

VISION AND VALUES: Articulating a Progressive Morality

Introduction: Reclaiming Values

- Fair pay for a fair day's work.
- Equal access to educational and business opportunities.
- Increasing voter education and participation.
- Shared responsibility for the planet, for the nation and for each other.
- Respect and protection for the rights of the individual.

These are basic statements with which few people in this nation will disagree. So how are we losing the national “culture war?” The conservative agenda is often reduced to Pro-Life, No Taxes and Strong Defense. While that is a perhaps an extremely simplified generalization, it is a generalization that can be articulated by many people. An often-heard criticism of progressive leadership is that there is no counter-narrative, no equally “high relief” map of our values — at least not one that can be widely agreed upon.

For many years, progressive organizations have shied away from overt expression of the shared values and vision that underpin their work—and particularly from articulating those values in terms that may evoke spirituality or morality. That silence has created a gap that the right wing has been able to fill—often with Orwellian results. Progressives have realized that we cannot lead with a policy analysis in public debates. Rather we must lead with the broad and basic values that inform our positions. A living wage ordinance is not simply an economic issue, but it is a moral imperative: *working families should not live in poverty*. We need to make sure our supporters can walk out of a voting booth not only thinking “I voted my values” but able to articulate those values in clear, compelling agreed-upon terms.

Sharpening Our Focus

In recent years — and particularly after the 2004 election — many progressive thought leaders have devoted time and resources to developing a widely accepted progressive vision and statement of values. Many notable examples have emerged:

- In his groundbreaking book, “*Don’t think of an Elephant*,” UC Berkeley Professor of Linguistics and Cognitive Science, George Lakoff offered the following ten word framework for thinking through how our worldview informs our values that in turn inform the issue areas and policies we care about most.

PROGRESSIVES

Stronger America
Broad Prosperity
Better Future
Effective Government
Mutual Responsibility

CONSERVATIVES

Strong Defense
Free Markets
Smaller Government
Lower Taxes
Family Values

- The **Opportunity Agenda** is applying communications, research and advocacy tactics to engage the public around the shared goal of expanding opportunity in America. Their work lays a critical foundation in articulating the following six “Opportunity Values” as fundamental components of realizing the American dream — **Equality - Mobility - Redemption - Voice - Community - Security** — and placing each in a philosophical and historical context (see attached).

- The **Network of Spiritual Progressives**, led by Michael Lerner, is challenging the misuse of religion by the Religious Right, advocating a “New Bottom Line in America” as one that: *“takes into consideration not only how well institutions and the economy maximize money and power, but how well they maximizes love and caring, ethical and ecological sensitivity and behavior, kindness and generosity, non-violence and peace”*. (From *Left Hand of God*.)

No Silver Bullets

But this is only the starting point. No matter how tightly constructed our messages are, we have to make sure they are connected from the bottom to the top — to activists, to leadership and to communities. Because no amount of “framing” or “messaging” will ever take the place of community organizing and civic participation. These strategies always go hand in hand.

As Jean Hardisty and Deepak Barghava remind us in their article “Wrong About the Right,” (see attached article), victory for good policies at the polls is not an end in itself. It is, in fact, part of a larger movement building strategy. We seek to represent, connect, recruit and build leadership for a vibrant civil society. To get there, progressives need to ask fundamental questions about what they actually believe and then *“declare those values in a clear, uncompromising voice that is not only morally compelling, but strategically smart.”*

Developing messages requires many of the same elements as effective organizing. Firstly, deep engaged listening in the communities where the work is being done is fundamental. Secondly, it is important to avoid letting progressive voices on the East and West coast dominate the message development. For messages to resonate nationally, they need to span America. Funders and activists alike need to rethink traditional assumptions and start from a place of learning together to build and articulate a vision that is stronger and more far-reaching.

The Funding Approach

As recently as the last Momentum conference in February 2005, funders were focusing on how to support initiatives in this area being undertaken by organizations large and small. The following three funding strategies — Big Ideas, Connecting the Dots, and Spreading the Word — offer a starting place for individual funders who want to effectively support organizations that are working toward the massive goals of developing, sharing, articulating and disseminating a truly progressive vision for the future.

Funding Strategy One: EXPLORING BIG IDEAS

WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT VALUES

“It’s a funny thing about the term “framing:” The more it gets used, the less we seem to understand what it means. Three years after George Lakoff emerged from academia to help make framing a household word among progressive activists, most of us are now thoroughly confused about what a frame is, or how to distinguish a frame from a slogan, message or spin...

What we learned from Lakoff early on is that framing begins at a deep conceptual level. It is really about how we understand the world and our place in it; how we define problems and solutions; how we organize ourselves to achieve our goals; and how we talk about all of it.”

From: *Suitable For Framing?* By Peter Teague, on AlterNet, January 2006

The challenge of “articulating a progressive morality” is not just a question of finding the right new phrase or sound-bite. It requires a step back to reassess “business as usual” and to ask some fundamental questions: What role do we want government to play in our lives? What are the rights we stand for? What does our vision of a just economy look like? What fundamental changes are needed to achieve that vision? How should we gauge progress, growth and success? Many organizations are taking on these questions with a commitment to serious research and analysis, and to generating policy solutions that challenge current assumptions. Whether targeted to specific issues, or taking a global view, these institutes are working towards development of new approaches to entrenched issues and viewpoints, and to a new articulation of values that can resonate with the U.S. and international public. For example:

- **Redefining Progress** is a national policy institute that works in partnership with grassroots communities, labor unions, policymakers, academics and businesses to develop new frameworks to shift the economy and public policy towards sustainability. Their development of the Ecological Footprint — defined as the amount of nature it takes to sustain a given population over the course of a year — offers a different measure to assess the impact of programs and policies.
- The **Center for American Progress** is a research institute committed to “developing a long term vision of a progressive America”. The Center offers innovative policy solutions, talking points and analysis on topics ranging from “Using the Arts to Galvanize the Public on Global Warming” to “HIV/AIDS and its Impact on Africa” and almost every other topic covered in these Momentum briefing papers.

Suggested Strategy:

- Provide general operating support to progressive think tanks and policy institutes that a) are committed to early and meaningful involvement from community activists to inform their research and vision development and b) are focused on fundamental questions and reframing.

Possible Organizations to Fund

- Institute for Policy Studies
- Institute for American’s Future
- Institute for Policy Studies
- Institute for American’s Future
- Center on Budget & Policy Priorities
- Opportunity Agenda
- Economic Policy Institute
- Rockridge Institute
- Center for American Progress

What to Look For:

Institutes and policy organizations that have the most potential to articulate a progressive vision that will resonate across the country are those:

- that build a broad base of connections beyond the beltway;
- whose analysis and research approach incorporates questions of race and class on every issue;
- whose work looks beyond immediate electoral outcomes and toward movement building; and
- whose research is linked proactively to communications and mobilization strategies.

Funding Strategy Two: CONNECTING THE DOTS

BUILDING CONNECTIONS AMONG AND BETWEEN POLICY INSTITUTES, ACTIVISTS AND COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS

“The challenge posed by the lessons from the right is not just for individual, single-issue movements to articulate a shared vision but for those visions to add up to something even larger: a broader, multi-issue progressive movement. If related single-issue organizations working toward the same long-term goals would be more powerful, imagine the power of even more organizations, working across issues for the same ends. Certainly the issues are intersectional — foreign policy is inextricably intertwined with economic development policy; abortion rights and reproductive freedom intersect with criminal justice. Our solutions must intersect as well”

Introduction to the Movement Vision Project of The Center for Community Change

Too often, organizations doing effective work in one particular issue area operate in a vacuum, rarely connecting with other organizations working in the same field, and even more rarely with organizations across other sectors. This is often an issue of competing priorities and limited time, but a large part of this problem is also the fact that activist and community-based organizations rarely receive funding that is specifically designated for collaboration, learning, partnership meetings, convenings and conferences. Yet it is exactly these types of activities that can play a crucial role in developing a broader progressive movement.

Making this interaction an integral part of an organization’s workplan allows for the mental space necessary to take full advantage of these occasions. Sharing work product, sharing ideas, sharing language and sharing values will not only make each individual group stronger, but strengthen the movement as a whole. Funders can play a critical role in supporting organizations to make this work a priority and in helping them identify and convene with other progressive organizations to build networks and identify common solutions, while fully allowing the activists to drive the process and the results. Most effective are convenings whose membership extends beyond the “usual suspects”; that cross issue lines and cultural lines; that bring together policy institutes and community organizers; that link organizations working at the local, state and national level; and that break down the often artificial distinction made between “activist” organizations and those focused on “service delivery”.

Suggested Strategy:

- Provide targeted and consistent funding to convening initiatives that bring together diverse coalitions of organizations in order to identify common interests, build alliances, identify shared strategies. A particular priority is initiatives that build systems to ensure ongoing collaboration and encourage long-term relationships.

Possible Organizations to Fund

- Redefining Progress
- Urban Institute
- Demos
- Media Matters for America
- Center for American Progress
- Center for Community Change

What to Look For:

Some of the questions to consider when identifying initiatives to support include:

- Who is leading the work? Specifically, what is the role of the communities most impacted by the issues being discussed — communities of color, LGBT people, low-income communities, youth, seniors etc.

- What are the roles being played by beltway and grassroots leaders? Is there broad representation?
- Who are the initiative's stakeholders? Who defines the goals of the initiative?
- Does the work provide a stepping stone to deeper, long-lasting connection across grassroots groups?
- What are the expected or possible outcomes? Is there a concrete initiative that can emerge from the convening?

Funding Strategy Three: SPREADING THE WORD

PUTTING POWER IN THE HANDS OF THE COMMUNITY

Reclaiming the right, the confidence and the framework to articulate the goals of the progressive movement in terms of a shared value-driven vision is crucial groundwork, but it is not the end. Even when the message is clear and strong, there are often too few messengers, or too many who are communicating on behalf of, rather than from, the communities most impacted. There exists a clear need to ensure that activists and community leaders at every level and in every community have the training and tools to communicate their vision and have their message heard.

Building the communications capacity of the progressive movement requires investment at many levels: from ensuring that grassroots organizations have access to toolkits, training and resources to communicate their work more effectively, to investing in large-scale collaborative mainstream media campaigns. In this work, support for progressive intermediary organizations with a high level of expertise in communications is crucial, and can have broad impact. For example, one of the most effective products of Tides' "*Bridging the Economic Divide*" Initiative has been the development with the SPIN Project of a highly regarded manual on economic justice, entitled "Words that Work", which includes sample news releases, talking point templates, training exercises and in-depth resources on the issue of economic justice and the living wage.

Suggested Strategy:

- **Invest in building the communications capacity of community-based progressive organizations** with a particular focus on organizations led by, and for, low-income communities and communities of color. This includes designating funding specifically for the communications components of all projects and initiatives, and supporting organizations' internal capacity through communications audits, development of communication plans, and media training.
- **Provide general operating support to intermediary organizations whose mission is to build the communications capacity of the progressive movement.** This includes supporting organizations that provide communications training, or that help manage media campaigns and communication strategies for progressive initiatives and campaigns.

Possible Organizations to Fund

- SPIN Project
- Communications Leadership Institute
- Spitfire Strategies
- Rockwood Leadership Training
- Media Matters for America
- Movement Strategy Center

What to Look For:

- Communications plans and strategies that give a platform for, and amplify the voice of, spokespeople from the communities most affected by the issue being addressed.
- Intermediary organizations that have strong partnerships with, and clear strategies to make their resources and services available to, progressive community-based organizations.