

How Kat Taylor and Taj James Are Challenging Philanthropy to Take Bolder Steps to Shift Power

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After seven years in the sector, if I had a dollar for every foundation executive or trustee who made a public statement about the need to fund vulnerable communities in ways that are less burdensome and advance systems change—while continuing to make the same avoidable mistakes grantees have been criticizing for years—I’d be wealthy enough to launch my own philanthropy.

Critiques of charitable giving are as old as charity itself, though I would argue that the origins of our contemporary debates are in the 2007 publication of “[The Revolution Will Not Be Funded](#)” by INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence. Recently reissued for its 10th anniversary, this collection of essays by activists, academics and nonprofit leaders makes a compelling case that a trillion-dollar industry that undermines democracy and often perpetuates inequalities will never truly disrupt the status quo.

Although the book wasn’t directly mentioned in my recent conversation with philanthropist [Kat Taylor](#) and capital advisor [Taj James](#), the wisdom of its authors was undeniably present. Taylor’s work to encourage meaningful reform in philanthropy caught my eye in November when I learned about her [Good Life Pledge](#), a commitment to return one-third of her wealth back to communities of color, and a challenge to others to do the same. The move was inspired by her participation in a learning community on equitable development with James and others. James and Taylor currently collaborate on the Good Life Pledge and other projects that return wealth to the communities that created it.

As high-minded rhetoric is increasingly understood and acknowledged as [a poor substitute for action](#), Taylor and James are experimenting with a new way to redistribute wealth that is grounded in antiracist values and accountability—simply handing leaders of color a large amount of unrestricted money. I was eager to connect and learn more about their work; here’s our conversation.

Tell me how you met and began working together.

Taj James: Change happens through relationships. [Lora O’Connor](#) has been working with Kat for many years, and we are fortunate to have her in our community. Lora is always linking people together, and so much happens through the relationships that she weaves. I got connected to Kat through Lora initially. But another part of the origin story is that Kat met a gentleman in South Carolina named Harold Mitchell, who was the leader of

[ReGenesis](#). Inspired by the work that Harold had done in Spartanburg, Kat, Harold, Lora, [Anasa Troutman](#) and I came up with the idea for creating a learning community on equitable development, which is where we started working together in earnest. I curated a series of conversations to bring together some of the wisdom that is being built around equitable development work. Everything else grew organically out of the interactions and the exchange within that learning community.

What are some things you learned from that community that led you to making the Good Life Pledge?

Kat Taylor: It was a group effort. The main insight from that learning community was that it's time to shift power. This sounds so simple, but for most of my life, it has been taboo to talk about reallocating wealth. Maybe because I was afraid to address this taboo head-on, I spent a lot of my life working on systems change by building institutions. I started a bank to change banking systems, a ranch to change the food system, a venture fund to change venture capital allocation, and a political organization to get political change. Then I realized that if I'm starting them, or my husband Tom [Steyer] is starting them, those are white-led organizations, and that isn't really shifting power. It's gaining insights, and it's being an ally, but that's not the same thing.

So after running through all these portals, I came right back to the beginning: If we don't shift power, we're not going to address what's wrong in our society and become the beloved community that we're meant to be. We have to return assets, wealth, income, land and leadership back to the communities from whom it was taken. I've tended to talk about system change efforts in terms of "good money, good food, good climate." One of us in the learning community said: Why can't we all have good life?

The pledge isn't just an effort to reallocate your own wealth; it's also a challenge to your peers to do the same. Why was it important to include this call to action?

Taj James: In the work that's been done to reform philanthropy, a lot of focus has been on program officers and foundation executives—but it's the trustees who have the greatest power in decision making. When we have leaders like Kat, [Regan Pritzker](#), [Farhad Ebrahimi](#) and folks from the [Swift Foundation](#) take bolder steps towards shifting power, it allows us to make leaps that are much harder to make when we're working with program officers or foundation executives to tinker with systems that are ultimately governed by the trustees. When the invitation to try something new comes from someone who's done it, people are more likely to take it seriously and take a risk. A big part of the Good Life Pledge is Kat helping others to learn what is possible and necessary.

What are some of the steps you took that contributed to this decision?

Kat Taylor: It begins with listening to the people who have the purest intentions and motivations to reveal the truth—and that’s not likely to be those who are powerful within the status quo. People who have power within the status quo seek to maintain the status quo because that is the basis of their power. They maintain the myths that support that status quo, too.

I’m still in a process of reconstructing my own education. From W.E.B. Du Bois to [Michelle Alexander](#), reading the literature from those viewpoints is highly illustrative and not only teaches you about how mass incarceration is part of the lineage of slavery and Jim Crow laws, but encourages you to think about what else you might not know. It creates a questioning mindset. I know that I’m not the expert, so I associate intentionally with and listen to people like Taj, Lora, [Nwamaka Agbo](#) and [Edgar Villanueva](#).

The work you are doing is about transforming systems, which means there is a fundamental need for experimentation to figure out how we can create and embody a new way of being. How do you decide which risks are worth it and which experiments are worth doing?

Kat Taylor: A diagnostic of our current system is that we are not at equilibrium. It takes a tremendous amount of force and oppression to keep it in place. Maybe an indicator of the systems we should seek are ones that hold on their own because they are inherently fair, ones where nobody is incentivized to change it drastically because everyone is thriving. For me, what risks are worth taking? Risks to my capital, my privilege, and my reputation are all worth taking; risks to community are not.

Taj James: That one statement, if applied to philanthropy, would transform everything about the sector. So many of the myths in the systems of imbalance have to do with delusions about risk—who truly bears risk and who benefits. There is an erasure of where the capital that’s being reallocated came from in the first place and no real understanding of the business enterprise associated with the extraction of that wealth. One of Kat’s pearls of wisdom is: When everyone owns a little bit of everything and no one owns too much of anything, that’s how we get to the good life.

Why not work through the traditional model of philanthropy?

Kat Taylor: There is a presumption of legitimacy because philanthropy is a trillion-dollar industry that already exists. But it’s not held to account for all the ways it is so powerful. We give philanthropy a hall pass, because we don’t start with the fact that the first thing it does is underfund government, which is the only potentially accountable system we have in our country. Philanthropy has no representation in it and is a reflection of concentrations of power that already exist—and is designed to defend perpetuity of power.



Inside Philanthropy

Grantmaking from just 5% of the endowments will never clean up the problems that these investments cause in the first place. You ask any wealthy person, and they'll tell you that the assets, not income, is where the power is. I'm involved in [the Initiative to Accelerate Charitable Giving](#), which is an effort to reform the federal tax code rules to provide more aligned incentives to distribute philanthropic wealth instead of hoarding it. It is an uphill battle because of the way we describe philanthropy.

Taj James: In some ways, the image of philanthropy is a delusion. If you say, '95% of what you are is water and 5% is salt, but we're going to call you "salt," most people would say that is a delusion. Philanthropy is its endowments, and its biggest impact is in what happens with the investments of endowments. That's not its face, but that's the reality. We're in a moment when a lot of people are telling the truth about this, so it's creating more space to think about how philanthropy might transform.

What I hear you saying is that philanthropy has failed to make good on its promise. As you're doing this work together, how do you identify when something is a mistake so that you don't keep doing it?

Kat Taylor: I think charity is an admission of societal failure. If we were running the world right, we wouldn't need charity at all. In this country, we're at risk of delegitimizing government entirely. When you allow tax deductions that can amass up to 72 cents on every dollar given in philanthropy, that's like government distributing funds to wealthy people as opposed to investing in public goods for all people. Even the leadership in mainstream philanthropy is opposed to reform, so we're definitely poking a bear.

Taj James: When I think about mistakes that I've made, or mistakes that Kat and I may be making, one thing is just knowing you're going to make them and not allowing that to paralyze you from taking bold action. There can be a tendency to not act when we're not sure exactly what to do, especially when we're concerned about not doing harm. Some people think they have to wait until they've got the perfect answer. But the thing is: There isn't one. You're going to do some things right, and you're going to make mistakes. What's important is to act, especially in this pivotal time when so much is at stake.

When I think about where we have to get it right, it's really about listening to the right people. We have a commitment to listening to the communities and the leaders who've experienced the problems and who have the solutions. There's a challenge in that because communities are complex, and some people will step forward claiming to represent their communities when they are just representing themselves or a small section of the community. So how do you navigate those complexities? You keep asking: Who am I listening to and why, and am I listening to the right people? The more voices you bring in, the more complete and complex the picture becomes. There is a humility in the listening that is essential to learning.



Inside Philanthropy

There are a lot of people in philanthropy who are saying the right things, and far fewer who actually enact the values you are naming. What draws you toward a way of being that is grounded in action and accountability?

Kat Taylor: I'm not even close to being accountable for my privilege yet. There are many miles to go. Truthfully, I don't know any other way to have a life of meaning than to be honestly in pursuit of justice. The privileges aren't worth that kind of injustice. They're not even enjoyable until there's justice.

What about you, Taj? As someone who holds positional power given your proximity to people with accumulated capital, how do you work accountably?

Taj James: When I think about accountability for the decisions that I make, I know that I'm not a separate, isolated individual. We are interdependent and interconnected. The impacts of my decisions are not just felt by me. So the question is about the depth and quality of relationships that I'm in. Because if I'm in loving relationships, there are going to be very strong feedback loops that are going to give me information about the impact of the decisions that I make. And if I truly love the people that I say I do, then I'm going to make decisions that will help everyone I love to thrive. In cultures built around mutuality and care, accountability is built into the process.

In the spirit of loving relationship, tell me one thing you appreciate about the way the other does their work?

Kat Taylor: I have a lot of inherent trust in Taj. And the reason I trust Taj and other leaders, like Harold Mitchell, is because they come from a place of love and not ego. It's palpable. I always boast on people like Harold and Taj because they don't boast on themselves.

Taj James: The first thing I thought of was her songs. Sometimes, people give Kat a hard time because she'll come into a meeting and just start singing. There's something that's so inherently human about that in a system of capital that is so fundamentally dehumanizing. But we're all just people. We laugh, we learn. So let's just be human and figure this out together. The things we're trying to do are hard and they're complicated. They're messy, but we have to be bold.