

Interview

Marion Rockefeller Weber

'May the rivers of wealth be undammed and flow freely over the earth. May the gifts move through increased hands until all people experience the abundance of life.' These words appear on the home page of www.flowfunding.org, initiated by Marion Rockefeller Weber. Grand-daughter of J D Rockefeller, Jr and daughter of Laurance S Rockefeller, Marion Weber was born into philanthropy but she has taken a unique path, as she explained to Chet Tchozewski.

How much did your family discuss the best way to do philanthropy?

Philanthropy has always been a huge part of our lives as a clan. When I was young, my grandfather would talk about our responsibilities to give away money, but my father pretty much set me loose. He never really talked to me about how I should do it, so I had a lot of space to make mistakes and actually to create something new.

So how did you develop this concept of capillary philanthropy or flow funding, as you call it?

I was never drawn to the foundations that my grandfather and father and uncles set up. My sense was that I needed to get money out there where it can serve life beyond the places where proposals are required. In mammals, the nutrients go out through the capillaries to each cell in our body and after this exchange the blood returns to the heart. In flow funding, the people who are carrying the money are nurtured as well as the ones who are receiving it. It's a wonderful idea to think of philanthropy delivering nutrients to the most remote parts of society. So the flow funding idea is a sort of bio-mimicry; it works like a living organism.

How does flow funding work?

It is actually very similar to what Global Greengrants Fund does, with one main difference. I don't pick advisers, I pick intuitive, visionary people who I

admire and who have not given money away before. I approach them and see if they might like to try giving away \$20,000 a year for three years. I give each potential flow funder a questionnaire to fill out in order to learn about the general direction they would like the money to go in. They have freedom to discover where their money needs to go with the understanding that this is a volunteer activity and

they can't fund their own projects.

Trust is an important aspect of flow funding – and curiosity as to where the money will go. I have witnessed a lot of money flow into the world through the hands of flow funders in a creative and meaningful way with very little effort on my part. Also I have no overhead, no staff salaries to pay and no bureaucratic red tape to deal with. The flow fund circle is made up presently of about 50 members, but we started as five members, 25 years ago.

Can you give an example of how this works?

We have a flow fund circle in Brazil. I send the money to my friend Edmundo, a former member of my circle, who chooses his own flow funders to be in his circle. He gives each member

of his circle money to give away. They come back after a year and talk about what surprised them, what inspired them, what challenged them and what moved them – what we call the four learning questions.¹ We also require a report showing where the money was distributed.

The group in Brazil really didn't know what to do at first, because they had never had the chance to give away money before. They were frozen for a year, then suddenly the inertia lifted and each person gave uniquely from their heart to those in need around them. Part of the beauty of flow funding



'The flow funding idea is a sort of bio-mimicry; it works like a living organism.'

is the transformation that happens in the people who carry the money. It is a real life-changing experience for them to be able suddenly to give out money instead of focusing only on bringing it in. Flow funding is a triple blessing! It is a blessing for me, the flow funders, and the recipients of the funds.

We have a flow fund circle meeting once a year where we discuss our process and share what happened during the year. Each person answers the four learning questions and talks about where the money went. Any active flow funder can come to the meeting. I pay for their travel and it's a wonderful meeting. During the year each flow funder's report is emailed out to all the circle members.

You talk a lot about being surprised by what has been accomplished. Have there been any unpleasant surprises or any mystery about what has happened with the money?

There are always some challenges that emerge while flow funding but we have always learned a lot from these challenges and integrated the learnings into our process. There is a mystery to flow funding – not the type that results from lack of transparency but rather one that emerges and is felt by us all from the vibrancy of the outreach and patterns of connections that come from unimpeded generosity.

And is it always satisfying even if it may not have accomplished its original goal?

We never know what the goal really is. Apparently, there is a random movement at the level of the capillaries and there is a bit of that in the flow fund circle. I like the uncertainty, as long as the mission is to serve and bring resources to places the heart dictates. We are still experimenting. I am beginning to flow fund a number of collectives. One of them is called Beyond Boundaries, an international service pilgrimage; one of them is called the International Council of Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers; and the last is called the Tipping Point Network. They are all flow funding now and it is a real privilege for me to witness their outreach! Amazing what they are doing!

'One of the joys of flow funding is that nobody knows you are carrying the money. Nobody is going to write a proposal to you; you can go out and discover what's meaningful for you and what might be helpful in the world.'



NIPUN MEHTA WWW.CHARITYFOCUS.ORG

The most recent flow fund meeting, with Marion Weber in the centre.

I think you touched on a really important thing when you mentioned the randomness of the outcomes. It seems to me that philanthropy spends a lot of time and money trying to discern patterns of cause and effect that often aren't there. Like you, I believe it is important to accept that a part of the process of discovery involves not knowing what the outcome will be.

Yes, I agree with you! And may I add that in order for a funder to experience the freedom of discovery, it is important that they are not approached for funds. One of the joys of flow funding is that nobody knows you are carrying the money. Nobody is going to write a proposal to you; you can go out and discover what's meaningful for you and what might be helpful in the world. Part of the reason I started the flow fund circle was that I was overcome with proposals and felt like my own creativity couldn't find a way.

Do you act as a flow funder yourself as well as giving to other flow funders?

I'd say at this point it's about half and half. For instance, I heard a lecture by a man who wants to raise money for a film, so I wrote him a little note saying I would like to help him make this film. I had never met him before but I could feel that his film could be of great benefit to many in this time of transition that we are in. On another occasion I was walking down the street of my town and I saw some beautiful garments made out of nettle fibres being sold by a man who had fled Tibet. I bought a few and started talking to him and ended up giving him money to bring his family over here. When I do grassroots funding, I can really feel my heart open. ▶

Interview: Marion Rockefeller Weber

Can you explain more what you mean by grassroots funding? What size of grant are we actually talking about?

The range is probably \$250 to \$2,000. I try to encourage people not to give over \$5,000.

But we are really talking about increasing the number of philanthropists in the world. One person, one philanthropist, can touch a lot of people through a bio-mimicry approach. Flow funding is a micro model of a way to increase the number of philanthropists and democratize philanthropy. I really woke up to the fact that it wasn't healthy for me to donate large amounts of money and that I needed to share the process with many people. I also understood that writing cheques to support faraway projects was also not healthy. Flow funders fund at the location of need. It is through their grassroots generosity that I have learned so much about meaningful philanthropy.

Does it follow from your approach of not knowing what will happen with the money that there isn't really a concept of failure?

There is no failure if you let people discover what's meaningful for them and if you trust them and you know they're generous people to start with. All

'I really woke up to the fact that it wasn't healthy for me to donate large amounts of money and that I needed to share the process with many people.'

my life's work has been with people in the space of unknowing and the most amazing things come from that space. So it is natural for me to trust freedom and spaciousness as the most dynamic and alive way to quicken creative and meaningful philanthropy. Bio-mimicry has proved valuable in technology and industry and this is really adapting it to a social process for distributing and sharing wealth and value.

If I could wave a magic wand, I would ask that all people on this earth will one day see themselves as philanthropists and that we will trust children and teenagers to give money away as well. If we can have more trust and keep the money flowing and spreading out, then it will find its way to where it's needed. I think this is an important consideration for right now at this transitional time. @

For more information

www.flowfunding.org
www.grandmotherscouncil.com
www.gobeyondboundaries.org
www.capitalmissions.com/tpn.html (Tipping Point Network)

If you are interested in creating a flow fund circle of your own, contact Sandra Hobson at sshobson@aol.com

I would like to acknowledge with much gratitude Angeles Arrien, teacher and former flow fund circle holder, for the four learning questions. In her book *The Second Half of Life*, she writes: 'Love, Surprise, Inspiration and Challenge are the four rivers of life that sustain us, keep us

from stagnation and connect us to great gifts.' Discussing these four rivers of life each year in relation to our flow funding has added a depth to our work which we have valued. See www.angelesarrien.com/Foundation.htm

BOTH ENDS FOUNDATION



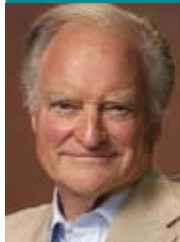
Both Ends, based in the Netherlands, was formed in 1986 with the remit of supporting organizations in the developing world that are both fighting poverty and working for sustainable environmental management. Since then, it has supported hundreds of environmental organizations in Latin

America, Africa, Asia and Central and Eastern Europe.

Following the death in 2005 of Joke Waller-Hunter (Executive Secretary of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, pictured), Both Ends set up the Joke Waller-Hunter Initiative, which gives grants to young people nominated by organizations from developing countries. Eighteen grants, ranging from €2,500 to €15,000, are given each year to individuals who display leadership potential but lack practical skills. Grants can be spent on anything that will improve the person's leadership skills, such as language lessons, a study trip or a management course.

For more information www.bothends.org

PHILANTHROPIC VENTURES FOUNDATION'S AMBASSADOR PROGRAM



Philanthropic Ventures Foundation, based in Oakland, California, was set up in 1991, and has developed a reputation for its innovative approaches to grantmaking. Its programmes, such as the Paperless Grant (a single-page funding request) and Immediate Response Grants (which

delivers money within 48 hours) are designed to minimize red tape and maximize the social impact of every donated dollar.

In 2007, founder Bill Somerville (pictured) launched the Ambassador Program, which recognizes the work of selected community service providers by awarding them with an immediate \$10,000 grant to use at their discretion. These 'paperless' grants have no formal application or review processes, and instead rely on trusted relationships and acknowledged good work on the part of the recipients.

For more information www.venturesfoundation.org