



A PODCAST WITH RUSTY STAHL | S7 EP12

Wellbeing as Strategy: Reimagining Philanthropic Practice

WITH

Laura Bacon
Funders and Wellbeing Group



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INTRO

Welcome to the Fund The People podcast. I'm your host, Rusty Stahl. I'm president and CEO of Fund The People where our mission is to maximize investment in America's nonprofit workforce. We give funders and nonprofits cutting edge ideas, research and tools to help drive equity effectiveness and endurance in the social sector. So let's start the show.

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RUSTY

Welcome to the Fund the People podcast, everybody. On today's episode, you'll hear about how funders are thinking about well-being in nonprofits and the grantee organizations they support. And you'll be hearing from a former grant maker and current strategy lead and facilitator of the Funders and Wellbeing Group. So my guest today for you is Laura Bacon.

For more than two decades, Laura has designed programs and led projects and teams to achieve social impact around the world. She's currently an independent consultant, partnering with clients on a host of cool initiatives. And one of her roles that we're going to talk about today includes strategy, lead and facilitator of this Funders and Wellbeing Group, which is part of a larger effort called the Wellbeing Project. And in this role, Laura facilitates peer learning and convenings among a dozen funders to enhance wellbeing for individuals, organizations, sectors and communities.

Previously, she was founding director of the Partner Support Program at Luminate, a global philanthropic organization that's part of the Omidyar Group, where she supported over 300 grantee partners to achieve their goals of being more resilient, healthy and inclusive and well networked. Before working at Luminate and the Omidyar Network, Laura was a White House

fellow focused on clean energy. And earlier in her career, she was a Peace Corps volunteer in Niger. And she holds a masters in public policy at Harvard's Kennedy School, where she was the Kathryn Reynolds fellow for social entrepreneurship. So welcome to the show, Laura Bacon, I'm really thrilled to have you here today.

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LAURA

Thank you so much for having me, Rusty. So happy to be here, I'm a big fan of your podcast.

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RUSTY

Well, now you're on it and you're making it happen so, glad to have you as a part of it. You know as a listener that I tend to ask this question, you know, give us a sense of how you got into this. Is there a moment or a motivation that led to your nonprofit and social change career?

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LAURA

There were several moments in my life that I think led me to where I am now, but probably one of the most significant was my senior year in college. I was heading toward being a musician, I'm a cellist, and I wanted to either go into performance and go to conservatory for graduate school or do arts management. And my first day of my senior year, 9/11 happened. And as any of us who were around during that time remember, it was just really intense and sort of changed the way we think about our world and our purpose and life.

And so my college roommates and I all enrolled in a course called "Personal Choice and Global Transformation". That course was the second most popular course in college that year, so over 300 people, it has since been turned into a book, and was called *Idealism 101* by the New York Times. But the professor, Brian Palmer, invited a series of people who epitomized personal choice and global transformation and they were some of the most inspiring speakers I had ever come across, and it made me just want to go into social change. So, I scratched the arts career and joined the Peace Corps in Niger, moved to a very small and remote village there, lived there for almost three years. The rest is history.

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RUSTY

Wow, alright. Thank you for sharing that. That's pretty incredible. Sounds like a book worth getting our hands on. So what is the book called?

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LAURA

Yeah, it's by Brian Palmer, and it's a compilation of essays and interviews with some of these change leaders. It's called *Global Values*. It was such a wide range of amazing activists, thinkers, philosophers, historians. Phenomenal, changed our lives.

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RUSTY

Wow, That's great. Yeah, it shows what can be done in higher education in terms of pulling together people from the world of practice to inform those of us who are in school and shape our trajectory. So, skipping a few years ahead, you know, a lot of folks listening to this are funders or are fundraisers or, you know, nonprofit folks who are trying to raise money and do their best interacting with the grantmaking world.

And we all know that, you know, burnout has been a major, major issue that has only grown in extremity these last years and is likely to continue among other crises that nonprofit folks are dealing with. And so I wanted you to have a chance to share, when you were a funder or worked in a funding organization, at Luminate this foundation created by the Omidyars, if you could share how you as a funder thought about wellbeing in the organizations that you and Luminate were supporting, and the connections you saw between staff wellbeing and organizational capacity and wellbeing. And yeah, share a little bit about what you tried to do to support wellbeing in that regard.

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LAURA

I worked at the Omidyar Group for over ten years. I started on the Governance and Citizen Engagement team at Omidyar Network, where I was a grant maker and had a portfolio of grantee partners, and then moved into this role of being the founding director of partner support at Luminate.

I mean, stepping back I think my worldview had always been oriented toward wellbeing. I studied psychology as an undergrad. And I looked at organizational psychology, what's going on in teams, what's going on in workplaces, what's going on with leadership. I also studied individual psychology, looking at mental health and social psychology, in-group, out-groups dynamics. So I've always been mildly obsessed with those topics. I also was a peer counselor; I was trained doing overnight, non-judgmental non-directive listening, active listening to my peers in college; I worked at a sexual assault hotline after college; I was a counselor chosen within the Peace Corps for my fellow Peace Corps volunteers, and so I had been awakened to trauma and mental health issues generally.

I also, once I joined philanthropy, became very aware of the power dynamics very quickly at play as a funder. And as I got to know my grantee partners, you know, I'm a people person and just love building relationships. As I think I did when you and I sat down for breakfast, Rusty, the first thing I always ask grantee partners is, how *are* you? No, really, how *are* you? And I mean it, I want to know, if that's not too intrusive a question, how people are *truly* doing. Not that "I'm fine" – especially these days.

So I really got to hear what was on executive directors, leaders minds and it was heavy. Sometimes having to do with family, sometimes having to do with the world, sometimes having to do with staff, sometimes to do with the burden that they hold as the fundraisers and the head

of strategy. And sometimes, what those of us as funders are doing to influence their wellbeing or lack thereof. And then I read this Columbia Research on burnout and trauma and depression amongst changemakers, PTSD, and how they weren't really getting the help and support and affirmation that they needed.

And so, first I was a grant maker, but then I was asked to create this partner support program, which is basically beyond-the-grant support. And one of the first things I did was I gave a presentation to our whole company called: The Case for Wellbeing. And I had this PowerPoint and shared all of this data, shared some of this research, and also shared what we as funders could do to support the wellbeing of the changemakers that we're in partnership with. You know, putting your money where your mouth is.

We also wanted to create a wellbeing stipend. Rusty, since I've listened to your rant on small stipends and top-ups, I will say we always tried to give wherever we could flexible general operating support core funding that was multi-year and as generous as possible. So this (stipend) was always on top of that, this was not a replacement to that. We created a wellness stipend, we gave over 70 of them. We spent hundreds of thousands of dollars supporting our changemakers and earmarked it particularly for their own wellbeing.

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RUSTY

So you said about 70 of those went out, is that, did I get that wrong?

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LAURA

Yeah, I believe it was 71 grants, maybe \$350,000 total. They ranged between \$5,000 to \$10,000, depending on the organization and how much they wanted.

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RUSTY

Yeah, I saw in your materials you had a pie chart sort of tracking how some of that got used and some of the feedback, I think, about those. Do you want to share anything about that?

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LAURA

Absolutely. I mean, it was a well-timed program. We didn't know that a global pandemic was around the corner, but we launched it, I think, in February of 2020. So as we know, COVID hit the next months and so what we thought would be a meaningful, impactful program sort of took off and we doubled the original plan.

So I will say a lot of people used their wellbeing stipends for things like office deep cleans, for safer transport to the office. They used it for health or life insurance or to support funerals of family members. People used it for toys, for their kids to keep their kids busy while they were working at home. So there was the COVID expenditures, which you might imagine was really

highly correlated with wellbeing in 2020, but people were also using it for team retreats and anti-oppression workshops, trying to learn how as companies they could be more radically inclusive and create centers of belonging. Some just gave out stipends to the staff and said use this for whatever you want. Some got psychologists or therapists available. I know one person used it for hiking boots so they could go for walks during COVID, which was, you know, an isolating and very much indoor time.

So we heard wonderful feedback. We have blogs that share some of the learning and some of the critical feedback we heard as well. But on the whole, people said it, first of all, helped prompt these conversations internally in their nonprofits: what does wellbeing mean to us and what are our priorities? Because we were very clear, you don't have to tell us what you're using this for, you don't have to apply, you can use us however you want. We reached out to those we thought might need it most and said would you like this? And all they needed to say was yes. There was no detailed reporting or anything.

So they said: a) it prompted a lot of important conversations internally; b) it kicked off longer term institutionalization of wellbeing –so things that they had wanted to do, retirement plans, more robust health insurance, staff retreats that helped them make that happen; c) they said that it gave them leverage when they talked to other funders, they could say, well, “Luminate is supporting our wellbeing and care about how we're doing as humans, you know, either can we use your money for that or do you have anything that you could offer us for wellbeing?” So it gave them that. Yes, several other impacts but people said it came as a really pleasant surprise and they felt like it affirmed our partnership with them and that it wasn't just a transactional but a transformational relationship.

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RUSTY

Yeah, as much as I rant about the small percentage of dollars going into wellbeing from foundations versus project support or even unrestricted support, it does send an important signal that we care about you as humans, not just your programmatic outcome measurement as a sort of entity and organizational entity. So, those signals are so important for the human beings who are making these organizations run.

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LAURA

Agreed. It's an important signal to send, we wanted to let them know this is something we care about a lot. We are encouraging you to look into this, it's not superfluous or a nice to have. It's a must-have.

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RUSTY

I'd be fascinated to hear more or read more about how it prompted groups to do things like health insurance or retirement plans because we've talked about those things on this show about how difficult it is for nonprofits to set up retirement savings plans and create the right

incentives for savings long term and really think about their employees as, you know, they may be temporarily at that organization, but we're investing in them because in America, that's how we do it, you have to rely on your job or your employment for health insurance and retirement for the most part. So, yeah, that's interesting to think about.

There's a couple of blog posts you sent me about what was learned through all of this and so we can include those in the show notes as well. So, thanks for sharing a little bit about how those wellbeing supports were perceived and used. As you've in the last year moved into this role as strategy lead and facilitator of the Funders and Wellbeing Group, we're going to talk about that next. So give us a high level overview of the Wellbeing Project, which is sort of the organization in which the funder group lives.

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LAURA

The Wellbeing project is a global network, it includes organizations of folks who care about the intersection between inner wellbeing and sustainable social change. And so these organizations include foundations and grant makers, include grassroots organizations, advocacy groups, activists, business organizations, educators, frontline workers. We define changemakers broadly. And the Wellbeing Project is trying to catalyze a culture where changemakers are well and their work is thriving and those are quite related. We believe that wellbeing inspires well doing.

And so the Wellbeing Project has a series of initiatives. They do research, so deepen the knowledge base for wellbeing being at the heart of social change. There are several communities for learning and acting together to support change makers and their organizations, we'll be talking about one of those communities in a moment. The Wellbeing Project convenes summits both at the local level and at the global level, around social change and also mainstreaming wellbeing and social change narratives and trying to destigmatize discussions of wellbeing and mental health. And the Wellbeing Project really looks at the relationship between individual wellbeing, organizational wellbeing, sectoral wellbeing, societal wellbeing and planetary wellbeing.

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RUSTY

Going from micro to macro there. You know, sometimes that is like hard to hold in my head all at once. So, I'd be curious if you could say a little bit more about what kind of topics get included in wellbeing in the frame of wellbeing within the Wellbeing Project. Like you mentioned, mental health, are there other things, practices or ideas or domains that are included within the concept of wellbeing here?

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LAURA

Yeah, absolutely, always happy to make things more tangible. The Wellbeing Project doesn't define wellbeing because they believe that people come to this with different understandings

depending on their culture, their background, where they're based and what their biggest needs are. But if you go to a Wellbeing Project gathering, it might start with some deep breathing, it might start with music, it might start with a meditation, it might start with a dialog between two deep thinkers on topics of wellbeing. They might be spiritual leads, they might be academics, they might be researchers, they might be philanthropists and just trying to expand our understandings of what wellbeing includes and why it's so important.

I mean, probably the most clear, obvious example of this is when people are burnt out or traumatized or overworked, they can't make the kind of social change they want to make. And obviously we have really extreme examples in our nonprofit sector of toxic workplaces or times when people felt really isolated or lonely at work and took drastic action. And so that's an extreme example.

But you can imagine the day-to-day, even right now in this moment, as wildfires were burning in Los Angeles, there's something going on with our planetary wellbeing. Our planet is not well. And that has implications for our physical health, our mental health, how we come together as societies, what organizations are able to do and how they can help. And so all of those things are open for conversation.

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RUSTY

Makes sense that there are different elements, different meanings in different cultural contexts. So it is a very big tent conceptually and in terms of who's, you know, doing this around the world. So, you know, Fund the People has been so US focused, because the US is a big place to try to make change and with tons of nonprofit people, both professional and volunteer activists. But you know, one of the exciting things for me about this conversation is learning about, you know, how the same issues are playing out in different parts of the world, both in, I'm sure, similar ways and different ways. So thank you for taking my question in the spirit of learning and investigation to understand what that really means wellbeing.

So now let's dig into the Funders and Wellbeing Group. So, it's part of this wider Wellbeing Project, seems to be the community within it that is really engaging the funders community who are concerned about wellbeing, both sort of their own and then the nonprofit folks. So share with us what the funders group does and what it's all about.

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LAURA

The Funders and Wellbeing group, as you said, is a community of the Wellbeing Project. It was launched in 2022 at the Wellbeing Project's Global Summit in Bilbao. And the Wellbeing Project has a goal of influencing philanthropy to invest more in changemaker wellbeing. And as you well know, often it's the philanthropists that are holding the purse strings and are distributing these grants and have a lot of power in terms of resourcing and so if philanthropists aren't on board for this, you've got a major barrier, an obstacle there. So this was really created as a dedicated global learning community of grant makers and foundations who are exploring this intersection

of inner wellbeing and sustainable social change. We experiment with ways to put it into practice and learn from those. And then the goal is to eventually contribute to culture shift in the philanthropic ecosystem more broadly.

So again, making it practical, I can talk more about the group and what we do, but we meet about seven times a year virtually, and it's about 12 foundations, one or two or three of members per foundation attend. And at one recent cohort meeting I asked everyone who had done a wellbeing stipend –and there were several of us, I think there were four or five of us – what did we do, what did we learn and what recommendations would we give to other grant makers about wellbeing stipends? We did a little panel, we used the liberating structure of “what, so what and now what?” And I just had all of us share briefly what we had done and then any of the other funders who had critiques or questions or were considering wellbeing stipends of their own could learn from us and our experiences. So no one is reinventing the wheel.

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RUSTY

Nice. So here's a follow up question I didn't plan, but so I think you and I have had some parallels in our work. Like I went from being working at a foundation in a junior role to then creating and running an affinity group, a network for funders and people working in foundations. So, curious to hear how it's felt for you to go from the power dynamics of being a funder and working with grantees and working internally at the foundation to then herding cats, herding philanthropic cats as a facilitator and looking to create this larger community around these issues among funders.

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LAURA

Yeah, it's a great question and a dynamic I'm quite alert to. Before I was in philanthropy, I had a wide-ranging career and that's given me different kinds of inflection points or perspectives on these dynamics. So for instance, when I was working in research organizations, we were always applying for grants and writing up funder reports for our funders and things. So I had been on the other side before becoming a funder.

And then as you mentioned, when I was in grantmaking, I was a member of many funder collaboratives and now I'm facilitating one. And yeah, people have said it's like herding cats and I was definitely one of those cats that was difficult to herd. And now I'm doing that myself. I try to always be very people-centered and very empathic and know everyone is busy, everyone has their day jobs, everyone has their priorities. And for the most part everyone, at least the people I work with, are trying to make the world a better place in the ways that they know how.

And so, actually it's interesting Rusty, I didn't say this at the beginning, but one of the other influences when I was thinking about going into philanthropy is we had a former president of a major US foundation come to the university where I was working and was talking about what it's like to be in philanthropy and, to me, it was sort of this black box, as you say. And he was like: “Working in philanthropy is amazing and here's why.” And he gave these three reasons and one

was, you wake up every single morning thinking about “how can I make a positive impact?” And you're not stressed out about fundraising, and that's where all of your mental energy goes. It's “how to be strategic and how to have a positive impact,” he said. The second reason is that you have this big picture you get to take a systems-level and look across sectors or within sectors, and it's not at the organizational level. And so that perspective can be really exciting, because you can connect dots and look for trends and connect people and again, take a systems view. And then the third, he said, is “it's not a competitive role.” It's not like for-profits or even sometimes a nonprofit sector where people are vying for the same resources. You are mostly in collaboration mode and you get to work with other funders and you're just getting ideas from them without any sort of “this is mine, this is yours”. So, that really appealed to me.

Now, once I joined philanthropy, I, you know, those things are true and it's complex and there's a lot of issues or problems with that field. And so I became a lot more critical and learned a lot more about those dynamics. But just to say that that was one of the things that appealed to me about it. And yeah, now working with funders, it's been fascinating, I love it. And the goal of a funders collaborative is to try to make the work that you're doing, this learning community, as relevant as possible to their day jobs, so they can action these things.

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RUSTY

Yeah, that's right. One thing I was going to ask you earlier and I skipped was, is you're moving some money in your grantmaking role toward wellbeing practices and supports. And then now as you're engaging this intimate crew of funders who are committed to that. So in both roles, like looking out at the field of other funders who are in this, you know, same networks and spaces as you, did you see like skepticism, criticism, cynicism about wellbeing? Like what do you think has been the sort of mainstream, if you will, or philanthropic view of this issue?

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LAURA

It would be hard to categorize a view. There are a complex number of perspectives out there. There are the folks who were allies on this. I mean, I'll say I got the idea about a wellbeing stipend from the Rights and Dignity Working Group, which was within the Omidyar group, they had piloted this. General Services Foundation had done a wellbeing stipend before we did. Astraea Foundation did a healing justice stipend. And so that's again one of the exciting parts of being in philanthropy, is learning what others are doing and what worked and what didn't, and getting their ideas and then sharing it with others. So I wrote up a bunch of blogs and then others went on to launch stipends like this as well. So there's certainly the allies who know that this is important.

There's also the folks that have very healthy skepticism, not that wellbeing isn't important, but how do we decolonize wellbeing? How do we make sure wellbeing isn't this global north or western concept where some people hear wellbeing and think “pull out the yoga mats” – and that's not always what wellbeing means to nonprofits around the world. It might be the last thing on their mind when it comes to wellbeing. And so, you know, there are a lot of really interesting

feminist organizations and feminist funding networks, Prospera, Astraea and others who are doing really great work on this and really cutting edge and thinking about community care, healing justice. It's the same with the word resilience, right? And capacity building. All of these words can be problematized, so wellbeing can as well.

And then there are folks that think, well this is a nice-to-have, this is a luxury, but this isn't the most important thing.

And then, as we mentioned, there are some folks who unfortunately have a deleterious effect on civil societies' wellbeing in the funding community. And we see that, with "Crappy Funding Practices" or things amplified on "Nonprofit AF." So it's such a wide range.

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RUSTY

Yeah, totally. And it is a wide range, you're right. And I think maybe those bad practices that actually make things harder get so frustrating, that sometimes people get cynical about the whole philanthropic field or the foundation world. But I've always said there are people inside trying to make change and support change both internally and externally. And that's very important to remember and to support.

So, back to the Funders and Wellbeing group, you all had this gathering recently, the annual in-person gathering late last year in Malaysia, and it was like immediately before the Fund the People's California Talent Justice Summit. And I know we had one person go to both events, Jen Wei at the Hewlett Foundation. So thanks, Jen. Shout out to you for being part of both efforts and convenings. But tell us about the theme and the framing of that gathering and what did you see? What happened? What happens in gatherings like these, and what did you experience?

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LAURA

As I mentioned, the Funders and Wellbeing Group meets mostly virtually. We meet seven times a year virtually through cohort calls and community calls. But in-person gatherings, as we know, can really enable much deeper bonding and connection and learning and it can also help us get grounded in a certain place or space. So the Malaysia retreat was our opportunity and the purpose of the retreat was to pause our day to day routines and build meaningful and supportive relationships with like minded counterparts who are allied around wellbeing for deeper learning and collaboration. So that was the stated purpose.

First of all, I read Priya Parker's "The Art of Gathering" and tried to model our retreat after a lot of the principles that Priya Parker shares in the Art of Gathering, which is a beautiful book, it really blew my mind and made me rethink all the convenings I've ever facilitated prior to this one and what was I doing? And one of the things that she talks about is this, I think, it was a 16th century Japanese tea master who talks about *ichi-go ichi-e*, which is this concept of "one

meeting, one moment in your life that will never happen again". And sort of this idea of: How do you make the most of humans coming together and sharing wisdom and their hearts and hands and heads and minds with one another? So I also encouraged everyone to really lean into the present and take full advantage of being together.

So one of our themes was the Serenity Prayer. And Alcoholics Anonymous, as we know, has adopted this prayer: "Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." Another way that this has been visualized is a Venn diagram. Two circles, one is "things that matter" as one big circle, one is "things I can control", and in that very small overlap of things that matter and things I can control is: "this is where you focus". And I think this could not be more relevant than right now, early February 2025, there's a lot going on.

I wanted all of us as funders, as humans, as those of us who are formerly or currently in the nonprofit change-making world: What can we can control and how do we make sure we have the courage to step up in this moment, but also to let go some of the things where we don't have control and know that others are working on those. So that was the theme.

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RUSTY

Please give us a little picture of what kind of things you did.

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LAURA

We had three full days. The first day was around People, Purpose and Place, and so we were getting to know one another, some people had never met. And so the funders getting to know one another a bit better, talking about the purpose for a meeting and the purpose for our work as Funders and Wellbeing Group, but also everyone's individual purpose, why they do what they do. And then place. You know, we were in Kuala Lumpur and we really wanted to get to know the country, the culture, the history and how they approach wellbeing to the extent that we could in a short visit. So Malaysia is this incredible blend, I mean, it's this beautiful melting pot of cultures. So, that was day one.

Day two, we focused on Work and Play and so we went to the rainforest right in the middle of the capital city, Taman Tugu was a name of the park, and we did instead of fireside chats, we did a forest-side chat and we talked about a lot of the things you and I are talking about. How does organizational capacity building and capacity strengthening relate to wellbeing? What have we done and what have we learned from that? We have four layers that we look at in the Funders and Wellbeing Group. So we look, first of all, at the humans within philanthropy and the wellbeing there. We look at the wellbeing of philanthropic organizations, so how does wellbeing play out in our DEIJ strategies or in our policies? And then the most obvious, when you think about the Funder and Wellbeing Group, is the wellbeing of our grantee partners and how to support that, and that's a big chunk of what we do. And then finally, how to influence norms and the philanthropic sector around wellbeing.

Everyone was listing priorities in each of these four layers, here is what I'm doing, here's what I'm going to do in 2025. And then people got to ask questions and learn more. So for instance, someone said, "my company offers me a racial equity coach and it's changed my life", and other people are like, "tell me about this, how could I get that in my organization?" Or, "I'm trying to build more participatory community led grantmaking in our ways of doing philanthropy" and others ask about that. So it was a lot of work.

And then we did play, so it was all about letting go and improvisation. I had a facilitator named Catherine Wilks, she runs something called the Shoopery, and we all learned to SHOOP. It was just a chance to let go and to improvise and to play and it was very, very bonding. And so those of us who are quite cerebral and quiet in our heads most of the time, it's a chance to make art together and dance together. Anyway, that was our work and play day.

And then our final day was about Apply and Act. And so how do we take a lot of the things that we've learned and put it into action in 2025 and beyond. So we looked at: What are our influence opportunities for the year? We talked about – we had met with civil society from Malaysia – what are our learnings there, and what are our curiosities around decolonizing wellbeing, or the intersection between DEI, belonging, accessibility and wellbeing? We had met with other funders from Malaysia, and so: What did we learn from how wellbeing is practiced in the grantmaking context in Malaysia and what do we take away?

And then it was followed by the Regional Health Summit, which is why we were in Malaysia. The Wellbeing Project had partnered with Impact Hub in Kuala Lumpur. It was the first Asian Regional Health Summit hosted by the Wellbeing Project, and so all of us were attending that and getting to know other civil society and change makers in Asia. So we had tacked our retreat onto that.

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RUSTY

Got it. So you had a packed retreat followed by a broader one. So you mentioned as part of the gathering that the funders group met with Malaysian civil society leaders and by civil society leaders, for those unfamiliar with the term, we mean nonprofit, social movement and civic leaders. So, can you share a little bit about how do the challenges they face around wellbeing and nonprofit work compare to what you see or what we're all seeing here in the United States in recent years?

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LAURA

One of the objectives of our gathering was to learn and expand our understanding of wellbeing approaches, how is wellbeing framed in Malaysia? So we asked funders and especially civil society leaders that question directly: What comes up for you when we say wellbeing? What are some of the wellbeing issues that come up in your work? And some of the problems they mentioned were somewhat unique to their context. As you know, every context has its own

specificities and background. And what was very striking to all of us was how similar and universal some of the issues they mentioned were.

So for instance, they talked about shrinking civic space and whether that puts limits on what they're able to say out loud, or limits on funding, or rising authoritarianism, or curtailing democracy. You know, there was one group there that focuses on religious pluralism, and they had had a fatwa issued against them for promoting pluralism and diversity. And we don't use the same words here but that's, you know, in terms of all the anti-DEIJ, things that are happening in the US right now and beyond.

They talked about being underpaid and overworked, which again you'll recognize is a universal civil society problem. But it was sad, I mean, some of these very young civil society leaders were saying to us: "most of my peers have had to leave this sector because they can't afford to live in the city, have a family and work in a nonprofit." And so they're moving to the for-profit sector. "we can't afford to be in this sector," which again, has resonances and echoes in our context here.

They talked about leadership transitions and how difficult leadership transitions can be, both in and out, within an organization and how that causes wellbeing challenges for the leaders and for the staff. They talked a lot about tensions between managers and staff and intergenerational tensions and approaches to the work. And so all of that really resonated with us.

And then the most striking, which won't be a surprise to you, Rusty, but it's something long hypothesized, is that *funders* have a lot of responsibility for the wellbeing of these nonprofits. So they talked about "when you're asking us for so many reports," they said, "do you really read these reports? You know, the due diligence was just too, too much and there was a lack of trust", right? They talked about all the bad practices that funders do that have implications for the wellbeing of civil society leaders.

What was great is they also talked about some positive outliers and best practices. And so, some of them talked about when funders have hired locally and ensured that the local staff is Malaysian and not making decisions from the US or London. That proximity and that understanding of the context makes for a much better grant making grantee relationship.

One grantee talked about how both on her way in and her way out as executive director of a nonprofit Luminate had supported her with a coaching stipend and how supportive Luminate had been during that transition.

Someone else mentioned that on his team they look at radical extremism, violent imagery and the content moderators were really struggling. And their funder, knowing the context and the kind of work they were doing, said would you like psychological support? Do your content moderators need to get some support for all the secondary trauma they're experiencing as a result of working on such intense and violent issues? And they said that was so welcome and no funder had ever asked them that before.

So those are just some of the things that came up in our conversation with Malaysian civil society. It was a very rich and rewarding conversation.

00:38:22:17

RUSTY

Yeah, that's a lot. And very, very parallel to what's going on here, what people are experiencing. So, what do you think funders and nonprofits here in the U.S. should be thinking about funding and working toward well-being in nonprofits this year and in 2025 with everything that's going on.

00:38:40:03

LAURA

This is a unique moment, really. February 2025, we've had hundreds of executive orders, there's threats of a funding freeze, there's this chilling effect, there's anti-DEIJ rhetoric and a fundamental misunderstanding of what DEIJ is at its heart. We're seeing layoffs, you know...

00:38:59:22

RUSTY

Misunderstanding or intentional manipulation.

00:39:05:16

LAURA

Absolutely, yeah, the weaponization of [DEIJ].

I will say this is a tough time for any of us who are thinking about human rights, immigrant rights, diversity, equity and inclusion, justice, belonging, racial justice, LGBTQ+ rights. All of those are under attack right now, as are nonprofits more broadly. And so I guess if I have any opinions on how we should be thinking about funding and working toward wellbeing, I think going back to that serenity prayer, and like focusing on where you have control.

So for grant makers, that's often: How can you structure your funding and how can you just give generously and give flexibly? How can you ask your grantee partners, "how *are* you doing right now?" You know, what we did during COVID. Maybe we can reduce the number of reports you have to submit. Maybe we gave your disbursements early, maybe we allow for oral reporting or a quick phone conversation rather than wanting pages and pages. Maybe we say you can recycle your reports.

Thinking holistically: wellbeing is playing out at the individual, organizational, sector or societal and planetary levels right now. I keep going back to Deepa Iyer's Social Change Ecosystem Mapping and we all have different roles we play. And so instead of trying to play all of them, to really value each of those different roles and understanding where you sit, where your partners sit in this moment.

You know, this is not a drill. We're watching our social fabric getting pulled apart and so I think funders need to be generous, I think wellbeing is paramount. A lot of us are worried that wellbeing initiatives might be cut or sidelined as there is this funding crunch, especially if federal funding is frozen or changed. And so, how to make sure that wellbeing is baked in and make sure that funders say to nonprofits: "We're not going to tell you how to spend this money, but make sure you're taking care of your people in addition to the programs that you're running."

And then, yeah, Rusty, I always think about what you say at the end of every podcast, which is something along the lines of "make sure that your cup is full and make sure you take care of yourself and make sure you take care of those around you." That's the best advice you can give, in this moment.

00:41:14:08

RUSTY

Thanks. It's true, it's the airplane: put your own mask on as well. It's what we need to do as a sector, because I think this time around, if we compare this Trump administration to the last one, we're not just talking about attacks on various communities, if you will call them attacks, you know, policy attacks on various communities, whether it's trans or immigrant or others. But they're also attacking the nonprofit sector and philanthropy itself. And so I think funders and nonprofits have to recognize that we're dealing with both of those things and that adds a different kind of strain to the response and to sustaining ourselves and our wellbeing.

So that's the challenge. It's an interesting one, and I think folks in some ways were made for this moment. I was talking to another one of our upcoming guests, Loretta Turner, about this, and she said, you know, how do we recognize that nonprofit people have been training for this and we're used to making something out of nothing and enduring and pivoting as needed. And so, let's use all those skills at the same time, let's make sure we're taking care of ourselves and not having to make something out of nothing all the time.

As we wrap here, how can folks find the Funders and Wellbeing Group online and what materials or resources might they find from you?

00:42:35:22

LAURA

Thanks, Rusty. We would love to share that The Wellbeing Project is having its Global Hearth Summit in Slovenia at the end of June. It'll be June 17th through 20th and change makers from around the world will be there to celebrate with one another the promotion of wellbeing and how it relates to change making. Funders are welcome to join the Funders and Wellbeing Group so you can reach out to me or to Dana Preston, we'll include all that contact in the notes.

People can subscribe to the Fund Well Newsletter, this is one of the publications for the Funders and Wellbeing Group. Every month there is a guest curator, I guest curated Fund Well in December and wrote about some of our lessons learned from our Malaysia retreat. So there's always really interesting nuggets and resources there.

I'm also happy to share my blogs on partner support, wellbeing stipends and coaching stipends. So those are some resources.

I'm happy for anyone to contact me, my email address is laura.m.bacon@gmail.com. I'm on LinkedIn and the Funder and Wellbeing website is, if you're interested in joining, wellbeing-project.org/funders-wellbeing-community-group. Please join us. Reach out to continue this conversation.

00:43:57:18

RUSTY

Well, Laura Bacon from the Funders and Wellbeing Group, thank you so much for coming on the Fund the People podcast today.

00:44:03:21

LAURA

Rusty, thank you so much for having me. It's an honor and pleasure to be here.

00:44:07:18

RUSTY

So folks, I hope you enjoyed this episode. I wanted to let you know that I will be sharing more about the California Talent Justice Summit on our next episode. And so you're going to want to stay tuned for that. I want to give you more of a sense of who came, what we did and some of the outcomes from that event that was in December of 2024 and helped set up Fund the People for this year.

And you should know, too, that we are in the midst of our occasional series of episodes here on the podcast where we're bringing you some of the speakers and participants from the summit. So we kicked off 2025 with Geoff Green from Cal Nonprofits. We also have had on Nneka Payne from CHOOSE 180, a youth serving nonprofit in Washington State, and those have been fantastic episodes. And we've got more coming to you both national folks doing really interesting work as well as guests from California and from the summit.

So I hope you're enjoying this season seven of Fund the People podcast and I do hope you stay tuned as we continue bringing you people, ideas and resources to help you invest in the nonprofit workforce wherever you sit or stand in the field and I hope you are taking care of yourself and taking care of one another. So, I will talk to you soon.

00:45:36:18

OUTRO

Thanks for listening to Fund the People podcast, visit fundthepeople.org and click on podcast to find a transcript for this and other episodes and all the links discussed in the episode. If you enjoyed this episode, we really appreciate a five star rating and a quick review if possible, on Apple Podcasts. It helps more people to find the show. Thank you for driving change in our

communities. Remember to keep your tank full, take care of yourself and take care of one another.