

Giving Done Right, Season 5, Episode 6 – An Anti-Authoritarian Playbook for Donors With Joe Goldman

Joe Goldman: This is not about one ideological camp holding more power such that they can set taxing policy. This is about, do we care about living in a pluralistic system? Do we care about individual rights? Do we care about human dignity?

Grace Nicolette: Welcome to Giving Done Right. I'm Grace Nicolette.

Phil Buchanan: And I'm Phil Buchanan.

Grace Nicolette: Today, our guest is Joe Goldman, President of the Democracy Fund. Democracy Fund was created by eBay co-founder and philanthropist Pierre Omidyar, and its goal is to build an inclusive, multiracial democracy that's open, just, resilient, and trustworthy. Democracy Fund and its partner organization, Democracy Fund Voice, have together committed over \$500 million in grants since 2014 to support those working to strengthen our democracy.

Just a note, we recorded this conversation on September 9th [2025].

Welcome to the show, Joe.

Joe Goldman: Great to be here.

Phil Buchanan: Hey, Joe, great to see you, and let's just jump right in. I wonder if you could react to something.

I wrote a piece in mid-August that, maybe it's outdated by now, but I made the case that every foundation and donor should be alarmed by a set of actions: the dismantling of international aid; dismantling of health-related research; gutting of our key aspects of domestic social safety net; federal funding cuts of duly allocated funds to nonprofits doing crucial work; the detention and imprisonment of people legally in this country merely for their statements and perceived political views; and maybe I'd add to that also just the ICE raids that are indiscriminately picking folks up just based on some suspicion or flat out racial profiling; censorship; retaliatory investigations that seek to put political opponents behind bars; off-cycle redistricting in Texas at the behest of the president, who's quite transparently trying to maintain control of the house; an assault on objective data, including the dismantling of data systems and the firing of those who dare to report inconvenient facts; and the deployment of US military forces under false pretenses about crime levels. I think that's probably incomplete.

And I guess my take is there's, it's a genuine crisis. And I want to get your response to whether I'm being hysterical, first, and how donors should think about this moment and what they can do.

Joe Goldman: Yeah, well, I don't think you're being hysterical. As someone who runs an organization called the Democracy Fund, it's a bit strange to find myself living in a country that I no longer think is a democracy.

I think donors need to understand that this is not, it's not a "wait and see" moment, and is not a time when business-as-usual expectations about roles and other such things is gonna suffice. It's not a question of whether we're on a path to authoritarianism. We are plainly here.

Some experts say that the best way you know whether you're actually living in an autocracy or not is when you start having to think twice before saying something publicly that is critical of the government out of some fear for retribution. And I think if there's anybody who's listening who's even modestly in the public eye, who has not had to think twice about something that they wanted to say, is either foolish or already operating in such a private way that they're not actually engaging with the world around them. You know, authoritarians have broken through and are consolidating power. And if they succeed, it's gonna take years and years and years to shake off what is effectively an unfree nation, which doesn't mean that we won't have elections. It doesn't mean that we won't still have some independent institutions. But it means that we're going to be operating in a society that is far more closed than what we have come to expect in the past and operating with a fundamentally uneven playing field for anyone who opposes those in power.

Grace Nicolette: Joe, I feel like whenever I've been having these conversations recently, I feel there is such a chasm between those who are following what's happening and actually those who aren't. And as I'm listening to you, I wonder what do you say to folks who haven't really been following it? And I imagine some may respond and just say, is this just, I don't know, liberal panic? What do you say to folks who are like, no, no no, our institutions will hold? For folks who might be more like, who see themselves as more conservative or middle of the road.

Joe Goldman: Yeah. Well, I guess I would start by saying to me, this is not ideological. This is not partisan. When you talk to experts who study this kind of thing, who study authoritarianism, they see all of the things that you would look for in democratic backsliding. It is not normal for law enforcement to be out on the streets, wearing masks and not willing to share who they are before they're pulling people into their cars. It is not normal for the critics of a president to be investigated on kind of trumped-up charges. It is not normal for a government to fire inspectors general and other kind of watchdogs that are there to clamp down on corruption and other such things. Like none of this is normal. And, you know, I think folks who are unwilling to engage with that, you have to be pretty intentional about it because it's almost everywhere you look.

Phil Buchanan: So when we look at the way donors have responded, that is an impossible thing to generalize about at some level, right? Because we've seen both individual donors and institutional donors that have shown a lot of courage and that have

spoken up in ways that I think have been inspiring and perhaps literally inspired others to do the same, because they saw what was possible. But we have also seen, and I'll speak here now, even though our audience is obviously more broadly individual donors as well as institutional donors, but we have seen, I have seen in conversations with friends, with people I respect, a level of fear and sort of, to your point earlier, self-censorship that I wouldn't have expected, and folks saying, we're gonna wait and see, we're going to try to stay under the radar, we're trying to be small right now. We don't want to be perceived as partisan.

What is your take when you look at the action and inaction of different donors? I guess what's your assessment, and what would you hope to see more of right now?

Joe Goldman: My starting place is, I actually think that philanthropy and the larger donor community has stood up in really admirable ways and has exceeded my expectations and done so far better than many other sectors –

Phil Buchanan: Yeah.

Joe Goldman: – quite frankly.

Phil Buchanan: Low bar, arguably.

Joe Goldman: Well, sure. Everything's relative. Yes, have shown up better than other sectors and still not enough. If that, you know, we did a survey of a couple hundred democracy related donors back in February. And universally, 99% of them were deeply, deeply concerned about what was going on. But the other thing that was shared pretty widely across the group was a sense and a real concern that we don't have a plan for getting out of this.

And so when, you know, when I look at donor behavior out there, I see some donors who are backing out because they're afraid, like that is a real thing. And it's legitimately scary. And I see some number of donors who haven't stood up because they are exhausted or overwhelmed. But I think the biggest thing that is keeping some donors from the space is not some failure to understand what is going on, but a sense of overwhelm by the scale of what is happening and a real struggle to see what we can do about it. And so I think a lot of folks who are in the space, what we've taken on as our responsibility is not just to stand up ourselves, but to show people that while we have not figured everything out, we don't know everything that you have to do to get ourselves out of this, but there actually is a plan and that we actually can make progress. Right? That for me is the burden that we have to bring donors along in this moment. I worry less about those who are afraid and more about those who don't have a sense of what we can actually do.

Grace Nicolette: Can you tell us what donors can actually do? [laughter]

And I mean, I think that sometimes, I don't really understand, like, what does it mean to support democracy, right? Oftentimes, like, does it mean that I'm supporting candidates?

Probably yes. But from a philanthropy or charity perspective, tell us more about what donors can do and also what the Democracy Fund does.

Joe Goldman: It would be pretty weak if I had just said that and didn't actually have a plan. [laughter] But yeah, so look, the way I think about it and a few of my colleagues and peers, we kind of break up the kinds of things that we need to do in this moment into three buckets, three kinds of strategies, and we call them guardrail strategies, breakthrough strategies, and reconstruction strategies. And let me try to explain that.

I've been toying with a metaphor, and let me see if it, let me say if it works for you. So think about democracy as if we're, we're in this old house on the shore, and an overwhelming storm is coming at us. And we can see that storm is gonna just knock us out. There are three kinds of things we need to do in that context when we have to really be concerned about the degree to which we can make it through the storm.

So, the first thing we need to do, the kind of guardrail strategies, we need to leverage the defenses that our house has for keeping us safe as long as we can. We live in this house. We can't just abandon it, because the rest of our family is inside. And so, we need to leverage the kind of levies that protect us from the storm and buy us time. And so for us, guardrails are the courts. They are state and local governments. They are a free press. They're an independent civil society. These are the kinds of things that are built into our democracy to protect us from authoritarianism. And we need to do everything we can to leverage those guardrails and to kind of look at what's been working amongst them. Philanthropy has put a remarkable amount of resource into litigation and legal organizations. And there have been hundreds and hundreds of cases in the courts that have slowed or stopped authoritarian abuse of power, right? And that is a kind of thing that we can do.

The problem with the guardrails is that they are under remarkable pressure. They're degraded. Some of them have already failed. Not all of them, but some of them. And at the end of the day, guardrails don't build durable power to get you out of a situation. They can stop things, but they don't transform the situation. And that's where these things called breakthrough strategies come in for us. And, you know, if you think about the metaphor of the house, you got to get people out into boats. You got to get people away from the house. And so for us, guardrail strategies often involve social movements and organizing that engage in 3 Ds, right? They engage in disruption, they engage in delegitimization, and they secure defections from the authoritarian coalition. And so if I think about kind of nonprofits that are out there doing this kind of work, I think about a group here in the DC area called Free DC. Free DC saw when Donald Trump came into office, they were listening to what he was saying. They saw the historical patterns of what authoritarians do when they come into office. They began preparing, because they knew at some point, what the authoritarian does is they try to consolidate power in the capital city. Free DC started organizing neighborhood by neighborhood over the course of the last eight months to ensure that the residents of the District of Columbia would be ready when something like what just happened in the last few weeks would happen. And what Free DC has been doing is delegitimizing the kinds of actions that have been taken in the name of a false

emergency on crime that doesn't stand up to scrutiny in terms of the actual facts on the ground. They have been training people, hundreds and hundreds, thousands and thousands of people, in how to resist and how to fill the space in the community. And one of the things that we've started seeing is, as these prosecutors are bringing cases against residents in DC, grand juries are refusing to actually indict these folks who are being accused of crimes.

Phil Buchanan: They didn't indict the sandwich guy, for example.

Joe Goldman: Exactly. I mean, what you see is residents of the District of Columbia are refusing to obey in advance. They are using the power they have. One of the powers they have is as a juror to say, we do not accept these trumped-up charges. That is one of the kinds of disruptive strategies that you can pursue.

The third category, and again, if we go back to the house metaphor, when the storm's coming, when people are afraid and don't know what to do, they need some understanding of where they can go that is an alternative to what they've got. And right now, what people have as an alternative to broken unpopular systems that have caused pain and have failed the American people in countless ways, what they have is a MAGA vision that is selling them on quick, easy solutions to the problems they're facing that probably aren't gonna work. And we, in the pro-democracy community, need to offer people an alternative. We need to offer them a solution that is better than what they've had in the past. And what the problem has been in the last several years for the pro-democracy community is we have found ourselves in the position of defending broken, unpopular systems. And people look at kind of our defense of our elections, our defense of federal agencies, and they say, Yeah, it's not working so well for me. And so if we're going to get out of this, we need to leverage our guardrails. We need to disrupt the attacks that are coming at us and build durable power. And we need to offer people a positive alternative of the kind of democracy, the kind of society that will actually serve them well. And there, you know, if I think about the kinds of things that are offering people that, I think about Press Forward, right? This effort that has galvanized philanthropy around a new model of journalism to create a non-commercial sector for journalism. That is part of, that is not the whole of what we need to work towards, but that's part of it. There are other groups like More Equitable Democracy that are working on creating a more proportionally representative system, and they're doing it at the state and local level to show people this is how you can actually govern different, right? And this is actually something that is going to produce a better life for you and your family. That is what people need to see in order to get out of what we've been in.

Grace Nicolette: Can you tell us specifically for a Democracy Fund, that looks like funding in those three areas, is that right?

Joe Goldman: Absolutely, the Democracy Fund, and then we have a c4 called Democracy Fund Voice, and all of our grant making is kind of basically broken out across those three areas of work. We make between \$50 and \$60 million in grants a year, which

is a drop in the bucket compared to what's really needed, but doing whatever we can to advance those different kinds of strategies.

Phil Buchanan: I find this framework so helpful, because I feel like I've been grasping for a framework, a way to think about this. And so I really appreciate your laying out those three buckets. You offered a few examples of specific efforts. Can you give us a few more? I mean, just to bring it to life a bit for the donor who says, yes, but what's a great nonprofit that is doing important work in one of those areas. Can you give us a few more examples, Joe?

Joe Goldman: Sure. Well, just to, to stay within this, these kind of three buckets, this framework, so let me, let me go back to the kind of the guardrails work. So I talked about litigation. There are a range of amazing organizations doing great litigation work. Protect Democracy is the name of one. Um, Democracy Forward is the name of another. Those are, those are kind of very large litigation organizations that are driving – most of the kinds of lawsuits that you see out there are being driven by those kinds of organizations. ICAP at Georgetown Law is another amazing group. There are other litigation efforts, like the Government Accountability Project, that are more niche. So, Government Accountability Project [GAP] defends whistleblowers. That is their specialty. They don't have a big name. They don't have a big profile. They don't have a huge budget. But in this moment, one of the kinds of things we need to do is make sure that folks who have courage and are willing to step out and stand up on principle, these whistleblowers, that they actually have a defense. And so groups like GAP provide that defense.

Beyond litigation within that kind of guardrails bucket, one of the kinds of things I mentioned was like federalism is really important in this moment. We are not, we don't just have a federal government. We actually have hundreds and hundreds and thousands of state and local governments all around the country, and they have power, and when the federal government is abusing its power, one of the things we look to are governors and mayors and attorneys general to stand up in these moments. And there's a group called GovAct that supports governors who are pro-democracy and standing up in this moment. There's another organization called States United who works with state-based attorneys general, kind of support them standing up for democracy. You know, another really important kind of role that pro-democracy donors can play.

If I think about social justice, kind of organizing, building durable power, breakthrough strategies, you've got some kind of groups that are actively delegitimizing the steps that are being taken by the administration. So if you think about the organization Community Change that works with others on kind of Medicaid campaigns, one of the things that's happened is this government has pulled the rug underneath people who depend on programs like Medicaid, and, you know, folks who have been supportive of this governing coalition, and we need groups that are going to actually help people understand how the actions of this government are harming them. And so groups like Community Change that are working on things like Medicaid campaigns become really, really important in this setting.

And then, you know, there are an array of groups that are trying to think from a reconstruction standpoint – from a kind of this, this, what is the alternative future – that are kind of digging into, you know, what does a Project 2029 look like? What does an agenda look like that deals with the aftermath of the amount of destruction that has happened within government over the course of these last many months? And there, you know, to some extent, you're looking at kind of think-tank-like organizations, whether it's a New America or a Demos or whatnot, that are really trying to grapple with what a future government could look like that is not, again, restorationist, is not going back to what we were, but is actually creating something better. And I think we need to support those kinds of spaces that are not just kind of intellectually imagining what these can look like, but are engaging movement-based organizations and civil society in that conversation such that, if and when a window of opportunity does open up in which we can create something better, that we actually have folks who are bought in to that vision, and we'll be able to drive it forward.

Grace Nicolette: Stick around We'll be right back.

[Break]

Grace Nicolette: Jo, how do you talk to folks who worry that some of this pro-democracy kind of movement building is actually really just like a thinly veiled push on the left for more power? So I just think back to like before the election, when you ask, you know, surveys done across the spectrum, people on the Left and the Right are saying, you know our politics is really broken, our democracy is broken. I think that sometimes it's really hard to separate one's kind of partisan affiliation with the desire to build up democracy. How do you address that? Is it that you simply want the left to win, which would be a very uncharitable interpretation? What would you say to folks who are just worried that that's what it is?

Joe Goldman: Look, I am progressive. I am coming from the left. I, you know, that is, that is part of who I am. And I think there is a real role in this moment for progressives to express a robust vision for what a more equitable world looks like. Period. *And* it is hard to look at what's happening and not understand it beyond ideological or partisan categories.

What we're seeing is the destruction of our democracy, of democratic norms that have been in place for decades and decades. This is not about one ideological camp holding more power such that they can set taxing policy. This is about, do we care about living in a pluralistic system? Do we care about individual rights? Do we care about human dignity? Honestly, I don't have a whole lot of patience, at this point in the story, for those who would suggest that this is just about helping to empower the left. Like, it is so blatantly obvious at this point that that's not what's going on, that we are not in normal times. And I think it takes some level of willful ignorance to be in that position at this point.

Phil Buchanan: I'm right there with you, maybe not surprisingly, but I wonder how to think about what to say to the folks who have spent a lot of time and grant-making budget over the last few years focusing on things like pluralism and bridging in a moment when the

Republican party seems to be completely taken over by MAGA, by the very forces that are threatening democracy. So who are we bridging to exactly? What does pluralism look like in this moment? I mean, you have a lot of colleagues who have focused a lot of energy on this and have talked about polarization as if it is the biggest problem. And I think what I hear you saying, or at least this is my belief, is actually the problem is not polarization. The problem is authoritarianism, and how do we fight back against it. I guess, what's your take and are you talking to some of your colleagues about these questions?

Joe Goldman: Yeah, look, I mean, for a long time, the Democracy Fund, you may recall, like, was a bipartisan organization. The guy who ran my elections and voting program had previously worked for Chuck Schumer, and the woman who ran my program on Congress had been a Republican Chief of Staff in the House for, for two decades. And it wasn't until, I don't know, 2019-ish, 2018-ish that we made a pivot and said like, look, we'll work with anyone, but we are anchored in our values, not this sense that the ultimate goal is actually some kind of bipartisan stance. So I've been there, and I actually think there is a lot of value in bridging work. I think it is important work to do, and it needs to be done in the context of some understanding of what's happening and what you're trying to achieve with it.

You know, I think in this moment, we, we don't get where we need to go without a big tent, right? All of the research, when you look at democratic backsliding, country after country after country, part of the recipe for the anti-authoritarian playbook is a big tent. And so we need people who are reaching out, but that reaching out is not necessarily to those who are of a certain place within the partisan spectrum. It's reaching out across sectors, right? We need to bring in folks across the education sector. We need to bring in and create solidarity across big law. We need to do so amongst the business community. It's not, when we think about the big tent, it's not just about an ideologically big tent. It's about a multi-sector big tent. It's about people from all walks of life. And it's thinking about, within the authoritarian coalition, where are there stakeholders, where are there groups that actually are not well-served by the agenda that is being carried forward? How do you pull them back into a pro-democracy big tent to get where we need to go? And how you hold the tension of there being a kind of progressive vanguard that is pushing the envelope on the kind of world we want to live in that is deeply important – how do you hold the tension between that and the big tent? But we need both of those things. And so, to get back to your question, like, I'm not critical of those of my peers who are doing bridging work, especially if in this moment, they are using the capital, the relationships, the trust, the capital that they have built up, in order to actually leverage it for our democracy. What I'm critical of is if your position as a bipartisan, as a bridging institution, as someone who stays out of politics, if that is keeping you paralyzed and unable to act at a moment when literally our country, our democracy is on the line, like that is unacceptable. And that's the point where you need to ask yourselves what your true values are and what you're in this for.

Phil Buchanan: The sector defense work was focused on some very specific threats, some of which have actually not really come to pass, right? And worries about entire sets of nonprofits having their 501c3 status revoked, which I'm sure you'll remember there was a period in April where everybody said that's coming and then it didn't come. Worries

about an increase in the excise tax on foundations that was in the House Bill, but ultimately didn't pass the –

Joe Goldman: But it, but that's not, that didn't just not happen, that happened because people worked very hard to prevent it from happening, but yeah.

Phil Buchanan: Yeah, no, absolutely. But I guess the question is, I think my fear, and maybe I'm worrying over nothing, is that that is really important – that was important work – but that there are these larger, even more sort of existential threats, and that that work needs to continue, but also there needs to be this sort of cross-sectoral alliances that you're describing. Is the CEO of Costco talking to John Palfrey at MacArthur and are they also talking to Alan Garber at Harvard, because their fortunes are interconnected and linked. So it's a lot, it's lot to do both at the same time, to both focus on the narrow sector defense, but also not lose sight of the cross-sectoral sort of possibilities and the kind of existential threats that might make, in retrospect, an increase on the excise tax on foundation earnings on endowments look like not such a big deal.

Joe Goldman: You're referring to this philanthropic coalition that's been created called Unite and Advance that has, you know, hundreds and hundreds of philanthropies have signed on to a coalition to kind of defend one another and defend the philanthropic sector.

Phil Buchanan: Which is great.

Joe Goldman: Which is great, and you're accurately kind of categorizing the effort overall as an attempt at creating a big tent that kind of pulls in and holds some of the more center-right donors that may disagree on, on any number of issues, but can agree on fighting an excise tax increase, that kind of thing. Look, I guess my, my point of view is that there is a really important role for that kind of coalition, and that the efforts that folks like John Palfrey and Tonya Allen and others have engaged in to kind of hold together that coalition really pays off and has a lot of value and doesn't get you everything. Right? And so it becomes important while that coalition is holding so that it can act together on as many things as it can act together, subsets of that group need to be able to also engage and push the envelope on those things that the more conservative donors won't stand up for. Like these things both need to be true. And do I think conversations are happening amongst business leaders and university leaders and philanthropic leaders, like, absolutely, that work is happening. Is it enough? Has it gone far enough? Is it happening too slowly? Also, absolutely.

So when I – in March of 2024, I had a conversation with a few of my board members, just kind of thinking about what does the world look like in which Donald Trump is re-elected, and some of our worst concerns about a kind of authoritarian agenda actually are realized. And based on what we know of what happens in these situations, how is philanthropy going to respond? And to a person, everyone in that conversation, their response is philanthropy is going to fold. That was our assumption. And that's not what has happened. Right? We've actually seen hundreds and hundreds of remarkably courageous steps taken, maybe not as courageous as we would have wanted, maybe not as many stepping

up in the way we would like them to, but the sector has stood up in really important ways, and not just for itself, right – to defend the independence and freedoms of civil society writ large. That is what we're seeing happen, and I think it's really admirable.

Phil Buchanan: And Joe, do you think that folks have watched what's happened with the law firms and the colleges and universities and perhaps drawn a lesson there about capitulation not getting you –

Joe Goldman: Had philanthropy come first, had philanthropy been targeted first, things like Unite in Advance wouldn't have happened, right? Philanthropy was not ready. And one of the, one of the benefits for this sector is that they came after education and big law first, and I think part of why something like Unite in Advance was able to happen is leaders saw what was happening and said, that can't be us. And, you know, there have been organizations like Ian Bassin's Protect Democracy that has been out there for a long time before this year started saying like the biggest thing we need to worry about is anticipatory obedience, the kind of obeying in advance, the practice of making yourself small and kind of operating independently. We know that's how you lose, right? How you win is why making yourself big by standing up with others in solidarity within, you know, across a sector and across sectors. That's how we get where we need to go. That's, how you have a chance to win. And I think that's what we're starting to see more and more of, despite the very first months of this year being pretty dispiriting as we saw institution after institution folding. I think we're now seeing folks stand up and recognize that that's what we can't do.

Grace Nicolette: Joe, how do you all think about impact, right? We get a lot of questions from donors. They often are very concerned with how are they stewarding their resources to understand what the impact is. And it strikes me in listening to you that democracy work is long, it's messy, it's certainly more than worth it. How do you advise donors on how to think about their own impact when you said yourself, the funds that you all have are a drop in the bucket. I imagine for individual donors, they might feel that even more so.

Joe Goldman: Yeah, look, you know, these questions of impact are knotty and hard and different donors have different predispositions in terms of like what impact means for them. And I guess, you know that one of the virtues of the democracy space is there's lots of different kinds of work you can engage in. And some of it, you can see very clear hard outcomes. If you want to engage in the world of voter registration, we can calculate out for you, if you put in X dollars, you're gonna get this number of voter registrants using X, Y, and Z tactics. If you wanna kind of money ball your philanthropy, there are parts of the democracy space where you can really very clearly see dollar per output involved. And there's parts of this work that are unsexy and long and grinding and require patience. And that can be true in the information environment. When we're talking about narrative or trying to fight misinformation, it's true in the kind of durable organizing work that is required to build up power to get where we need to go, those kinds of things are much harder for those who need that kind of dollar per output point of view, but there are donors who are attracted to that kind work as well. And I often talk to donors who are looking at the space and they kind of like, what's the, what's the most important thing I can do? And my response every time is like, it's like asking me in this, with this three legged stool, which of

these three legs is more important to keep the table up or the stool up? Right? There is no silver bullet. There's no one thing you can do that is going to mean, all right, the democracy saved. And those donors who are looking for that, that silver bullet are going to be frustrated, and they're going to waste a tremendous amount of time trying to find that one thing. And I think what donors need to do is accept that they are one part of a much larger system. They can't do it all. And if there's something about where they're from, or what their values are, or what they're strengths are, that pulls them more into the world of defending free and fair elections instead of supporting litigation, or doing work with media, like, great, do that work, do it really well, support the groups on the ground doing that work. And then let others kind of take up the other pieces of it. And, and be in communication so you're, you are aware of what those other pieces are, even if you don't need to do it all. And if that feels exhausting, just imagine what it feels like for our grantees who are out there on the front lines feeling scared – Like, and if you are scared to do that work because you're scared of being attacked, just imagine what these grantees on the front lines feel like in this environment. It is hard leading a nonprofit in the best of circumstances, but when you are taking the risk that you and your family and your staff are going to be targeted by name, and swarmed on social media, or targeted by regulators in the IRS or the Department of Justice, or – that is a remarkably vulnerable position to be in. And we need to find ways, as donors, to use the privilege that we have in being a step removed from those threats. We are not invulnerable from attack. They can come after my 501c3 status. They can target my staff or myself. But I am far more protected than those on the front lines, and we need to find some courage, and we need to be okay with solutions that are not perfect and not let the perfect be the enemy of the good here.

Phil Buchanan: You're speaking our language.

Grace Nicolette: How do you know that you're making a difference at the Democracy Fund? What are some of the things that you think about?

Joe Goldman: I mean, what I'm moved by is acts of courage. Like there's nothing that's gonna guarantee that we're going to make our way out of this, but what makes it all possible are people acting courageously. And sorry, this will be a slightly indirect way to answer the question, but, um, you know, this weekend, there was a big march in Washington, DC, on behalf of this Free DC effort. You know, I've been going to protests and demonstrations since I was a teenager. But as we were marching down the street, there is this chant that comes up in most of these kinds of demonstrations that kind of, "Show me what democracy looks like." And the response back, you know, "This is what democracy looks like." And, you know, marching down the streets, knowing that across Washington, DC, there are masked law enforcement agencies pulling people into, you know, unmarked cars and like that people are out there in the street, taking risks, being vibrant and joyful on behalf of democracy is like, it made me tear up a little bit. And when I, you know, when I see that at the kind of community level, or when I see a city clerk or an attorney general or a business leader taking a risk and standing up for principle because they feel like they're part of something greater that we've helped to create – that gives me a sense that there's a path forward here. And the cycle of anticipatory obedience has a response, which is, you know, a kind of a cycle of anti-obedience or whatever you want to

call it. Courage breeds more courage. Solidarity breeds more solidarity. And when I see people coming together and taking action, I know that we're creating the conditions for success in this kind of environment.

Grace Nicolette: That's really powerful.

Phil Buchanan: Super powerful. And I think, I also like the way earlier you spoke to the challenge that nonprofits are facing, and certain organizations more than others, but really we see this in data we've gathered going back to February, where we just saw overwhelming stress and worry from nonprofits when we surveyed them about funding cuts, of course, but also about things you would not expect – high numbers of response to, like 40% of leaders saying they were worried about the safety and security of their staff or the communities that they serve. I suspect that would even be higher still now. We just fielded another survey, we don't have the data yet, and we're experiencing something remarkable, which is very unusual when you survey folks : emails coming back, expressions of gratitude for the opportunity to express themselves in a safe way about what's going on. And then anecdotally, I hear nonprofits say, of course, we need more funding, you know, we need communication from our funders. But I'm also hearing them say, we just want to hear from them. To your point about the contagiousness of courage, not the word you used, but I think that's so, so important.

I wonder aside from thinking about folks who have it hard and who need to have your support in this time, that sort of empathy that's driving you, where else personally does your own commitment and courage come from, Joe? Like, why are you, I mean, you didn't expect to be in this situation, obviously, but you've spoken to the fact that, like, the fear is understandable and rational. So can you tell us a little bit about where you draw strength?

Joe Goldman: There's a book called *Hope in the Dark*, which is kind of a meditation on what it means to be hopeful, written by Rebecca Solnit. And um, part of what that book digs into is that, well, first of all, that there's a difference between being hopeful and being optimistic. Being optimistic is just kind of, I'm assuming that things are gonna turn out okay, and there's no agency in it. Whereas being hopeful is looking squarely at the hardness, the scariness in front of you and making a choice that you're gonna do all that you can to be part of the solution along with others.

And one of the things that is necessary to be hopeful is some sense of history. To understand that there have been other people in the past who have gone through things that are just as hard, if not much harder, and they've made it through. They may have not succeeded initially. They may actually have failed multiple times, but eventually we come together and we make things better. It's not inevitable, but we have the capacity to do so.

And so for me, just being grounded, knowing that this is not the first time someone has had to take on an authoritarian, that we actually know a lot about what it takes to succeed against democratic backsliding, and to know that others have done so – that, for me, is so helpful and so important.

At the start of the year, we published a blog post that was kind of our commitment and our pledge for how we were gonna try to, as an organization, walk through this moment. I actually printed it out. It sits right above my desk, and I look at it multiple times a day. And you know, it basically had seven or eight elements. The first was, choose hope. And for us that involved kind of finding courage to stand up for our core values and not retreat out of fear. The second was stick together. We are committed to nurturing community, resisting isolation, and forging relationships across difference, even if that is hard. We believe in practicing solidarity. We want to use our position to defend and stand with those who are under attack. We want to seek opportunity, like even in the darkest of times, there are opportunities to make things better and to actually score wins. And sometimes in the darkness times, that's when there are the greatest opportunities to do things transformationally. And so we want to keep our eyes open looking for those opportunities. We want to remain humble and acknowledge that our behavior and the roles we've played have contributed to the situation we're in today. And so we want to be humble about the assumptions we hold about how we get out of here and try to learn from our mistakes. We want to bolster resilience. One of the things that we did at a retreat early in the year is we handed out batons to our staff. The message was like, not only is this not a sprint, it's not a marathon. It's a relay race. Right? Because there are gonna be times when all of us are gonna have to step back because we're facing a level of exhaustion or trauma or you name it. We need to feel okay with stepping back. We need to make it okay for our peers, our partners to step back, and we need to be able to step in for them when they do. And then finally, our commitment is to live our values. And at its core, that means rejecting violence. It means not dehumanizing our opponents and standing by the principles of an inclusive democracy. So for us, if I can walk through the world knowing my history, feeling a sense of solidarity with those around me and a sense that, together, we can do this, and living those kinds of commitments – that makes it all possible.

Grace Nicolette: Looking at your bio as I was preparing for this conversation, I feel like you've been involved in democracy work from the very beginning. It seems like in many different cities and with voting and also with city planning and all of that. What was the seed of your career that sort of set you on this path?

Joe Goldman: You know, it's complicated being Jewish right now for all the reasons we all know. But I grew up learning about the Holocaust, and in college, you know, my intellectual hero was a German Jewish philosopher named Hannah Arendt. And the core of her project was kind of trying to understand how the Holocaust could happen. Part of her analysis is, it happens when people are unthinking. *Eichmann in Jerusalem* was a book she wrote that was kind of looking at Adolf Eichmann and seeing that the banality of evil was made possible by people not critically engaging with what was going on, and that the lack of public spaces where people can show up as citizens with a small “c” enable authoritarians to kind of overpower public realm, right? That we need places for people to be able to come together and exert power together. That's what makes a democracy possible and holds authoritarians at bay. And so, yeah, for me, I think I was taken by this sense of how do we prevent the kind of mass dehumanization of others and the abridgment of people's rights in large part because of that story. And I was attracted by

this analysis that the answer to those kinds of crimes against humanity, the answer to hate, the answer to authoritarians is democracy. And yeah, that has shaped my career.

Phil Buchanan: I think that's a great place to end, Joe. This has been such a great conversation. So appreciate all that you're doing and appreciate you sharing your insights and wisdom with us today. It's a great conversation.

Grace Nicolette: Thanks so much.

Joe Goldman: Thank you, it's been great to be here.

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

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

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