Ford, that works on issues of social justice, the issues we work on will always be contested. It is not like a foundation that works on vaccines or agricultural seeds and food security, where you can conduct randomized controlled trials and make breakthroughs and scientific and medical discovery from which you accrete progress and you continually move forward. When you work on the issues of justice, you move forward, but we know from history you also revert back. And we are certainly seeing some of that today on the example that is most notable is women's reproductive freedom. So if you believe that the issues of justice are going to be contested, the thing that is most important is that there be institutions fighting to protect and promote justice. And so if you believe that, then you have to invest in institutions. And the way you best invest in institutions is not by giving them highly curated, highly programmed and designed strategic grants. You give them general operating support, you provide them with unrestricted support and the technical assistance that helps them to prioritize strategy, to prioritize the infrastructure that needs to be built over time to sustain this institution. One quick example, we have supported the NAACP Legal Defense Fund since the 1960s. Now, in the 1960s, we made great progress on racial justice, on voter inclusion. And so during that period, we were supporting this organization to work on issues of litigation, voter mobilization, particularly of people who historically had been excluded in the American South. Fast forward to 2020, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund says to us, we are once again at a moment where we are going to have to litigate and work to promote and protect the idea of voter engagement, the idea that every person should be encouraged to vote. Well, we made a grant that's very similar to the grant we made in 1965 for that same work. And that's because issues like women's reproductive rights, access to voting are going to be contested in the future. And whatever the social issue that we care about, it's necessary for us to invest in those institutions charged with protecting those rights and creating the space for opportunity.

Phil [00:15:31] So appreciate the explanation of the way in which supporting institutions to be strong for the long haul can be just a vital part of actually being highly strategic.

Darren Walker [00:15:44] But it's not sexy, and there's no naming opportunity, and there's no moonshot in three years for this kind of philanthropy. And unfortunately, many in philanthropy are looking for a silver bullet, are looking for a quick win, if you will. The headline. And I don't think if you're really committed long term to social justice, to building a nation that is inclusive and that provides opportunity to everyone that you are necessarily going to be saying, quick three year grant cycle, big wins. Yes. It's possible. We saw that in the criminal justice space. We've seen it in other spaces. But as philanthropists we need to be in it to win it. And winning it requires a long term perspective and a long haul commitment to investing.

Grace [00:16:39] Darren, what advice would you have for individual donors who may not have millions to spend, right? Like your vision that you laid out about fighting inequality and broadening that lens is very compelling. What do you say to individual donors who want to join and make big bets, but may not have the dollars to match?

Darren Walker [00:16:59] I say invest in people, invest in human capital, and making a difference in one or 2 or 5 people's lives can transform a family, a community. In my example, I look at my life and I have been so blessed because private philanthropists, private individuals invested in my potential. When I was at the University of Texas as a student, I had a scholarship. It was \$500 a year. This one award that I received annually. That \$500 that came from a family, they weren't wealthy, but they were committed to philanthropy, to honoring their father. And so they created an award for promising young Texas men. I was the recipient of that award. That \$500 to a poor kid like me made a monumental difference in my quality of life. It made it possible for me to not have the stress of the simple things that cost money, a lot of money, when you're a student. It made it possible for me to return home and see my mother. It made it possible for me to pay for my family to come to my graduation. Because my mother didn't have the money to travel, my family did not like my friends, families, and many of the people who could come to Austin, Texas and stay in a hotel for a weekend, that wasn't possible. That award, which was unrestricted and supportive of me and my potential, made it possible for my family to attend my graduation and for me to have the dignity of that experience that would have not been possible were it not for that \$500 a semester award that came from a generous but not wealthy group of children in honor of their father.

Grace [00:19:18] I love that story that's so powerful, and I think that sometimes donors can feel this dynamic tension right between, well, yes, I can invest in the lives of a handful of folks because I may not have unlimited means. And yet we're always counseled to work upstream and work on root causes and, you know, think big about solutions. How do you advise donors to think about some of those tensions, right? Because dollars may be limited. And, you know, you can really help someone like you just described on an individual basis. But there's also the upstream issues. What advice do you have?

Darren Walker [00:19:58] Well, I think we have to be humble. And I actually don't say to donors, you've got to go and work on a systemic issue at a systemic level. They're not the resources for smaller donors. Larger donors, absolutely. We should look at the systemic a bit. And so again, returning to criminal justice reform, the systemic ways in which policies have generated the kind of over mass incarceration, the over punitive ways in which our criminal justice system penalized particularly poor whites, Black and brown people. Many donors have worked systemically at that level to change policy, to do the public education

work, to invest in the ideas, the institutions advancing a new framework of mass incarceration as a scourge and a problem for society. And so I think donors can do that at a large level, at a scale when they have the resources. But the donors who gave me that scholarship, they were working on a root cause issue. The University of Texas had excluded African-Americans for most of its history. And by giving me this scholarship, they were addressing a root cause issue that Blacks have been excluded. And now Blacks were being included. And this family, with their grant, were providing a young Black man with the opportunity to have a transformational education and a life with opportunity that prior generations of African-Americans were denied. So they were working on a root cause issue. They certainly didn't approach it that way. But that is indeed what they were doing by investing in me.

Phil [00:22:07] Stick with us. We'll be right back.

BREAK

Phil As you talk about, you know, the difference between smaller donors and larger donors, it makes me think of the dynamic that you and I have talked about over the years, many times, which everybody who is a big donor or leading a big institutional foundation and who's thoughtful about it, thinks about which is the dynamic of being surrounded by folks who might be predisposed to tell you what they think you want to hear because they're grantees or prospective grantees. But you have been, and I see this as one of the real marks of your tenure at the Ford Foundation, super committed to getting feedback, and you've done some of that work with us. Whether it's from your staff, from your grantees, doing it regularly and learning from it. And can you tell us a little bit about why that commitment has been so important to you, and maybe an example of something that you changed because of what you heard when you went out and got that feedback?

Darren Walker [00:23:24] Well, I think it's it's difficult to hear negative comments about your performance, your leadership. It's unsettling when you would like to believe you're doing well. And in some areas you're not. So, no one wants to sign up for that. But if we committed to our institutions, we're going to be the best leaders we can be, we have to be willing to engage in the hard work of excavation of our capacity, capabilities, our strengths, our weaknesses, our development opportunities. One of the first things I did was to hire an executive coach who met with my board. We talked about an assessment, as you say, Phil, CEP has been our partner and engaging with some of these 360s, in which I am able to get very clear feedback to a set of questions about how I'm doing as president and as you know, the CEP survey asked specific questions like, does the president represent the values of the foundation? Is he or she a good manager? Are you inspired by their leadership? What could they do better to be a better leader, a more effective leader of the foundation? And so I have received innumerable amounts of feedback, and it is all been helpful to me, and specifically when I think about my work habits and the feedback that I received about Darren sends emails late into the night. Darren works on the weekends and expects us to respond to him when he sends us a message. Darren texts us too much. Everything is urgent with Darren and he creates chaos because there's so many things going on that keep me stressed out and on edge as a direct report. I had to take that into account. I wasn't being effective if, my direct reports were stressed out because I, I emailed him, 24 seven. So I needed to modulate and change my behavior and sometimes my own tendency around urgency because I, I believe, unlike when I worked in the private sector or in the nonprofit sector where there was such an urgency because we

had clients, we had people whose affordable housing needed to be built because they were unhoused until we got it built. So the urgency that I felt in those two sectors, I didn't feel in philanthropy. And so my own sort of self-generated urgency, which cascaded out to the organization, was felt. It was well-intended, but clearly it was undermining my effectiveness as a leader. So that's an example of a behavior that I just... I had to change.

Grace [00:26:35] I observe in you the dynamic of many things can be true at the same time. You are really collecting that detailed feedback. And then like you said earlier, you are then moving forward and making decisions, right, like you are making the calls. Sometimes you are changing and other times you're saying, no, actually, I'm trusting my gut and moving forward. I wanted to go back because Darren, you are such a bridge builder, and what I often reflect on with your leadership is that you didn't necessarily need to be, right? The Ford Foundation is often viewed from the right as sort of a boogeyman of not listening to donor intent, for instance, because, you know, the deep roots in the Ford family and the Ford Motor Company. But yet you have then brought in members of the family. You talked very early on about needing to reach those who are impoverished in kind of white communities. Tell us more about this bridge building aspect of your work, right? Like you didn't have to do this. You could have continued to raise a very progressive flag and pushed forward those priorities without bringing folks along. But yet, I've seen you at every step try to bring folks along. So tell us more about that.

Darren Walker [00:27:53] Well, Grace, I think the issue of bridge building as a negative thing is something that is recent, and it's a real shame, and it's deeply problematic for our democracy when leaders do not see building bridges, helping people to engage, engaging with people you may not agree with on everything, and I think it's really unfortunate. I was very clear with the Ford trustees during the interview process. This is my natural quality. This is the way I engage. It's the way I would serve. And so I'm not ideological. I'm a pragmatic and practical person who seeks to problem solve. And I don't think in a complex society like ours, we can problem solve by just demonizing those who we don't agree with or simply saying, let us focus on our base. Yes, let us focus on our base, but let's build our base to a broader group of Americans who share our common desire for democracy to work our economy to work for more of us. It is harder. There is no doubt, because ideology and intolerance exist in many forms, and our culture and in our politics. And so I'm not saying that there's any one side that is more ideological or more intolerant, but it is important for us as leaders to be prepared to build bridges and therefore be prepared to receive blowback. I experienced this some time ago when I co-authored an op ed on philanthropic pluralism. And the co-authors included some conservative leaders in philanthropy who I do not agree with on many issues. But we did agree on the idea that we need to promote and protect a philanthropic pluralism, if you will. The idea that all forms of philanthropy should be allowed to flourish. And this notion that some philanthropies are good and others are bad is ultimately bad for philanthropy. I was disappointed that I received some disapproving feedback from some of my progressive friends and staff for co-authoring that piece, because they felt that some of the organizations involved in that were harmful to our progressive ideas. I don't believe that we can have that kind of litmus test when we are trying to build broader ideas to protect our freedom and ability as a progressive foundation. That is not going to be achieved by only working with progressive foundations. We're going to have to work with conservative foundations. We're going to have to work with people we may not agree with to ensure that the idea of American philanthropy and all its forms is allowed to flourish.

Phil [00:31:29] Darren, you may recall that I wrote a piece about your piece in which I didn't so much have an issue with the notion that there would be an ideological sort of

cross-section of folks who come together and write about this. I think what puzzled me about the piece, and I wonder if you might address it, was I had a hard time understanding what the threats actually were. What is it that is actually getting in the way of donors and foundations doing exactly what they want? Because when I look out, I see folks seeming to do exactly what they want. So that was one question I had. And then the other question that I had was, while I very much agree with you that an echo chamber of folks simply agreeing with each other and nodding and performatively stating their belief in this or that but not expanding the base, as you put it, is problematic on the one hand. On the other hand, I struggle with when is the bridge a bridge too far? When are we normalizing extremism if we're engaging, folks are giving them a platform who have views that cross a line into hate or bigotry. So those were two of the things that I wondered about as I read that provocative piece that you co-wrote.

Darren Walker [00:32:51] Let me first say that, maybe you and I see different things, or maybe I'm privy to things. But make no mistake, Phil, there are people, influential policymakers, especially, who have made it very clear that institutions, charitable foundations like the Ford Foundation, should be dissolved because we advance, in their view, un-American, destructive ideas through our grantmaking, and we have enough intelligence and information gathering as a foundation to know when you have members of Congress, when you have leaders writing op eds on network television, naming your institution, naming me as its leader, as a scourge on America, some projecting into the future and looking forward to creating new taxing schemes that would ensure that in a period of time, we were out of business. These are real threats. And so, Phil, I absolutely know for a fact that there are some who are in positions of influence and power who wish harm and ill will towards progressive ideas and the charitable foundations who they see as the ATM machine funding the institutions advancing those ideas in our society. And so that is a reason, in my view, for us to not just rely on the progressive foundation community, but say to the conservative foundation community: this kind of thought is dangerous for us all because the wind could turn and you might have people saying that conservative foundations are harmful to American society, and indeed, there are some who say that as well. And so we have to protect that and I agree with you, I don't want to work with those who are promoting hate. I don't agree with the Bradley Foundation on their advocacy and the work they have done around women's reproductive freedom, But I don't believe that because I disagree with their position that they should be out of business as a foundation, and I think we need to protect that idea and in spite of our disagreement, commit to working together to ensure that as a sector, we continue to be resilient and to be able to engage. We worked very closely with the Koch philanthropy community foundations on criminal justice reform, because it was an issue where we agreed that we were at a state of over incarceration, and that they approached it from a somewhat libertarian view that it was wasteful public expenditures. We approached it from the perspective of racial justice and human dignity, but we could come together to do the kind of work that brought conservatives and liberals and progressives together to ensure that we began to reduce the number of private prisons and for-profit prison enterprises, and ultimately address this issue of over-incarceration. I agree with you, Phil. We don't want to work with people who are advancing hate, but we have to be able to have civil discourse with people we may not agree with on principle, but understand that as a matter of pragmatic management and leadership, we've got to work together.

Phil [00:37:08] I agree with that. And I agree that the criminal justice reform effort is a great example of the good that can come from those kind of unlikely, perhaps, bedfellows working together. And of course, I also agree that there are some statements from leaders that are truly alarming. And I think your specificity about those threats is super helpful.

Grace [00:37:31] Darren. This has been such a rich conversation. I'm wondering, as you look out, philanthropy in 10, 20, 50 years, what are the hopes and how can individual donors join you in those hopes?

Darren Walker [00:37:47] Well, one of the things I'm excited about, ironically, is that in just a few years, the Ford Foundation won't be one of the largest philanthropies in America because there is so much wealth being transferred and so many new foundations being created. So that actually excites me. What I'm hopeful for is that more of those philanthropies are committed to the idea of justice, committed to social progress as a people, committed to the ideas of opportunity for all in this country. And that their philanthropic practice is characterized by humility, by listening to those closest to the problems they seek to solve, by having on their staffs and the people who direct their philanthropy, some people with the lived experience and the very places and spaces they want to impact, and that we understand that scientific discovery, while critical to human achievement and advancing human welfare without addressing some of the root causes of the problems in our society – sexism and misogyny, racism, the historical ways in which the lack of opportunity has existed. Overcoming these ideas of pulling the ladder up that we see far too often – hopefully embracing the idea that the most noble and highest calling in our country is service. Service in the public interest. And that that may mean for the philanthropist that you have to get uncomfortable and that you have to embrace what Dr. King said about philanthropy. The following, “Philanthropy is commendable, but it should not allow the philanthropist to overlook the economic injustice which makes philanthropy necessary,” and embrace the idea that Dr. King left us. The idea that the work of philanthropy is not only charity and generosity, but must also be dignity and justice.

Phil [00:40:32] Darren, this has been a wonderful conversation. Thank you so much for spending this time with us. Thank you for all that you have brought to this amazing tenure that you've had at the Ford Foundation, for your leadership and for your guts in speaking out on what you think is best for this country and for our world. We're very grateful to you, Darren.

Grace [00:40:56] Thank you.

Darren Walker [00:40:57] Thank you very much, Phil and Grace.

Phil: There are a ton of resources about effective giving on The Center for Effective Philanthropy's website, cep.org, as well as givingdoneright.org, where you'll find all of our episodes and show notes.

Grace: You can also send us a note at gdrpodcast@cep.org.

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