Thank you so much for inviting me here to be part of this incredible program and to speak about courage in philanthropy. Many of you have modeled that for me in recent months, organizing your members to stand for the best values of our sector and with refugees, immigrants, scientists, journalists, artists, victims of injustice, and people of diverse faiths, ethnicities and races. Thank you for your leadership, which has been one of the bright spots of the past year in our field.

I want to begin for a moment by making this not about our field, which I’ll get to, but first about each of you and the emotions in this room. There are colleagues among us who are afraid right now, scared of losing rights they thought were finally secure, or of losing progress that never felt secure. There are colleagues who are enraged, over a culture whose hatreds never felt well-hidden but today seem triumphant in their madness, or over so-called friends whose silence has been damning. There are colleagues who feel broken, by a tide of ugliness they cannot fathom, and lost about how to stem it.

I would ask us today to hold those colleagues—which I suspect in some form is most of us—in our hearts as we talk about something as seemingly abstract as courage. Real courage, the epic kind that changes history for the good, begins with honoring the pain that we and others feel, not running from it or happy-talking our way past it. It comes from a place of love, not bravado.

Most of us in this room were drawn into this work in some way by the soaring ideals of the giants who came before—Martin Luther King, of course, Nelson Mandela, Vaclav Havel, Rosa Parks, Betty Friedan, Mahatmas Gandhi. Perhaps we even envied them for living in consequential times, because we too wanted to help humanity wing past the confines of prejudice and beyond the limits of imagination.

What we overlooked every time we blithely quoted them, but are learning now, is that what makes a time consequential is how high the stakes are, how uncertain the outcome, and how unclear the heroes. They were not heroes then. They became heroes when they realized no one else was coming to save them, made the fight their own, and persisted until they prevailed.

Toni Morrison, in “Song of Solomon,” wrote something that I think should be pinned on the wall of every foundation and every organization in the social sector in America today. “You wanna fly,” she wrote, “you gotta give up the shit that weighs you down.”

Forgive the vulgarity, but it is time for our sector to give up the shit that weighs us down. And for me that means it is time to strip ourselves of the comfortable illusions that keep us from rising to meet the challenges of a newly consequential age and, more importantly, keep us from helping those we care about take flight themselves. Admittedly, that is a kind of negative frame
for talking about courage. But really that’s the point—for us to be brave enough now to look at the hard stuff.

So what are those illusions that hold us earthbound when we are called to soar? I want to offer you four, not as a definitive list, but rather I think as a good place to begin.

First is the misguided hope that our fears are misplaced and that these times are less consequential, less defining, than our worries tell us they are. This is the illusion of destiny, that what we are striving for is somehow inevitable, and that what we are experiencing now is just a bad phase.

A video made the rounds recently of two young children on their way into a Make America Great Again rally in Montana. Asked what mattered to them about that agenda, they cheerfully responded, “Building a wall because we don’t want Mexicans, or illegal aliens ... coming here and overpopulating us.”

Out of the mouths of babes. For a new generation of American children, that is their moonshot. Not a voyage of discovery out beyond the boundaries of human possibility, but a retreat behind a wall, the jealous guarding of the fortified scrapheap of what was once American greatness. This is their hero’s journey. For them the soaring rhetoric of a flawed but bolder America has been replaced with a fearful fable about the scary other, about people who are not people but murderers, rapists, gang members, monsters, infestations and vermin.

In an interview I did with her last month for Media Impact Funders, Soledad O’Brien called these words “the language of ethnic cleansing,” which of course it is. And, of course, to say that is to risk being accused of hysteria and exaggeration, of overstating the importance of words and of this moment.

But words have consequences and presage action, as we saw in recent weeks with the sickening spectacle of children being separated from their parents at the border, of a government shruggingly disinterested in reuniting them, and of a country openly at war with its own nobler ideals. All motivated not by evidence or facts on the ground, but by a dark fantasy, a hollowed-out lie about who we are and the real perils we face. At the heart of that lie is a breathtaking heartlessness expressed so well by the FOX News anchor who rationalized that, after all, these are “not our kids.”

“The soul,” the Roman emperor and Stoic Marcus Aurelius once wrote, “is dyed the color of its thoughts.” In an era of resurgent white supremacy, white nativism, Nazism, racism, sexism, bullying, hate crimes, mockery, and disdain for democracy and the institutions that protect our safety, health, dignity and liberties, we do not have to try too hard to understand how these newly emboldened thoughts are tainting the soul of our whitewashed nation.

Contrary to our sector’s perpetual delight in misusing the iconic quote, the arc of the moral universe emphatically does not bend towards justice—it curves in the direction that sustained effort by passionate and dedicated people makes it bend. And the truth is, right now it is
bending in the wrong direction. Far from secure, the values and progress represented by our field—of a fair, open and inclusive society and a sustainable environmental future—are being unraveled and undone.

Equally sobering is the second illusion, which is that these threats are something new and alien, not deep and endemic. This is the myth of deviance, the idea that the threats we face are real but ultimately, deep down, “not who we are.”

The reality, of course, is different. In many ways what is happening now is merely the slinking into the light of ancient beliefs and hatreds that have always lurked in the shadows—and even the bright daylight—of our national psyche. They have defined far too much of our history, and clearly still do.

When an unarmed teen named Antwon Rose was shot multiple times in the back and killed last month as he ran from a police stop in the little town of East Pittsburgh just next door to my city, I knew with nauseating certainty how too many members of the white community and media would spin that story, and they did. In no time flat, they made it Antwon’s fault. Never mind how rare it would be for a white child in identical circumstances to face the fear, let alone the fate, that Antwon did; better to make this child the perpetrator than to acknowledge and confront the systemic racism and police violence that killed him.

This is a narrative as old as America. But in our lives, in every generation, we do not get to hide behind the sins of our forefathers when by our actions we make them our own. When we would rather hold onto old hatreds than overcome them, rather perpetuate injustice than set aside our fears, rather cling to unfair privilege than share opportunity, then that is an impoverished destiny of our own choosing.

In her poem “Tecumseh,” the poet Mary Oliver reflects on the grievous harm inflicted by an invading people on Native Americans near the banks of Ohio’s Mad River: “The wounds of the past are ignored,” she writes, “but hang on/ like the litter that snags among the yellow branches,/newspaper and plastic bags, after the rains.”

Old wounds left untreated do not disappear. They hang on, and in time they consume the privileged as much as the vulnerable. Sustained injustice inevitably breeds violence and paranoia in those who ignore and enforce it, as we are seeing now while our country is weakened not by outside invaders but from within, by the unrepentant merchants of division whose only sorry wares are monsters, malice and mayhem.

Third is the illusion that we in this field are at best marginal players in a drama that is basically political and not about us and not ours to affect. This is the illusion of neutrality, the myth that we somehow stand apart from the fray around us.

Last week a presidential tweet gratuitously mocked George H.W. Bush’s “thousand points of light.” That gave me pause, because there is a pattern at work here—of mocking #BlackLivesMatter to attack the idea of racial justice, of mocking #MeToo to belittle gender
equity, of mocking “fake news” to discredit real journalism, of mocking “fake science” to de-
legitimize climate change. You know the drill.

Whatever you may think of his imagery, President Bush’s thousand points of light was a hopeful
embrace of America’s social sector—the field that you and I are proud members of, and that
philanthropy at its best supports and makes burn ever brighter. It was a lousy slogan but a
profound ideal. So we should wonder: why mock that now, the notion that we can, each of us,
become beacons of hope in a darkening sky?

In his recent book, “To Fight Against This Age,” the cultural philosopher Rob Riemen, offered
what I think is the answer. He wrote this about the populist movement that swept Europe in
the 1930s, and by extension about all populist movements rooted in doctrines of fear: “It was
not actually interested in finding solutions, had no ideas of its own, and did not want to solve
social problems, because injustice was necessary for maintaining an atmosphere of vilification
and hatred.”

In the times we are living in, the social sector represents a startlingly discordant and even
radical idea. It matters profoundly. Those points of light are inherently a counter-narrative to
the darkness that is always the grim orthodoxy of the world’s would-be strongmen. The story
they tell is one of human connectedness, possibility and worth; of our vast human potential to
overcome our limitations and bridge our divisions. They model power shared, not hoarded.
They call us to counter hatred and vilification with something we can only call love.

Every time I hear people in our field describe the privileged place we occupy in our society in
terms of the tax code or the dollars we shepherd, I want to vomit. What’s truly special about
philanthropy—the reason we are indeed privileged—is that we are part of a sector that at least
in theory embodies society’s noblest impulse to solve its problems the only way we can:
together. That is our unique and sacred role. We are not marginal players in a drama that is
mostly about politics; we are central players in a story that is mostly about community. To
believe that we have no partiality in this struggle is to miss both the reality of what is happening
and the whole reason for our being.

Fourth is the smug belief that we are already all that. This is the illusion of sufficiency, that all
we have to do is be more of what we already are.

As I was preparing for this talk last week and agonizing, frankly, over what more I could say that
I haven’t said too many times already, I met one evening with the advisory panel for a
participatory grantmaking project we are conducting. At one point a young African-American
woman named Nadine asked me, “I work in the nonprofit sector and I get looks and questions
just for wearing my Black Lives Matter wrist band, and I wonder how you manage that, having
the courage to use your voice?”

What hit me, beyond how much easier it is for the white male head of a large foundation to
answer that question in our society than for a young black woman still early in her career, was
not just how crazy it is that she should have to worry about wearing a cry for racial justice on
her sleeve. What struck me almost more was that she should have to worry about it in our field.

If we really understood our role, Nadine wouldn’t have to worry about her wristband. Yet I have
heard stories like hers from people in communities all across our country, as intimidated
nonprofits find their values being politicized and their voices constrained by an atmosphere of
fear and uncertainty abetted by uncertain execs, cautious boards and divided donors.

The public opinion researcher Richard Edelman recently spoke to a small group of arts funders
about his annual trust index, which for the first time this year saw NGOs fall below corporations
in levels of public trust. His explanation was unequivocal. We lost trust because all institutions
have, but also because we have not been vocal enough about where we stand on the issues we
purport to care about.

We are not always the good guys we imagine ourselves to be. We weigh our words endlessly
but our silences hardly at all. We are quick to preach a vision of a better society but too often
fall quiet when it is attacked. We too often talk a better game than we fund, treating injustice
as just another item on a long list of priorities rather than the core of them all.

Sometimes we are even the agents of oppression. The explicit intent behind separating families
was to make asylum-seekers so miserable and terrified that they would stop coming here—an
inhumane absurdity for people fleeing violence, abuse, oppression, hunger and poverty. Yet the
intellectual groundwork for this cruelty was laid by nonprofits funded partly by philanthropy,
which in effect means giving by the powerful to preserve privilege through deliberately driving
up the pain of the vulnerable. It would be better known as misanthropy.

The point is that it is a mistake to view philanthropy or even the social sector overall as an
inherent good, unless we actually live up to that good. It is time we lived up to that good.

To do that, we will need to drop the four illusions I have described here—that all will be well,
that today’s headlines are some strange anomaly, that we in our sector must sit on the
sidelines, and that whatever we do is good enough. But we will need to go beyond merely
shredding the weight that holds us down. We must also remember what it is to fly.

We know it when we see it. It looks like Darren Walker using his position at Ford to act as the
conscience of a field, my friend Jim Canales from Barr who is here, and every foundation leader
who is speaking out right now. It looks like the Joyce Foundation shifting racial equity to the
core of its mission, and every foundation shifting resources to pursue justice. It looks like all the
foundations wrestling with how to get fossil fuels out of their portfolios. It looks like all of you
challenging this field of ours to have the conversations we collectively need to have. It looks like
all of this, and more, more, more.

Courageous philanthropy knows that we are not owed hope and we are guaranteed no destiny
other than the one we work to create, and so makes that its fight. It acknowledges the deep
roots of suffering, the enduring wounds of inequity clinging like so much litter to our collective
It feigns no impartiality when it comes to defending the people, planet, ideas and values that are the core of its mission. And it holds itself accountable above all for ending the injustice that hatred has forged.

That does not mean being political or perpetually chasing the latest outrage on Twitter. For philanthropy the first isn’t allowed and the second is a fool’s errand. But it does mean leaning into our values as never before. It does mean funding the journalism, the artists, and the activism that bear witness to the suffering and hopes of others and help us see in them some reflection of ourselves.

It does mean finding our voice. It does mean fighting against a world where some of us don’t count, or even get counted, and where the right to belong is decided by the vicious and the craven. It does mean, to use a phrase that the Heinz Award winner Angela Blanchard shared with me recently, helping the people who need us most to move “from desperation to participation.” It does mean countering a populism built on racial animus and fear with a movement built on hope and love.

And above all, it does mean loving in the ways that these difficult times demand. The hip-hop artist Jasiri X, an arts activist whose teaching work we have been privileged to support, is sometimes asked why he doesn’t write more about love in his songs. His answer? When his people have justice, he will sing love songs all day long, but until then—the activism, the organizing, the protest songs, the voice of anger against oppression—that, too, is love.

Not long ago I had the honor to attend the opening of the new Fred Rogers documentary with his widow, friends and colleagues who helped bring his neighborhood to life. When by the end of the film we were all quietly weeping I thought maybe it was because so many in the theater had known him, but really as I spoke with people later it was because his message of radical kindness felt so distant and lost today. We missed him, but even more we missed the loving and respectful ideal he represented.

But here’s the thing: It is precisely that which makes these times so consequential. Fred is gone, so are MLK, JFK and all the giants of the past we love to enshrine as though beyond our reach. But the work wasn’t done then, and it isn’t done now. We can lament what feels lost, or we can learn to love the way they learned to love—in action, as the most demanding of all verbs.

Toni Morrison also wrote: “Something that is loved is never lost.” Maybe, maybe. That’s actually up to us now. That’s up to us.

Thank you.