

Season 2, Episode 6: The Arts and a Just World

Elizabeth: We all know, I think, that we need the arts in order to move through space and time, to understand who we are as a society.

Grace: Welcome to *Giving Done Right*, a podcast on everything you need to know to make an impact with your charitable giving. I'm Grace Nicolette.

Phil: And I'm Phil Buchanan.

Grace: Today we are going to talk with Dr. Elizabeth Alexander. She's a renowned poet, scholar, educator, and now she's the president of the \$8 billion Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Elizabeth Alexander is author of 14 books, including two that were nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. Her book *The Light of the World* is a memoir about the death of her husband; I highly recommend it. She also gave the inaugural poetry reading at President Obama's inauguration in January of 2009.

Phil: She's an incredibly accomplished person, and we talk with her in this interview about what it means to bring a social justice or racial equity perspective to your philanthropy, and we also talk about the relationship between pursuing goals related to equity and arts and culture. We talk about the Monuments Project that the Mellon Foundation is leading, which has to do with telling a more accurate and inclusive story about the country's history. So there's a lot here for individual donors who really care about justice to learn from.

Grace: Here's our conversation with Dr. Elizabeth Alexander:

Phil: Welcome to the *Giving Done Right* podcast.

Elizabeth: Well, thank you for having me. I'm excited to talk together.

I've been reflecting a lot about what it means to come to philanthropy with tools and abilities from other kinds of work and how important it is to bring people in and to kind of unlock their tools, abilities, and perspectives in philanthropy. The story begins with Darren Walker, really, and with his uncanny ability to recognize ability and also his tremendous generosity of spirit and his brilliance at rebuilding philanthropy, as a field, into a place that is more focused on justice and more inhabited with different sorts of perspectives.

Darren recruited me to the Ford Foundation, so now we're talking five years ago when this adventure began. I was director of creativity and free expression, which was Ford's work in arts and culture, journalism, and film. And it was diving into the deep end. At first, I literally was like, "why are you calling me? What is it that you think I bring to this work?" Not in a falsely modest way, but in a literally, like, "I don't understand what philanthropy is and don't understand what you think it takes to be good at it." And what he said, that I really value, is he said, "in chairing an African-American studies department, you are running an under-resourced, complex organization. You're running an organization that, you know, you're bringing people together from all over the university and in world of African-American studies, as an interdisciplinary department, we had people from, the law school, the divinity school, the forestry school, the economics department, the history department. And that was a much more complicated mission, working, indeed, at a very wealthy institution with very little resource. And that, actually, would not only enable me to run a team, within a larger complex organization, but would bring some understanding to what it means to empower folks to do the work as we do in philanthropy. So it was two years at Ford, then I returned for five seconds to the academy and kind of simultaneous with that moment, the opportunity to lead Mellon as a possibility came my way, and what seemed so amazing about that was the one piece that wasn't there in my work at Ford was higher education. And that was the world that I'd spent my whole life in. At Mellon, we're, in addition to being the nation's largest funder in arts and culture, we are also the largest funder in humanities and higher ed. I think finally, what I would add is that, as a single mother, I bring tremendous practicality to all of our work. I like simplified solutions, I understand what it is to multitask, and things that sometimes seem like too much, I think we just shouldn't look at them as too much.

Also what it means, and this too, a larger value with doing our work, but also an ethos within the Foundation, is that we are complete people. This is what Black feminist leadership looks like, you know? So that means that to be professional doesn't mean to lop off your head from the rest of your body. Right? You know, to lop off your eight hours from the rest of the day. And I think that, actually, the people I work with are tremendously hardworking, tremendously effective, but I hope that they understand that what enables that is a kind of holistic acceptance of our full humanity, which, after all, is the thing that we're trying to do at Mellon.

Phil: It's been so interesting because this period of the pandemic has made it more acceptable, maybe even necessary, for us to share more about our full lives with each other. And like so many people in this country, I read your beautiful memoir about your experience losing your husband called *The Light of the World*, which I can't recommend highly enough. I wonder if you could say a

little bit more about this issue of how the personal and the professional intersect, you know, that you're sort of alluding to, and how we do a better job as leaders and also, for donors supporting organizations, how can we help folks to be able be their full selves they also pursue these important objectives, to make it more possible for non-profit leader to say to a donor, "hey, I can't do that right now because I've got to go pick up my kids"? You know, like, this is a conversation we're having nationally, right, I think. And I wonder you see it playing out in your work in philanthropy and with the nonprofit leaders that you support.

Elizabeth: Well, I'll answer that, kind of, very broadly. I think from a life's work, and a life, I have brought to philanthropy an absolutely consistent orientation towards justice. That's what I come out of in my family, from people who always taught me that it's important to share whatever resources or advantages you have, that learning and critical thinking and helping people to do that so that they can be further empowered is sacred work and crucial work, that we continue to be in a fight for full human rights. So that's why the mission of bringing diverse creativity and thinking and deep knowledge to more people, I actually truly believe is a solution, among many solutions. And anyway, that's what I know how to do.

I think that also, one of the things that we see sometimes is privilege is made invisible. So, I have noticed at many different moments in time that people don't talk about the privilege that allows them to have long vacations in lovely places, or the privilege—and I don't use this in a totalizing way—but I've had many male colleagues with wives who don't work outside of the home, which is all well and good. But that means that if I come and say, "I need a research assistant." And in a matter of fact way, I hear from colleague X, that's something that his wife does for him, and why do I need that? True story. True story repeated many, many times. So I don't care what your life is like, I do care if the privileges of one's life make other people be judged as somehow not measuring up, not being able to keep up. I think that's just one kind of workplace example where, I think, the workplace has responsibility to be as helpful as possible, to enable great work from the people who are there and that's going to look different to a lot of us. I do think that we need to have understanding that all of our lives and situations are not the same.

And what's beautiful about working at Mellon—and, I think, in the three years I've been there, the way that my colleagues have completely come on board to our newly articulated social justice mission—that I think we love our work. I think that we see the importance of what it is to be on this team at this time, that in the pandemic, my goodness, when we saw both the fragility of the arts and culture sector and it it's under-resourcedness, which I know we're going to talk

about more, and thought about what we could do to be helpful, that was driving throughout the most difficult time that I think any of us can remember going through. So enabling all of us to do this beautiful work and be a community, since after all, also, work is where we spend so much of our time. So I just think we have to be a functional, supported community. And that's how, also, ripples of equity and care radiate out. You have to start where you are. You have to start in your home, and then you go to your block, and you go to your neighbor, you go to your workplace. And I believe that that has tremendous power.

Grace: That is very powerful. I want to come back to the social justice focus, but first I wanted to ask you about what the pandemic has meant for the arts and the humanities. What can donors do to make sure that vital institutions, all the way down to small nonprofits come back from this time?

Elizabeth: Well, I can answer that by talking about some of what we've been doing with other colleagues, both other foundations and also with individual donors.

Here is the problem: in the under-resourcedness—and by the way, at Mellon we have historically supported larger organizations. We're still with some of them, but as we've been asking questions about resources, we've had to ask, "What does your board look like? Do you have access to other resources? Who might not receive funding if not for our contributions? Is there another way you might go about this?" Those questions are important. So we've moved from the large, brought in a lot of smaller ones, though not exclusively smaller. And we have not traditionally supported individual artists, it wouldn't be practical. But in the pandemic, when we saw that in the arts, you basically, with one blow, went to almost complete unemployment for artists. There's scarcely an industry that has been affected like that. At the organizational levels, if people coming to visit and paying any kind of entry fee is a part of your model—that's over. That's not all the way figured out yet. Even if you come—I'm going to the theater next week, and we will be spaced, so that means however many less people paying for a ticket. That—if you think also about all of the artists who are performers, with that I also include writers who read their work. And I just looked at my writer friends as the gigs just evaporated. And so even if let's say you have a job teaching or doing something else, that is income that people count on, and again, we haven't fully figured out how to come back from that.

We joined with some others to do Artist Relief, which was a program we were really proud of that we did for a few rounds administered by USA Artists. And that was a way they were able to get quick amounts of money, not huge amounts of money, but money, to artists in cycles that turned over every single

week. And that did, I think, make a difference. Although again, the thing that we learned from that, is it was a drop in the bucket to the need.

So we did lot of emergency funding efforts at Mellon, we did a small museums initiative and a medium museums initiative nationwide. Again, not because large museums were not in trouble. They were. But in trying to think strategically about what we could do effectively, we thought, well, these littler folks might close. They might close with no way to figure out how to reopen.

We also did artists' relief in New York and Los Angeles—thinking about cities where there are not only very high concentrations of people, but high concentrations in the arts sector. And now what we have coming forward is an initiative called Creatives Rebuild New York, where we will be able to support a universal basic income to a number of artists. We're really proud of that because I think that it asserts a few important things. One, that artists got to get paid.

Grace: Yeah.

Elizabeth: Let's just start with that. You know, we all enjoy what artists make. We all know, I think, that we need the arts in order to move through space and time, to understand who we are as a society. But what is the labor? How are artists workers? And how do we think about supporting that is another thing.

Grace: So let's say I'm a donor who has identified that I would like to give to the arts and the humanities. There's sort of a range of options I could choose, as you mentioned: large institutions all the way down to individual artists. Where should folks go to find artists or organizations that are really moving the needle? How would you advise individual donors to get started?

Elizabeth: So, I mean, seriously, the first thing I would say is let's talk because, I think, tremendous colleagues, this is what we do all day as I said, again, being national funders and having tremendous staff expertise, people with lifetimes of experience in the arts. All day long, we're looking, hunting, saying yes, saying no. And so, I think to engage with individual donors about questions like, are you a place-based thinker? Or are you thinking in a national way? Do you see something particular in the place where you are—which I think is where all great thinking starts. Is there a genre about which you have particular knowledge? Sometimes people have particular devotions or knowledges.

We just supported, with the Ford foundation, some beautiful work for artists with disabilities.

And so to really think about: what are new paradigms of what is really useful to you? Let me not assume I know what it takes for you to do your work.

Grace: I wanted to dive a little bit deeper. I know that arts and humanities, some donors, obviously, the arts can be viewed as upstream from culture, down—I mean, there's a lot of ways to look at it—but I know that some donors see value in really influencing the culture at large. And I've been very interested in the Monuments Project at Mellon. And so I'm wondering, can you tell us a little bit more about that?

Elizabeth: Yes, we are so excited about the Monuments Project. When I was coming into Mellon in the interview process, this was an idea I had. Thinking about our built environment, thinking about the commemorative landscape, thinking about the statues and memorials and other kinds of spaces and objects that say who we are, that tell the stories of who we are. I think what we are collectively realizing in very powerful ways now is that commemorative landscape does not begin to tell the story of who we are in this country, in its variety. And further, and more perniciously, what we're seeing is that the built monumental environment disproportionately, values men, values white people, values acts of war and aggression, and very specifically venerates the lost cause of the Confederacy.

Grace: Yes.

Elizabeth: Once you start thinking about this, you can't stop, I think. When you think about the fact that, not only did the Confederacy lose the Civil War, so what does it mean, for example, for U.S. Armed bases to be named for Confederate generals, to be named for people who *failed* in acts of war and aggression and who were treasonous to the Union? I mean, it really blows my mind on the regular, as we say. So thinking about the symbols of the Confederacy's, and thinking about the tremendous possibilities of what it means to tell different stories in our commemorative spaces.

Grace: Can you give us an example of like a reenvisioning of a monument that you've been involved in?

Elizabeth: Yes, so before we had a Monuments Project as such, we were already doing this work in things like our support of the Equal Justice Initiative's Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama. You know, the great lawyer, advocate, civil rights leader, Bryan Stevenson, who comes at justice work through the law and through advocacy, realized that in order for that work to be ultimately successful, there also had to be narrative

change efforts. He knew that there was so much enmity and stereotype, and he tells the story of going into the courtroom and being treated very disparagingly by a judge who assumed that he was the defendant. And so, you know, it doesn't matter if you're the lawyer or the defendant, everyone should be respected in a courtroom, but a Black man going into that space and being treated disparagingly. And so, realizing that, he thought it important to tell the story of how we got to mass incarceration, starting with slavery, moving through Jim Crow, moving through the resistance to the Civil Rights movement, and then moving to over-policing, over-incarceration of Black and brown people in particular. So we felt it was not only incredibly important to tell that story, and that's what happens in the museum, but the extraordinary Memorial, which, it also surfaces and tells the story of lynching. And that says, it's bad enough that these things happened; these stories are submerged. And so one piece of that project I'm involved—and imagine—along highways in the South named for Confederates—the Jefferson Davis Highway—what does it mean to go by the side of the road and mark the spot where a lynching took place and to dig some of that soil and put it in jars where people's names and dates, and to say, "we remember you." Your family can know and have closure on how you died, and there can be accountability. So there are these tremendous—designed by MASS Design, really quite something—these hanging slabs that have counties and names and dates where lynchings took place. And the idea is that all of those counties, not just in the South, further north than we might've imagined, should reclaim those slabs and take them to the site where the crimes happened and do the reconciliation, working in community.

Phil: Bryan Stevenson and Equal Justice Initiative, but Bryan's work broadly—and his book *Just Mercy* is must-read for anyone who resides in this country—is such a great illustration of working at so many levels. There tends to be this sentiment among donors, I think, like, are we going to work on alleviating suffering? So, certainly, Bryan and the lawyers he works with have sought to help folks who were wrongfully convicted get their convictions overturned. Or are we going to work on the root cause? And Equal Justice Initiative has worked change policy. Or are we going to work on culture? Well, that's also part of it. It isn't an either/or. All of these things are necessary if we're going to make a real, sustained progress towards something like racial equity. And yet, in this particular moment, you well know, Elizabeth, as many in philanthropy ask, "what can I do?" And we saw an outpouring of commitments at a level that we hadn't previously seen, sadly, related to racial equity a year ago, post the murder of George Floyd and everything that that created in terms of the national conversation. We're also simultaneously seeing a pretty well-orchestrated, sort of, backlash in which philanthropy is being painted as kind of "woke police" that is threatening this country's ideals. In this moment here, a year after the summer of 2020, would your counsel be to donors—individual, institutional—

about the role of philanthropy and racial equity as we see this kind of mounting backlash to the role of philanthropy?

Elizabeth: That's a big question, and so I'm going to answer in number of different strands. First of all, let's just talk about the term "woke." I would like to embrace it for a moment to remind us that it comes from African-American vernacular, which—I'm glad it's made it into the mainstream. If you literally think about the condition of being awake or asleep to the world around you, what would you rather be? I'd rather be woke. I'd have my eyes open to the world around me. And that's the exhilaration of being an alive, thinking person, is that also our ideas are constantly building, changing, being challenged, evolving. There's some beautiful work that we're supporting this being done by a group in Philadelphia called the Monuments Lab, that's going to really give us some sharp numbers about: how many statues of whom and how many places named for et cetera, et cetera. So when you look at marked commemorative images or sites, less than 2% of them are of African-Americans. Less than one half of one percent of them are of Latinx people. Less than one half of one percent, less than that, are of Asian-American people. If you look at how—go to any city, look nationally, look at the map, national parks, wherever you measure—a fraction of these sites are devoted to women.

So I'll just tell you that about the commemorative landscape to say, like, I don't want to be stupid walking around, thinking that the men on the losing side of wars on their horses are the whole story. So I think that these are times of tremendous learning, tremendous opportunity. I think that all of the racial tumult that we lived through last year was not confined to last year. It has roots as old as the country. We are continuing to deal with it moving forward. And I feel like, you know, I will work all my days, really, to bring more stories, which is to say more lives—these aren't just stories. These are people's lives. Because when the Confederacy is over-venerated and when it's venerated today, that is explicitly about teaching white supremacy. And that has very real and tragic results every single day.

Grace: Last year, under your leadership, the Mellon foundation announced a strategic shift to prioritize social justice in all of its work. What does it mean to give with a social justice lens? And what does that mean to you? So I imagine that there are donors really care about social justice, but you know, there's just so many pieces of it, it can be overly broad. What does it mean to you? And what advice do you give to donors who care about social justice?

Elizabeth: Yes, well, here is where coming out of the academy and devoting a career to teaching critical thinking, and really believing that critical thinking

allows you to understand things and their root causes and how they are systemic rather than responding instance by instance, which is not only exhausting and ineffective, and doesn't get you to broader, actionable answers, but it is also very easy to default out of them. So I think that, to think about social justice, I think that it means that these resources contribute to a fairer and more equitable societal—all of us, not just some of us, not just our families, but all of us, the larger society that we live in—that justice and equity are something that everyone deserves.

What's also beautiful about a social justice lens is that it enables you to think about your grantmaking, but about everything you do. So, what is our hiring? What are our vendor practices? You know, who does the construction on the renovation? I mean, all of these are resources; we have to think about, is there a fair process through which they are distributed?

I think that, also, what social justice thinking gets you to is understanding—and we've been talking about this—that there are so many stories and experiences and perspectives that have not been elevated. We looked at our own grantmaking, and it has changed tremendously because we gave disproportionately to hugely resourced institutions. That doesn't mean that they weren't doing great work. That doesn't mean that we sometimes don't continue to work with them, but I mean, I think here to the mom practicality. You know, it's like, "did you have a sandwich?" You know, who, you know, "Phil, give half of your sandwich to Grace. Grace hasn't had lunch yet." I mean, it sometimes honestly feels as simple as that. It's analyzing what it means because no one should be an eternal grantee. There are so many beautiful communities and ideas that can be lifted up for the benefit of all. You know, again, I mean arts and culture—we're supporting it for everybody. And that's the ultimate goal.

Grace: So each episode, we ask each guest the question giving done right to you is about: fill in the blank. How would you answer that?

Elizabeth: Oh—giving done right to me. I will want to probably say this 10 different ways or to say 10 different things because that's such a rich question. But what came immediately to mind was: listening and learning and empowering. Listening, learning, empowering.

Grace: That's wonderful. Thank you so much; this has been great conversation.

Elizabeth: Thank you so much. What a pleasure.

Grace: Phil, I'm curious what you thought of our conversation with Elizabeth Alexander.

Phil: I thought it was fascinating. There aren't that many poets who've run multi-billion-dollar foundations. In fact, she might be the one and only. And I think what's so interesting is the way she talks about the importance of the arts, humanities, artists. She obviously recounted the toll that the pandemic took, the work that needed to be done to make sure that folks could just survive, right? And these are for whom this is their job. This is their livelihood. But also, they're enriching our lives and our communities. And I really think that the arts can almost be trivialized sometimes when people talk about their philanthropy, but Elizabeth helps us understand just how fundamental the arts are.

Grace: Right, the arts and humanities are not extracurricular to a healthy democracy. I'm also just struck by that combination of arts and humanities and their social justice focus that they pivoted to in the last year. And, you know, even in her description of Bryan Stevenson's Equal Justice Initiative monument in Montgomery, it's fascinating how arts projects often get at so many different levels, right? You have the policy level, you have the reconciliation, you have the historical, you even have the spiritual. When you're talking about the arts, you may actually be addressing all these different levels at the same time in the same project—and that's incredibly powerful.

Phil: Yeah, because we've got to change hearts and minds ultimately, right? And that's about what you see, what you learn about the history. And also, I think it was interesting to hear her reflection on the way in which the Foundation looked at "well, who are we supporting and is this consistent with our values?" And I think every donor can do that, right? There is a tendency, particularly in the early days of one's philanthropy, to just respond to what's in front of you, what you know, what your family's connected to, but that interrogation of yourself and your philanthropy to say, "hey, is this consistent with what I believe about equity and opportunity? Or am I actually potentially just exacerbating inequities with my philanthropy?" So important to do that analysis.

Grace: So Phil, where can people go for more information about effective giving?

Phil: Well, they can definitely go to our website, Grace, cep.org, or givingdoneright.org for all the podcast episodes and show notes.

Grace: You can find us on Twitter: I'm @gracenicolette and Phil is @philxbuchanan. You can send us a note with any suggestions or comments at gdrpodcast@cep.org.

Phil: I want to thank our sponsors, as always, the Walton Family Foundation and the National Philanthropic Trust. And if you like the show, please leave us a review on Apple Podcasts; it really helps.

Grace: Thanks again to Dr. Elizabeth Alexander for joining us today.

Giving Done Right is a production of the Center for Effective Philanthropy it's hosted by me, Grace Nicolette, and Phil Buchanan. It's produced by Sarah Martin with mixing and engineering by Kevin O'Connell and additional editing by Isabel Hibbard.

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