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## Wilderness Time for Nonprofits



WILLIAM A. SCHAMBRA

I want to thank the conference planners for inviting me here today, and for allowing me to be on the program before the speakers who are going to talk to you about uplifting topics like the state of the economy and how to avoid insolvency. After that, I suspect most of you will be too busy calling your therapists to have much time or patience for the likes of me.

I think it's important for us in our reflections this morning, not to pass too quickly through this grim and trying time in our eagerness to put it behind us, and to talk instead about the all-new and improved nonprofit sector somewhere just over the horizon.

That wouldn't be honest, and it wouldn't be helpful to you. I know that many of you are frazzled to the utmost trying to deal with incredibly difficult and pressing problems—too few dollars to support too few staff to deal with far too many and ever increasing social problems.

**When you're thrust into the wilderness, the one critical lesson you may learn is, who you truly are.**

Indeed, it must often feel to some of you like you've wandered into a howling, desolate wilderness.

Now, in my faith tradition, being in the wilderness isn't always a bad thing. It's never a pleasant thing, mind you. One of the Christian gospel accounts tells us that Jesus had to be driven into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit.

But it isn't necessarily a bad thing, and in fact, it may be a necessary thing. Why?

Because when times are good—when dollars and staff are plentiful—we may tend to become pretty smug and self-satisfied. We come to believe that our organizations are going to be around forever, that our staff and our resources and our standing in society are a permanent part of the way things are, and that the inevitable curve of our fortunes is ever upward.

And so we start to expand beyond our initial mission—to add programs that seem to be the inevitable next steps, but that begin to take us in new directions. That requires us to make ever more promises in ever more grant proposals about how many more people we're going to serve, how many new sites we're going to open, how many more partners we're going to recruit to the effort, and so forth.

In good times, all of this seems to be reasonable and inevitable. In our natural desire to serve more and more people, it certainly seems right and good.

But in all that wonderful new, expansive programming, something not so wonderful begins to happen. We begin to forget who we are.

We begin to drift away from our original purpose, our original passion. We might even become a complex, multi-faceted, bureaucratic deliverer of a bewilderingly diverse and cumbersome array of goods and services.

When times begin to get sour, we initially scramble madly to sustain all that activity that we've added in the good times. That's what a lot of us have been doing over the past year. We desperately don't want to let go of that new identity we've developed as a sophisticated, complex, multi-service organization.

But slowly it dawns on us that we simply can't scramble fast enough to keep it all going. We realize that we not only have to scale back staff and program, but we have to fundamentally revisit the questions of what our fundamental purpose in society truly is, and which of our activities truly reflect that purpose.

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Now, those are the kinds of questions that we wrestle with when we're driven—perhaps kicking and screaming—into the wilderness.

Once there, we finally admit that we have to let go of the inflated sense of who we are. We have to strip ourselves of the pleasing new, sophisticated self-images that we had begun to acquire.

We have to go back to basics—back to the original passion and purpose that gave birth to our organizations. When you're thrust into the wilderness, the one critical lesson you may learn is, who you truly are.

Now, I know that there are as many passions and purposes in the room today as there are organizations represented. But I want to suggest that there's a common purpose at the core of most of your groups, in spite of your diverse goals and backgrounds.

I'll try to get to it by describing an experience I had about ten years ago, while I was a program officer at the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation in Milwaukee.

One very cold, wet, dismal, blustery spring evening in Milwaukee—those of you who have been in the upper Midwest in early spring know that there's a lot of redundancy in that description—I was invited by a community organizer to join him and a group of a dozen or so parents and teachers in a cold, dismal, unheated field house in a park on the city's south side.

They were parents and teachers who had just learned that the school superintendent had targeted their school for significant changes in curriculum, and they were very unhappy about it.

In most American school districts, that would have been the end of the story—the parents would have had to just sigh and take what was dished out.

**It was the act of everyday citizens coming together around a shared vision and forging their own community to embody that vision.**

But Milwaukee has a pretty expansive charter school law. And with the help of the organizer, these parents were going to do something unthinkable and outrageous.

They weren't going to just take what was coming down at them from on high. They were going to start their own school.

For four hours that evening, these citizens discussed every aspect of what they wanted out of this school—what was to be taught, how it was to be taught, who they were going to hire to teach it.

At first, they were pretty timid and shy about it—as if they were trespassing on forbidden ground. After all, they had been told all their lives that education is an incredibly difficult and demanding thing, requiring all sorts of credentialed teachers and principals with PhDs and professional curriculum specialists.

They didn't have any of that. They didn't even know who to contact to turn on the heat in the field house.

But slowly, as the evening went on, they became less reserved and timorous, more engaged and vigorous, more expansive about what sort of school they wanted their own children to attend—and what sort of school they were even at that very moment designing for their children.

By the end of the evening, they had established the outlines of what came to be known as the IDEAL school—IDEAL standing for Individualized Developmental Approaches to Learning.

Ten years later, it's still going strong and enjoys a productive partnership with the YMCA in Milwaukee, with upwards of 200 students and a waiting list.

But even today, on their website, they recount the story of their humble and unpromising origins. As they say, "We started with no building, no students, and no name. What we did have was a vision."

For them, no matter how large or complex they may become, or conversely how tough financial times get, they embrace this story of their founding because it reminds them of who they are at their very core, which is who they were when they started with nothing—when they started in the

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wilderness.

I came away from this evening feeling incredibly energized and excited, and I wasn't quite sure why.

I've thought about it a lot over the years, and I've come to realize that it inspired me so deeply because I had been fortunate to witness the great and central act of American democracy.

It was the act of everyday citizens coming together around a shared vision and forging their own community to embody that vision.

From nothing except a shared purpose—and in the face of all sorts of obstacles, ranging from the bureaucratic charter application process to the hostility of the teachers unions to the scorn of the education professionals telling them that parents know nothing about teaching children—they nonetheless created a nonprofit organization to solve their own problems their own way.

Now, I knew about this particular American quality in theory because I, like many of you here today, had read Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*.

We learn therein that Americans are particularly gifted at establishing their own local organizations to solve their own problems, unlike Tocqueville's French compatriots, who, as he puts it, tend to fold their arms and wait for government to show up to solve problems for them.

But he warns us that getting citizens to pay attention to the larger affairs of the community is very difficult, even in America. The science of association or of community-building, he warns us, is rare and difficult to sustain.

First, because we democratic individuals tend to be selfish and materialistic and prone to pursue our own immediate self-interest without regard for others.

Second, because narrowly self-centered individuals are all too willing to surrender to government the fuss and bother of governing. Government, in turn, would just as soon do without all those independent and obstreperous civic associations that only clutter up the orderly, top-down delivery of services.

Well, all that I knew by way of theory. But it didn't prepare me for how awe-inspiring it would be to witness first-hand the essential Tocquevillian act of citizens gathered in a community to take back the power from centralized bureaucracy and become masters of their own future once again.

Don't mistake this for "volunteering" or "service." This was not nicey-nice giving blood at the Red Cross.

On the issue of utmost importance to these parents—the future of their children—they were able to act, for the first time in their lives, as genuine citizens of the great American democracy.

A friend of mine who was once a labor organizer described it well: in this field, there is nothing quite like seeing citizens coming into the first realization of their own agency, and living into their ability to control their own lives.

**Think about your own origins as a nonprofit—the story of how some citizens who had very little came together and created something from nothing.**

Now, for all the differences among nonprofits today, I suspect that most of you, in your origins, fit this Tocquevillian model, and have a similarly inspiring story of origins in your past.

It's there a century ago, or maybe just five years ago. It's there for ancient faith-based organizations, and for modern secular organizations.

In its origins in the mid-19th century, for instance, beleaguered bands of Salvation Army recruits beat their drums in the gin-soaked streets of London to redeem lost souls, in spite of the abuse of the drunks in the street, the owners of the taverns, and even the police who didn't care for the ruckus that they caused.

Just a few decades ago, shelters for battered women were furtively opened, threatened not only by the anger of abusive men but also by the neglect and contempt of the justice system.

Both of these movements have of course grown enormously. But always, there is the narrative of the founding, the story of how they came together in the midst of nothing, and armed only with a vision, created something, from citizenly determination to take back the power from failed social systems and build a new and responsive community.

Today, in this wilderness time for nonprofits, I'm not here to offer any specific or practical pointers—any helpful hints—for surviving hard times.

But my one recommendation to you would be to sit quietly in that wilderness for a while—to still your soul for a bit, stop the mad scramble to keep together all the pieces that you've added over the years, and think about who you were in the beginning.

Think about your own origins as a nonprofit, the narrative of your own founding—the story of how some citizens who had very little except a vision of what they would do differently came together and created something from nothing.

There, I think, you will find some clues about who you are at your very heart. There you will find some counsel about what you may have to let go, and what you should fight to the end to keep.

Then, you will be better prepared for the temptations that will face you, as you begin to emerge from wilderness time. Those temptations will assuredly arise, and once again try to pull you away from your central vision.

My faith tradition's scriptures tell us that when Jesus came to the end of his wilderness time, he faced three temptations.

Jesus was hungry after forty days in the wilderness. Satan suggested to him that if would be willing to compromise his new-found identity and turn stones into bread, using his power for materialistic ends, he could satisfy that bodily hunger.

**Nonprofits at their heart are not businesses. They are not government agencies. They are communities of citizens who gather to solve their own problems their own way**

As nonprofits, we often face a similar temptation. Today, we're told that if we adopt the means and maybe even the ends of business, then we can be much more successful materially than we've been.

So much of the discourse in the nonprofit world today takes its bearings from the corporate world.

We need a business plan; we should call contributions "investments;" we need to be more entrepreneurial; we need to focus on generating fees for service. We need to be less like nonprofits, some say, and more like business.

Ironically, nonprofits may be turning to the language of business at the precise moment that Americans are fed up with corporate snappy patter.

They now know that all of those complicated Wall Street logarithms and statistical formulas that seemed to guarantee perpetual corporate success were in fact completely detached from the real world.

What they did accomplish was to take economic power out of the hands of ordinary investors and everyday people and put it into the hands of so-called experts, who promptly drove us straight over a financial cliff.

In the midst of the economic chaos brought on by complicated, hyper-sophisticated, out-of-control systems, I suspect that citizens will welcome the reminder that within the small, immediate nonprofits in their own backyard, they can still exercise some control over their own fates and contribute to the well-being of their own community.

They will be relieved to find refuge from the self-interested materialism that Tocqueville warned would distract us from our civic obligation. But only nonprofits that don't succumb to the corporate temptation will be able to address that citizenly yearning.

Now, the Christian account tells us that Jesus faced a second temptation as well. All the kingdoms of the world were held out to him with the promise of ultimate political power, but again, only if he would compromise his true identity.

Nonprofits today, I suggest, face as well this political temptation—the temptation of becoming ever more attached to and structured like government.

It's hard to resist this temptation, because until recently government seemed to be a benevolent and inexhaustible source of revenue. So many nonprofits came to be massively dependent on it.

But that brought with it all sorts of regulations and reporting requirements that, over time, may have begun to inhibit the agility and flexibility of nonprofits, and divert them from their original missions.

After all, many nonprofits were started precisely because government had conspicuously failed to be flexible and adaptive.

Today, of course, things are different. Government at all levels is slashing spending for non-health care related services.

As Rick Cohen will tell you shortly, things aren't likely to get better for nonprofits any time soon, given the massive levels of public debt we face. So whether we like it or not, nonprofits are going to have to get over their reliance on ever-increasing levels of government spending.

But again, this can be a time when we recall who we were before we became dependent on and almost an extension of government – that is, when we reflected the passion of everyday citizens to tackle their own problems for themselves, immediately and directly, without the assistance of government, and maybe even in defiance of government.

We may now be ready to recognize the peril Tocqueville warned us about, when we begin to turn over to government the burden of governing ourselves.

Citizens will be searching for just such opportunities to reassume their own self-governance, as their opinion of government continues its downward spiral.

Now, I'm sure if I put my mind to it, I could come up with a nonprofit analogy for the third temptation faced by Jesus, but instead I will myself resist that temptation and bring these reflections to a close.

Time in the wilderness is never pleasant. It can be a time of great anxiety and a feeling that things are spiraling out of control.

But it doesn't have to mean the death of a nonprofit. It can in fact lead to an organization's rebirth, if we take the opportunity to revisit what we've become over the years, and question some of the attributes we may have taken on that make us less of who we started out to be, who we truly are.

Nonprofits at their heart are not businesses. They are not government agencies. They are communities of citizens who gather to solve their own problems their own way, often because those problems can't or won't be solved by business or government.

Nonprofits are the arena within which the great American story of active and committed citizenship is replayed within each generation, and passed on to the next. That is, finally, what we can learn once again in our time in the wilderness.

*William A. Schambra is the director of the Hudson Institute's Bradley Center for Philanthropy and Civic Renewal.*

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