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SPEAKERS

Monique Curry-Mims, Valerie Johnson, Mike O'Bryan

Valerie Johnson 00:03

Hello, and welcome back to beyond philanthropy. I'm Valerie. I'm here with Monique. And we have a fun guest today that we both know, I'm really excited to talk with him. So I'm going to turn it over to our guest, Mike O'Bryan to introduce himself because he's a man of many titles,

Monique Curry-Mims 00:22

He's amazing,

Valerie Johnson 00:24

and I don't remember them all. So tell us.

Mike O'Bryan 00:30

So first off, thank you for that beautiful introduction. And it's a pleasure to be here. Good morning. Good afternoon. Good evening, wherever you're at whenever you're listening. So yeah, I'm Mike O'Bryan. I'm here in Philadelphia. And I'll just talk about I'm currently doing I think, that would probably the simplest and probably the most relevant so I am fellow a distinguished resident fellow, gotta get all the words there right, a distinguished resident Fellow at the Lindy Institute for Urban innovation at Drexel University. So really quickly, the Lindy Institute, is a think tank. Housed at Drexel University, really focuses on the concept of city building and development, not just real estate, but the idea of growing cities. And my work really focuses on the human side of that in terms of, this is how I like to phrase it, how do we bring the science of human development and developmental psychology and these other forms of research around the mechanics of our humanity. How do we bring that to bear in the context of city building, and I take a specific focus on workforce development, the future of work, I spent a lot of time studying trauma theory and trauma informed care and practice and asset framing and resilience and just kept finding that a lot of that stuff was not finding its way over to other sectors outside of Social Services and the nonprofit world. And so yeah, I've been very fortunate to look at synthesizing that kind of framing and knowledge and bringing it to real places and spaces that traditionally don't have to consider wellness as a thing. That's been the bulk of my work. And then I have a business on the

private sector side that commercializes a lot of the stuff I've been learning over the years and building a small team and growing and it's been fun.

Monique Curry-Mims 02:17

So Mike is one of my favorite people. And he's also one of the smartest people that I know. So anything I do, he's on he's on every advisory board of everything I ever do, whether he likes it or not, I'm like, hey, I need you. And he's like, Alright, I got you friend. And that's and I love that. We've talked about wellness, and you know, self care within philanthropy. And just being human within this space is something that's being talked about a lot. You know, what, and there's so many ways to tackle this, but I think about foundations, right? And how they fund and how their priorities should be in alignment? Or can they be in alignment with really the wellness and health of not only just the communities, but the actual nonprofits that they're funding? What are your thoughts on that?

Mike O'Bryan 03:11

Yeah, that's a, that's a fantastic area for probing, we can talk just about that one thing for like, six hours. So just for your listener's context, I am on the board for a local foundation here in Philadelphia, and have been for I just finished my first term, which is wild, because time moves very fast. But I've been there for 4 years now, and general board service, but specifically, I'm on the Investment Committee, which I'm happy to talk about. As we get into more of the discussion today. And I'm on the board for a philanthropic institution, it's not a foundation, it's the Philadelphia cultural fund. And with the cultural fund you receive, we're a 501 C three, nonprofit chartered by the city some decades ago to receive part of the budget to disperse to the arts and culture community of the Philadelphia region. And then I've done a lot of consulting different parts of the country for both social impact investment funds, and initiatives and for foundations. And I bring all that up because everyone has a bit of a different method, if you will, of how they'll take into consideration of humans and people. Social impact investment funds, might take into consideration wellness, but it's going to be put up next to returns right? And then they got to make sense of that. Foundations might have more space to consider wellness, but there you're dealing with a ton of history and entrenched behavior that might center outputs and outcomes before it centers humans, both the humans internal to the nonprofit that are supposed to be doing the work that is of service to the people right outside of the org, and then also not necessarily centering the external folks who are supposed to be the ultimate, you know, folks benefiting from the investment of dollars in the activities. And so I think what's happening is that people are now post COVID. We're not post COVID. Now that we're in this next wave era,

Monique Curry-Mims 05:31

right, right. It's not going anywhere, right.

Mike O'Bryan 05:34

And you know, what, I think also just the Civic civil unrest that really dates back to, I mean, arguably, before Trayvon Martin, but I think we could say Trayvon Martin's probably the big breaking point, at least here in Philadelphia, was the big breaking point. People are now having to wrestle with this in ways that they don't necessarily have the organizational structure in place, you know, to do the sense making work. And then in other cases, you have a number of, you know, younger folks who are aging or getting older, and coming into places of power. And I'd argue we're forcing the conversation, I think

some places and some people would say, oh, boy, here comes Mike O'Bryan, he's gonna talk about trauma and wellness, and science and development. And but yeah, we got it, we have to think about these things. And so that's my quick response to like, kind of like the state of where that.

Monique Curry-Mims 06:35

I mean, so some, so you just said trauma. And I'm like, how do we, as a sector get past the trauma of philanthropy? You know, you and I had a conversation, probably like, two, three years ago, where we talked about, maybe we need to move past the word philanthropy, right, like, maybe that's not the right terminology. Because the way it's been bastardized and the way it's never been fully realized, and people still living up to that sense of whatever it has turned into be is not what it needs to be.

Valerie Johnson 07:09

love of man kind. That's not... nobody.

Monique Curry-Mims 07:12

Yeah, like that. No.

Valerie Johnson 07:13

That's the actual definition. But that's not a

Monique Curry-Mims 07:15

Is that how you love people, man, you barely like people. It's like, who needs lovers When you have friends Like this. it's just crazy. Right? So how do we move past the trauma of what philanthropy has become?

Mike O'Bryan 07:30

Yeah, no, that's a great question. Because the first thing with trauma in general, right, no matter whether it's interpersonal systems based, you have to actually address it, you have to address the harm, right. doesn't necessarily mean that you got to go into I have my own terms here, like every nook and cranny of the narrative, right or of the story, right, you don't have to relive every gory detail. But you are going to have to address elements of it, and some, maybe some big episodes that had a huge impact. And typically, if you address some of those, a lot gets addressed at the same time, which allows you to not have to go into every single instance of deep hurt, harm and pain. But what doesn't happen is the inverse. Like you can't just ignore it All. So the first thing we have to do is acknowledge real harms. And there seems to be some willingness to do this. Not it's not ubiquitous, right? It's not every institution, but I wouldn't be dishonest if I said that there aren't a number of institutions, starting that journey, or taking that journey of being explicit about the harms, how they came to be, how the practices and philanthropy came to be. That some being honest about what needs to change, also being honest about not knowing how, because the thing about philanthropy that I think the general public, and even those of us who spend our time fundraising, like the thing we don't get is that this is a tool of the financial industry. or we do get it and we ignore it.

Monique Curry-Mims 09:24

right, right.

Valerie Johnson 09:25

So we're gonna pretend it's not happening.

Mike O'Bryan 09:27

Absolutely. Right. And it's not until like you really sit in that reality that you're like, Oh, okay. Oh, God, this makes so much more sense actually. Now, I understand why it's actually not built to center people. And I understand exactly how harm is just happening at nauseam, even if you don't mean for it to write. So I think that's part of this journey is like there's a reckoning that's taking place and still needs to continue. And there's a level, it's interesting, I was gonna use the word objectivity. And I challenged that word all the time. But I think I might mean it. In this case, this comes from being in the space of I call myself a rogue Scholar, and research. I love it! Activity and research, that's not real.

Valerie Johnson 10:17

It's true. You are a rogue Scholar, it's true.

Mike O'Bryan 10:20

bringing in these lenses and experiences that shape our epistemologies and how we're framing out these problems, and even how we want to collect data, how we want to organize that data like and data are what should make them to an extent, like I mean, you can pull out numbers and pull out stories, and then you can, there's plenty of ways to manipulate those those things to get them to a spot that you want them in, or to leave out a certain kind of analysis to make sure it says what you want. So I don't believe in objectivity and research the way that people are claiming we can all be we can be objective. That doesn't mean you have to be intentionally biased either. Like, let's be clear, I want to be clear. But I think it's important to recognize that just my intentionality to be objective, does not mean that there are no biases present in my work, right. And so really, I think the idea of objectivity should be based on something else, like I get what it's pointing at. But I think the framing is off. But I think that I bring that all up, because I think philanthropy has to be objective, with the same kind of like nuances, they're like, kind of hard to do that. But I do think there is this objective moment we're coming into, or trying to, I'll say that right? Where, and objective more in the context of again, what I meant of like, we're honoring that there are biases present, we're honoring that bias is not as simple as like, oh, my gosh, you're black, and you're a woman. And I'm not going to think about you properly that though, though, those are real nuances to how bias works, and a human being and then systems, social cognitive bias at large, has a ton of research behind it. And there's a whole lot more nuance in that space that makes it so that you can be a person that is... I'll just use myself as an example to make it even clearer for folks. I'm black grew up really, really poor. You know, queer, my mother survived foster care. I mean, we've got my family's got a story. But we're not the only one in America with a story. Story. And I'd be lying if I told you that based on everything I've learned and, you know, really taken into practice around bias and this kind of work that we're doing, I'd be lying if I told you I didn't have lenses that I needed to check. Yeah, how I approach the work, etc. I sent her mother's a ton of when to hear my story like, Oh, that makes sense that there's a lip there that would push you there. So I actually have to do things that widen my frames and push me back from always wanting to like, what are the moms that need simpler. More people, there's families are different these days. They're, they're organized different, you got to think differently, to be able to show up differently in the work. But all of this gets to the space of

recognizing the trauma, honoring the harm, hurt and impact, seeing how it shaped the way you see the world view the world, whether that's from a place of power, or a place of disempowerment, negotiating whether or not the story you're telling yourself right now is one that pushes you towards disempowerment, when you might have more power, right. And philanthropy that's working out. Because there's a lot of like, yeah, I don't have enough money. And it's like, you said, 1.5 billion in assets? Yes, you got money. What are we talking about?

Valerie Johnson 13:47

No, but we can only spend 5% A year Mike, so like, when you think of it that way, We don't have any money.

Monique Curry-Mims 13:53

Or if we spend it all, you know what's gonna happen? We need money for later.

Valerie Johnson 13:58

Yeah, your whole job is to give away money. So you don't need it for later.

Mike O'Bryan 14:04

This is the thing Val, I'm glad you brought up that 5%. And, Monique, I know you talked about this in the past. That's the way around. This is a tool of the financial industry. So in that respect, it's like, yes, our secondary job is to give money.

Valerie Johnson 14:24

primary job is to hoard it so that we can make money for our

Monique Curry-Mims 14:28

make money off of it. Right? Because what do banks do, right? banks make money off of our money. That's why you're only allowed to take out so much per day, right? Because they've already got it invested somewhere else, so that it keeps the wheels going and keeps the keeps all the wheels going.

Valerie Johnson 14:42

So you mentioned that you're on an investment committee for a foundation was it a foundation?

Mike O'Bryan 14:49

Yea, right.

Valerie Johnson 14:50

So so how is all this playing out then in the Investment Committee?

Mike O'Bryan 14:55

I'll tell you this has been one of the greatest journeys I've been on I have learned so much, I have the gift of working with such data. I mean, these are some of the most caring people in the world. And this is where I really got it were like, Oh, this is about the system. This actually is not about it is part, let me rephrase that. It's partly about the people at the table, because you gotta have the intentionality, the will

the desire, that the ability, excuse me, sometimes I call it a muscle, you got to have the muscle developed to sit in ambiguity and kind of Drudge through things and learn and it'd be slower than you might want it to be. But it has been a wonderful gift to work with the other board members, our, you know, our asset managers are really kind of wonderful people they take are pushing, right, because they could be like, You know what, guys, we could find a simpler client. But we have been on a mission, actually, prior to my, you know, acceptance onto the board. The first one took up this journey of mission aligned investment, back, oh, my gosh, I won't put a time on it. But it was some years, like three or four years before I joined. And so they've been on this journey for about seven or eight years. And it's a, it's a hard journey, because even if the intentionality of fellows and the board is not to hoard money, and I would argue that there's a number of foundations and boards, their MO is not to hoard. The hard part is that you have these assets that are in quantities that are so big, I mean, you really have to change your mindset about how you think about capital, and how it works, yada, yada, yada. So you have these assets, and their value is humongous. And your goal partially right, we can get into perpetuity or not. Or in a couple of minutes looking at another space of disruption that's interesting. But let's just stay on the side of like perpetuity or something like it, you got to get returns in to keep giving money out. And at that little scale of money that scale the value. You only got but so many vehicles that can give you a return. So you automatically get kind of locked in. Even if your intentionality isn't, oh, we want to you know, no, no, no, it's just like, well, how can you possible in capital markets?

Monique Curry-Mims 17:39

And then how do you recommend that though, because I have to imagine, you know, there's this there's this priority alignment now with impact investing, where it's like, okay, what are your actual priorities? If your priorities are to fund black and brown communities, then you need to divest from private prisons, you need to divest from alcohol, tobacco, you know, whatever, those things that are hindering the communities that you're supposed to be helping. But I have to imagine those are the larger vehicles. So how do you reconcile that with, we want to put our money somewhere that's ESG aligned kind of a thing.

Mike O'Bryan 18:14

So this is a huge conversation, I'm only gonna be able to like touch pieces of it. Right? The hardest part is a ton of learning and a ton of like, it's a bit of like, hurry up and wait, because you want the impact impact investing is difficult, because you're looking for market based returns, at the same time that you're creating a substantial amount of social impact. Those returns are immediate either, right? So the flip side is the kind of vehicles that I'm talking about. There, those returns are pretty quick. Right? You get within the year, you're getting back a bunch of money, impact investing, that's not that's, that's a waiting game, right? You're waiting for the right moment in the lifecycle of this organization, for it to then boom, pop you back the but the returns are huge, right? The 250 x, right, you're getting humongous returns back. So they're a part of a portfolio that a number of foundations have that might be even if they're not mission aligned, they're probably making some private investments, making some bets on things that they're seeing or, you know, opportunities that have been brought their way that make financial sense that have passed the due diligence process and all of that, but even then, that's, that's a waiting game, because you got to get to the point of profitability, yada yada, yada. So that's that balance is one of the things that people have to like sit with in this space. When you have an endowment with varying assets that you can, you know, utilize and bunch of different ways. So there's

the time factor one, you have to make sense of in the context of what the hell is happening in Philadelphia and where can we show up? How can we show up? And, you know, we upped our spending, right? We went above 5%, we were going already, but then we took it higher for

Monique Curry-Mims 20:20

It's possible, people!

Mike O'Bryan 20:22

because of what's going on. But it's there's a lot of conversation about whether or not you know, we are doing the right thing in terms of, are we in perpetuity or not? And the board's, we're having those dialogues, right. And we're gonna be becoming a bit more public about our journey, and about what we're doing. And I think it might be worth it to, like, maybe even have some thrown out ideas that you hear. Maybe you have some of the Investment Committee. Talk with you like, maybe you agree, because we come from different backgrounds. But have the same heart around what we're trying to accomplish. Right. And I, we have really robust conversations again, being on the investment committee in the board has been a joy over the last three to four years. And as a young black entrepreneur, I've learned a ton. I've learned a ton. I've learned a ton, right? But it is, you know, going back to that time element, and the idea that you have to have money to give to the people that rely on you, this is what started making the perpetuity conversation harder for us. Right, because we're supporting immigrant and refugee based, not just programs, but the advocacy work going on over there. And we were able to utilize our positionality to get the city to invest in things that needed investment for the folks that are suffering from all of the inequities that are, you know, taking place in that immigrant and refugee space and existence, right. And so, what if we weren't here that we don't know, right? We're not saying we're so crucial that the world falls apart. But we do know what we did, and the continuity there, and our advocacy behind closed doors with people and then in front of, you know, the cameras and putting this money down, and Matt getting it matched, like all of that helped make a major difference to where there's now money in the budget for some of these issues that didn't exist there before. Right and particular way. So if we get rid of who we are, that apparatus kind of goes away or does go away. And that's another element to factor into the mission aligned investment, perpetuity, not perpetuity space. And so really, is this opportunity for us to be reimagining what does it mean to be a foundation in the 21st century, with all of the world's problems, as they exist or all Philadelphia's problems as they exist, because our mission speaks about this area and the five county region. So being specific to this area and its future, like, what role do we play in that? Could we play in that? And where's the opportunity for imagination? And something that's not shut down Sunset or perpetuity? Is there gradients in the middle? And what could that look like?

Valerie Johnson 23:15

I mean, the fact that you're thinking about it means that I think you should be here forever. There are other foundations that could sunset, they're cool. They're not thinking about any of this. And like I don't, I'm not saying they're doing a disservice, but they're certainly not serving the community as well as they could be if they were thinking more along the lines of the way you're thinking at the Fels fund. So yeah, I vote stay, but I have no vote. I'm not on your board.

Monique Curry-Mims 23:43

Yeah, I mean, I think that because you guys have a more strategic lens. And you said something that was key, which is advocacy, right? Like, **it's not just putting the band aids on it, its making sure that there's actual, like structural systemic changes that are happening at a city wide level. And not a lot of foundations are doing that at all.** They're just putting the band aids on and it's in some of those instances, I'm like, Well, what if you just went more of an advocacy, systemic change route, and that problem no longer existed? Right? Whether it's, you know, food, or whatever the case may be, you know, it's having a really interesting conversation. You can call it a conversation, it was more like an explosion a couple weeks ago, where, you know, we were having this trust based philanthropy, conversation and foundations, one not understanding their personal or which leads into their professional biases, and microaggressions that are perpetuating some of the issues. But then I started really thinking about, like, you know, how are you culturally changing? How are you? How are you investing, like, how are you actually showing up but you're here trying to be more inclusive, but you're really just acting the same and just, you know, what is it Like putting lipstick on a pig kind of a thing, right? Like, trying to present yourself better, but you're not really changing at the heart. And I think that there has to be a lot more of that.

Valerie Johnson 25:09

I wish there was more of a platform for folks who are doing the kind of work that you're doing, Mike, because I think it would a shame those foundations who are not doing, who say they're doing the work, but then they're not doing the work just so they like really understand what it means to do the work. But I do think that there are other funders out there who just don't know where to start, or what to do, or like how to think they want to be in that space, they want to like, be more trust based, more community centered, they want to help, they really want to truly help the community, but they have no idea where to start. Um, I guess, because they're all white folks with a lot more privileged than, you know, the rest of the rest of the world. But I think it would be really cool. Hopefully, hopefully, they're all listening, getting some ideas from what you're doing. Because I think it's really helpful.

Monique Curry-Mims 25:58

Yeah. Like, there's only one of you. And I know, like you have like a firm that has bet is growing amazingly. But like, where, where can they go? Like, what can they do? What steps should they be taking to be more strategic in this sense? And to be more thoughtful around this?

Mike O'Bryan 26:19

I appreciate that a ton. You know, there are a ton of people doing the work. I don't you know, the hard part is I don't know them. All right.

Monique Curry-Mims 26:28

But don't be vouching for people because you don't know.

Mike O'Bryan 26:35

Well What I mean by that is like what I **history speaks to the idea that there are often more people that are aligned with you in some format or fashion than you're consciously aware of.** I would even argue that there's there's some medium tools being used to angle certain conversations only at varying levels of scale, right? Whether it's a local, just take gun violence as an example, right, that we really reported

on gun violence, do a data centered lens, we the conversation would look very different. But that's not it's we we do sensationalized reporting. And I really appreciate, you know, a number of the reporters and initiatives in the city that are challenging that back, right and going like, no, no, no, no, no, we're not going to report it like that, right. So we do have this problem again, at every kind of concentric circle up from like, my personal world to like my neighborhood to Baba Baba blah, like certain the wrong narratives get centered in shape your worldview to be like, Oh, my God, I'm the only one in this spot doing this thing. And, again, history just speaks to something different being the actual thing. It's just our perception. And then the way that perception shapes our reality, and how will govern our activities, etc, you know, follows suit. So, you know, I just bring that up that people got to go out to try to, you gotta go find people, it's work, you got to find them, you got to listen to things like this, and then contact you. All right. So who are you listening to? Who are you talking to? What are the recommendations that have been made?

Monique Curry-Mims 28:10

We're talking to Mike.

Valerie Johnson 28:14

And the answer is, yeah, we're talking like, Mike. We do have people reach out and just say, like, Hey, I love that you said this, like, I've always thought this, and I've never heard anybody say it out loud. So, you're right.

Monique Curry-Mims 28:25

Or resources, or they ask for our resources? Yeah.

Mike O'Bryan 28:29

But I think I'll say this, right. I think that the larger thing that people are gonna have to do, we use the term hoarding earlier. And I think more individuals are not like, I don't think people want to hoard as much as hoarding just takes place. And it's just not been called hoarding. Right? Even using that terminology turns certain people off that I would like, I wouldn't use that terminology in certain rooms that I'm in, because they wouldn't hear me after that, because they would take personal offense. Right. Right. And, and so the being able to separate systems from actors within the system, I think there's a really important thing in this journey, a move that we're on, because, you know, Samuel Fels didn't make me poor. You get what I'm saying? Like it wasn't? Well, specifically, and their family business that made Michael O'Bryan and his family poor. It's not his family and his business that made my mother go through foster care and trafficking and all these things when she was a teenager, that that's, there's no causality there. There might be correlation. Right? But there's not causality. Right. And I think that's the larger frame and issue that we've have in the world around finances and this financial institutions and systems as they exist, and so the opportunity for people to reframe their understanding of history, just through different lenses by listening to different narrators, by taking in different viewpoints by creating a synthesized view of history, and I'll give you an example what I mean to that, right? We don't often get taught about the Chinese Exclusion Act in high school, or middle school, right? Like, I learned about that as I think I was like, right out of college when I learned about the Chinese Exclusion Act right. In the late 1800s. And it took me a moment as I was reading about it and considering it and like, oh, wow, this is why I did not know America did this. But this makes this is so American, actually. And then it's but

again, I'm reading it, I'm pressing on whoa, whoa. And then I was like, Wait a minute. It sounds so asinine. Almost like, Wait a minute. This was going on at the same time that Jim Crow was starting up. And that was the moment in my mind, I was like, right, because it was that coordinated. Why did I wait like what? Right, and it felt like I had been duped.

Valerie Johnson 31:11

Yup

Mike O'Bryan 31:12

The narrator's in the narration, I was given to American history, and to American economic development, and America's positionality. In a global economy. I didn't believe America was kind, but I did not have a synthesized view of history that placed America in a role that wasn't romanticized, even on the global economic stage. And so there's an opportunity that people have to really go into history and look at things, quote, unquote, objectively, right? Again, recognizing that to be objective means you have to recognize your biases, as much as you can, you also have to do things because of the way excuse me, yeah, the way implicit bias works or unconscious bias, you're gonna have to do things that help you ask a million questions, and keep finding more info. Because you don't always know, actually, you won't know when your implicit biases are at work.

Monique Curry-Mims 32:10

How do we how do we reconcile reconcile this? Because, you know, this makes me think back to basically the nonprofit industrial complex, the idea that foundations, like you said, were created around a tax code. And even going back further, right, like, it was created as a way where, you know, Rockefeller and whoever else, like they weren't providing proper wages, right? They weren't doing what they actually need it to do, in terms of giving people just basic, basic needs and basic rights, in terms of employment and things like that. So they ended up going into this foundation, give back space, right? And it's just like, but if you would have just done the right thing from the beginning, and took less profit from the beginning, but it's like, oh, and I'll get a ride off. And I'll get all these other things. So if you're, if we're going back to the idea that foundations and their endowments and this whole process of it being a a tax, financial system, how do we reconcile that with what it's supposed to know? How do we reconcile that with what we want it to do, right, like nonprofits, and some nonprofits are in it for the same thing, right? Like they're in it, because the money's there. And, you know, I can get my big salary and I can make a big name, but I'm not really about helping the people. But if we're really trying to help the people, how do we reconcile those two, because they're verging on different paths and they meet somewhere in the fork, but like, they're crossing each other's paths.

Valerie Johnson 33:43

I would like to also say this, we have asked you the hardest questions.

Monique Curry-Mims 33:48

He's the smartest person I know. He can answer them.

Valerie Johnson 33:52

Like, he's just rolling with it. He's ready to answer that question. Like, you can't see his face, but he's already there.

Monique Curry-Mims 33:58

He's ready. I know. It's not hard. It's not hard for Mike, he can handle it. These aren't just regular conversations that we have like over drinks like this is nothing

Mike O'Bryan 34:08

That is so funny, I appreciate that a lot. I mean, the reality is these these answers are I want to use the word challenging for people. But I'm gonna do what I always do based it in science. we're talking about spiritual things. And spiritual for me, I use that term through the lens of the Health Sciences model of human development, which says that human beings develop and for CO occurring and dynamic dimensions, right dynamic being that these four dimensions are influencing one another. So they're happening at the same time, you're subsumed in all four of them at the same time. And what happens in one is influencing the other three. And those dimensions are the biological, the psychological, the social and the spiritual. Well, spiritual on this model is not religious, or based on theology, it is about the fact that humans have a meaning making, if you will, apparatus, and we make meaning out of everything that happens to us. And that meaning this gets back to what I said before about our narratives. And the way we talk about the world and perceive the world shapes, how we're going to behave in the world, how we manage our expectations of the world, how we design an imagined in the world, all those things. And so we're asking, from that perspective, very spiritual questions, right. So part of the problem that we have is, and I'll give it to you in a metaphor, right, vinegar can only get but so sweet. You can keep diluting it, etc, and sugar, but it's still going to have this like thing going on, you can't add enough water and other additives that completely cancel the vinegar. Now, there's a couple of things there. That means you have to have a basin big enough to handle the amount of liquid and work and other things that you've got to put in there. And if you lack a certain amount of knowledge about chemical reactions, you could also do a lot of damage and harm while you're adding these things in. And again, the basins got to be big enough. So from a systems perspective, right, there's so many variables that you've got to like, get new knowledge on or get old knowledge on, and you got to make sure you have the right resources and finances to have the thing the basin that's big enough, and yada, yada, yada. And then what happens when you got to change it up, because the base is not big enough, then you're gonna find the basin that is big enough, and you got to actually transfer the liquid over and keep adding it. Like it just to a certain point, it's too, it's a little much, but that's the process we're using. I think on the flip side, at a certain point, like if I know my goal is to have apple juice, and I'm starting with a basic vinegar, it might be easier for me to like pour that out. And just add the apple juice, or at least start with water.

Valerie Johnson 36:58

Burn it all done. I hear burn it all down, which is always my choice

Monique Curry-Mims 37:02

It was, I was just like pour it all out and start over again.

Mike O'Bryan 37:05

I don't think we have to burn it all down. And the reason the reason I say that is because I think that it well, we could leave the basin, right, like I think at the core here is that we need to avoid more war at all cost. this is personal belief, right? 100% personal, we need to avoid war at all costs. And war is not just physical violence, right? There are other forms of violence. And we have to reckon with the fact that in the 21st century, America has been steeped in the mythos of its own goodness for so long, that we are challenging, particularly and I say this with love, the baby boomer generation grew up under the the central narrative that America is fundamentally good. And world war two being the exemplar of the goodness, and Germany and Nazi Germany at that, and Hitler are the, you know, icons of evil, right, more, arguably, more so than any other figures in the 20th century, right? Hitler is the Bastiaan of evil that we point out in this country. And there's an interesting book called Hitler's American model that really changed my life. And I've talked about this in other situations where it's written by a guy, James Whitman's legal scholar of New England, and he's shows up plenty of research to give more than enough space for the argument. And I'd argue proof that Nazi race law was based on American race law, and based on their own confessions, there are things that they did not do that they saw Americans do, because they thought it was too harsh. I mean, let that sit in your head for a moment. This is what I mean by like, the narrative shaping reality and like we're in that part of the world now, where or the existence of the world and American history where there's just a larger reckoning happening about who we are, what we've done and where we want to go. And philanthropy is a part of that. Right. And so, the question for us is more so to me about how willing are we to sit in the reality of what's transpired? Right, the facts of what's transpired, and then what truths do we want to derive from those facts that we got that we're wrestling with facts right now. And I think the other thing that's happening, and it will continue to happen, people might not like this, but I'll just be honest, January 6 was an interesting moment. I'll rephrase this. January 6, was about the full recognition that change is here. So the question is not if we're changing, but how are we going to change, right? Roe v. Wade is another notch in that belt. It's not about if we're gonna change. This is all about how we're going to change some of the changes, reverting backwards, some of the change we want propels us forward, some of the change we want just moves us into a completely different paradigm altogether, or backwards forwards ups and downs. It's all brand new, right, like, but the goal, I think, for many, regardless of where you're at on a political spectrum, is to change because the world at large has shifted right? If nothing else, just COVID and the Civic unrest since 2020 has prompted like, oh, god, yes, we did changes inevitable. What is it going to look like? And I think that's what we're wrestling with. So the reconciliation so much as it's going to take place after we're all dead, right? We're going to be a part of that. But then there's more to come. And it's not going to be it's not going to be as fast as I think we need it to be. But it can be faster than it is.

Monique Curry-Mims 40:57

Yeah, so that was deep. That was really deep. And I mean, my only my only follow up to that is, you know, we've been asking, you know, what resources, what books you named the one, but what should we be reading in our journey during this change, to educate us to shape our pedagogy to, to just get us to understand the facts so that we can shape our future?

Mike O'Bryan 41:30

I'll just put up books that have shaped me in my work, right. So I mentioned Hitler's American model by James Whitman, there's a book by Heather McGee that recently came out called the sum of all of us.

There's a book by one of my mentors, and it was Dr. Sandra bloom. It's heavy, but it's amazing, right? It's called Creating sanctuary.

Valerie Johnson 42:00

she's the founder of the sanctuary model. So if any of you are familiar with the sanctuary model,

Mike O'Bryan 42:08

there are a number of articles that I've read to like I read a lot of scholarly articles. And those have shaped me too. So there's a particular and I read people's research, and that shapes me, so I'll just name some of those folks. So Howard Stevenson is actually in Philadelphia, his work is fantastic. As a clinical psychologist who wrestles with issues of race, and adolescent development, human development, trauma, fantastic, fantastic at what he does, his research design is fantastic, very human centered. And he's just I think Howard is a really brilliant scholar, but also just like a brilliant person, like the we thinks about how to connect to people for the purposes of healing and justice and moving forward and growth and asset framing, like all of that, but he's really got him and his team, they really have a good handle on that. And I always am suggesting that people look into that. I think there are people in philanthropy that are making pushes, too. Right. And so decolonizing wealth, I noticed that people have gotten into and I think they should also a winner takes all, people are like it's inflammatory. I'm like, Well, I mean, but you might not like the verbiage but he's not lying.

Monique Curry-Mims 43:23

He's not lying, not lying. Truth hurts. Truth hurts.

Mike O'Bryan 43:26

It's one of those angles. There's another book that a colleague in really someone I admire, Dr. Natalie Nixon suggested, it's called strategic intuition. I think that book is fantastic. And I'll leave you with one other book called The genius and all of us, so that I'm not just piling on so much that you're like, Oh, my God, I can't keep up with anything. But the genius and all this is a fantastic book that is just challenging the mythos around talent, IQ, etc. And the dope part about that book is that the writers, if you will, his thesis is a third of the book. And the other two thirds is a well annotated bibliography that you could read like a book, the amount of research this gentleman put into this topic is breathtaking, breathtaking, and it's annotated so you can read through his thinking and what's connecting where through through the entire text chapter by chapter, but it gives you the foundational research across like six or seven different disciplines, sometimes even more, and it's just a tour de force that people really want to start digging into the meat and bones of like, what does IQ what is talent? What is intelligence and all of that, and yeah, I'll stop there.

Valerie Johnson 44:49

That's so many I love it.

Monique Curry-Mims 44:52

Well, I will say a couple of those we have on our list, so it will make our list as long for this month, but those were some really great ones.

Mike O'Bryan 45:00

Can I add in one more book just because we're talking?

Monique Curry-Mims 45:02

Yeah.

Mike O'Bryan 45:03

Systems and capital is a really amazing, yet disturbing book. And it's not disturbing because the writer did anything salacious. It's the reality of what he's talking about. It's like just the half has never been told,

Monique Curry-Mims 45:20

Oh, I haven't heard of that one

Mike O'Bryan 45:21

Oh, my gosh, I can't remember his first name. But last name is Baptist. It's on the relationship and history of capitalism, and chattel slavery. And it's tour de force to the point where I have when reading it, I could sometimes only take in 10-12 pages, and have to put it down and go, I have to process everything I just read. Because this is legitimately reshaping the narratives and the framing that I received around chattel slavery, and its relationship to the current state of our economic world. So it's, again, super well researched tour de force, it is thick. But again, even if you just take 10 pages at a time, it'll start you on a journey of like, wow, okay,

Monique Curry-Mims 46:07

I want to ask you for one more book, what it what is a book or resource that foundations can read more so around mission online investing, getting them in that kind of like, if we're going to not do in perpetuity, we're going to do it because you don't, okay, we're gonna write that thing. We're gonna write that, then you're gonna write that.

Mike O'Bryan 46:28

So here's what I'll say, I'm not gonna put

Monique Curry-Mims 46:29

He threw his hands up like he didn't know, people, so that means we're gonna write it.

Mike O'Bryan 46:32

I don't know that a book like that exists, it might and I just don't know it. Right. So I do that, first off, that this is more about my ignorance, as opposed to like a definitive than ever. I know, there are articles out there in this space that like we've read as a board. And that are, you know, the CEO, or Executive Director of the Fels fund is shared with us. So I'd be happy to share that article with you. Writings and like periodicals. I don't know that there's a book about this.

Monique Curry-Mims 47:00

All right, any, any closing any closing thoughts, comments?

Mike O'Bryan 47:05

You know, I think the 21st century is about what investments we make in this concept of shared humanity. And understanding that dehumanization has been the default operating system, both dehumanizing ourselves and dehumanizing others in ways that like we've been totally socialized to, and don't even know the name as such. And so I just implore everybody listening to be thoughtful about how you define humanity, your own and others and is their equity in that spot? And what do you need to learn to be able to do that? And I always say, start with just learning the basics around human development, and what in my line of work I call the mechanics of our humanity, right? Because then that can help you start to really reimagine what our needs, right? I think one of the easiest way we easiest ways we dehumanize people is by denying their needs, actually, or you don't need that, right or like, poor people shouldn't be happy, right? Like there's this these really interesting frames that we have that we think are in a moral space that actually have some biological basis as well. Right. And so there's biological harm in denying people who are poor, not just the right to be happy, but the pathways to find and, you know, operationalize, if you will, that happiness, I don't even substitute the word fulfillment in there. Right. And so, you know, I think there's, again, start with human development, start with, you know, an investigative, compassionate, investigative practice around what does it mean to be human? And I think we could really get somewhere over the next 20 years.

Monique Curry-Mims 48:43

That's awesome.

Valerie Johnson 48:44

Love it. I'm so glad that you were here. Thank you for taking the time to chat.

Mike O'Bryan 48:48

No problem. Thank you for having me. Thank you for building this platform. And this is huge. So kudos to you both. Thank you. Oh, thank

Monique Curry-Mims 48:57

you. Well, if you didn't know now, you know, this has been beyond philanthropy. Thank you for joining us.