

Faith, Women And Philanthropy: An Opportunity

By Donna M. Rosenthal

<http://www.clal.org/w1d.html>

(This talk was presented at the National Conversation on Faith, Women and Philanthropy, San Francisco, CA on December 6, 2005.)

Faith, women and philanthropy – looking at how they can come together to address the needs of women and children in need - is critical. To even use these three words – faith, women and philanthropy – in the same sentence, indicates that we are living in unprecedented times and have been given a tremendous opportunity. There are always barriers to everything we do, but how we perceive the challenge – positively, not negatively – I believe, is the key.

Jews believe that all human beings are created in the image of God. They have infinite value, equality and uniqueness. If we are to make this a reality, to infinitely value each person, then we must address the conditions of poverty, illness, hunger and hatred that exist in society. Jews also believe that to work to repair the world, *tikkun olam*, - in other words to make a world in which every human being feels as if they are an image of God - we must join together and act as a role model for others. *Tzedakah*, social justice brought about through philanthropy, is a basic tenet of Judaism.

We all bring different perspectives to the table today. We are truly women of diversity. Some of us are academics, some of us are religious leaders from a wide range of faiths, some of us are human service professionals, and others of us are philanthropists. Some of us are considered more traditional and some of us are more liberal. But diversity can and should be a great strength, not a barrier. The barrier is inside each of us because we expect agreement and sameness. The agreements are there, but you have to look deeper to find them, and I don't believe that you find them by minimizing the very real differences and disagreements that exist in this room. Those differences can become sources of creativity and insight when we honestly acknowledge them by maximizing the places where we actually are all the same – in the love and concern about and empowerment of women and children. Doing this will help us find new ways to address the complex problems of our society, new ways to act together, and new areas of commonality that we don't yet see.

So, if we are in the room because we care about the same things, and want to find ways to work together, it is important that we learn to listen and respect one another, understanding that while we may disagree with one another strongly in some areas, and we do, there are truths and values in each of our beliefs that we can all benefit from and use as a framework to address the problems and empowerment of women and children with which we are all concerned.

Today there is much discussion about faith-based social and health services. It always sounds like it is a new phenomenon. But from the 19th century we have had faith-based human service institutions in this country. As time evolved, these organizations became pluralist, serving a more diverse population. But we must not lose sight of the fact that their purpose and charters all stemmed from their religious origins. Caring for the poor and those in need, helping to repair the world, was and remains their mission.

And it has been women who have been in the forefront of this work... Women across all faiths who have been renowned for their work in this field... Women who have led the way... Women who have made a difference... Women who have dedicated their lives to helping others.

Now we are at an important crossroads. The problems of women and children throughout our country and the world are crying out for our help. We, women who empowered women to have equal rights in so many areas, have neglected to galvanize and organize to improve the lives of women and children in need.

I hope we will not be silent. What if we harnessed the stories of all the people who want to help and empower others, and made philanthropy for women and girls so attractive and inviting that everyone wants to join in?

Narrative leadership is critical to our success. We learn from our individual stories. And we have important stories to tell - about our work from a women's perspective, from religious perspectives, from the perspective of the people we are helping. We must tell our stories collectively and individually.

I will tell you a brief story. When I was the Executive Director of the National Down Syndrome Society, we held a large international conference. People came from 47 countries. On the eve of the conference there was an electrical problem, and all the exhibits, which had been very carefully arranged, were taken down and then reset. The next day, I came in to find that the Jewish Orthodox Adoption Agency run by a man in a black hat and a woman wearing a wig, and the Kuwaiti Down Syndrome Association run by a man in a burnoose and a woman wearing a head scarf, were side by side. It was too late to change their positions. And what happened. They became friends, giving advice to each other, and exchanging addresses and telephone numbers.

If the cause is important, touching what is most human about us - our shared vulnerability - it is amazing, I learned, how many barriers fall.

That is why I believe that it is critical to provide the opportunities for women to come together from different faiths and backgrounds. We have to take responsibility for the traditions that we cherish, respect others' beliefs, and contribute to a more just world. It is important that we build community and help people take the strengths of individualism into communal participation. One does not negate the other.

We will not all carry out our programs in the same way. In fact, we will undoubtedly carry out our programs in very different ways. However, we can learn from one another, and we can

respect one another's methodologies, and we can encourage and support one another. We can begin to understand more about each other and focus on the task at hand, rather than focus on our differences and our dislikes about one another as women from different faiths, or even different women within our faiths.

We women, Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, secular etc. etc. can be the leaders once again, and work together toward our common goals. There will always be among us some who will push the envelope for change more than others. There will always be among us some who will urge us to be traditional. But hopefully there will be consensus that we are working together to help improve the lives of women and children.

One question before us: How can we get others to join us? Of course we can reach out to women in their religious institutions. But, I believe that we also need to reach out in new ways to women who may not be active in their religious institutions, who are "disconnected". We need to understand that for people who say they are secular, who describe themselves as feminists, many still have roots in their religion. They score out proud to be Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, even though they may not consider themselves religious. But they do not make the linkages between their faith and their daily lives. Frankly, I never saw the linkage between my work and my Judaism until I came to CLAL. Although Judaism and its basic tenets have informed my work, no one had made that connection for me before.

We can be helpful in making that linkage for women, and starting them on their journey. It may not be a traditional journey, but it will be a compelling one. Engaging women in helping other women through a concerted effort on all fronts – religious, feminist and philanthropic – can galvanize them to help in a very meaningful and compelling effort. The undertaking must be realistic, motivating and effective. It must make a difference.

In summary, to succeed, I believe, we have to accept, even celebrate, that we are different, and with that awareness work together in a network, encouraging one another, inspiring one another, helping each other to recognize needs and support the programs addressing those needs. We do not have to stand by ourselves and we do not have to do it the same way.

But we do need to join together, bringing all the strengths and components that make us who we are in this room, recognizing that if we stand up and speak on behalf of women and girls who are in need, they will have champions in the world today.

Let's respect our differences, put aside our disagreements and work together to repair the world, advance life and become a role model for others to follow. Let us bring our collective religious, feminist, and philanthropic wisdom and inspiration, yes inspiration, to the public square on an issue of critical importance and urgency – the needs and empowerment of women and children throughout the world.

For more information about Donna Rosenthal, click [here](#).

