

Passages from an Exploratory Conversation on Money, Race, and Class

A Project of the *Transforming Money Network*

September 20, 2006

RSF Social Finance, San Francisco, California

[This original transcript has been read and approved by all participants in the conversation, and each of the participants retains full rights of use. General use copyright: RSF Social Finance ©2007. The full transcript is available at www.reimaginemoney.org under initiatives. The gathering was facilitated by Pilar Gonzales, John Bloom, and Katrina Steffek. Recorded by the National Radio Project]

Participants:

John Bloom, RSF Social Finance

CJ Callen

Armando Castellano, Castellano Family Foundation

Rose Feerick, Harvest Time

Pilar Gonzales, Independent Consultant/Advisor to Philanthropy

Paul Paz y Miño, Institute for Policy Studies

Eric Romann, La Raza Centro Legal

Nicole Sanchez, Youth Philanthropy Worldwide

Katrina Steffek, RSF Social Finance

Money, Race, and Class

Money has inhabited our lives since before we were born, for better or for worse. Race and racism are unavoidable. Class and classism, whether visible or invisible, mark every step of our journey in society. All three are intertwined forever. Do we untangle these characteristics of daily life? Do we stare them down and confront them? Do we ignore them in order to keep ourselves sane, or do we perpetuate them by merely being who we are?

—Pilar

On Making Assumptions

One lesson I've learned in conversations like this is about assumptions. We joke about it, we talk about it seriously, but we all—I make assumptions about everyone around the table because we're here, because of how I got here. Then I sit and I think well, it's fine, it's totally natural and people are doing it about me. It's really hard for any of us to get it even close to being right.

—Paul

Maybe from the white perspective you're not used to talking about race with anybody, because white people generally don't talk about race. My wife doesn't talk about race. It confuses her when I do. With all my colored friends, we talk about our skin color.

—Armando

On Identity

I've crossed over in a lot of ways and have been able to access and take advantage of having the skin color that I have, yet I've often felt, to be honest, guilt because of that too, because I received scholarships for school because I am Latino—at least half.

—Paul

The money in my family is very new. It's about five years old. I'm going to fully disclose—which I rarely do. It's just not a story that I tell. My father won the largest Lotto winning in the history of California for a single winner, after already a lifetime of community work. And he had infused all of us with that already, and then it just kind of turned into this foundation naturally, for myself and my sisters, who were already working in non-profits and doing similar work as myself.

—Armando

The Intersection of Race, Class and Policy

The intellectual side of me says, "Oh, this is so fascinating. We're talking about race and class." I have all this frustration—it would have been so much easier to talk about race, in some ways, than to talk about class and where they intersect. No one wants to talk about policy and how that creates wealth.

—CJ

An Unexpected Path to Philanthropy

I was kind of scared when we were going around because I was feeling like I had to talk a little bit more about myself as an African-American woman, and feel like I had to pull out a log cabin story or something. So imagine I was born in a log cabin and we had nothing to eat and—so imagine all that—all that's true. Somehow through all that I found myself in this weird place of being in philanthropy—working with wealthy people and dealing with this whole thing about wealth.

—CJ

Identity, Poverty and Wealth

I am an Apache-Mexican woman. I've never been mistaken for white, never been mistaken for wealthy. I have had brushes with wealth my entire life. Not as much as my living in poverty, but brushes with wealth. So money sort of touches me, through my work and how

I earn it and the people I associate with, and the fact that I have the college education that I do. Yet, how is it in this country that I can still feel poor and that my family is poor? I am dumbfounded by that.

—Pilar

Privilege

I was embarrassed that I really had never thought about my own privilege. I had the privilege of just not thinking about it. I grew up thinking that my family didn't have as much wealth as other people because my friends had bigger houses and went on better vacations. It was just so sheltered.

—Katrina

The Effect of Money on Identity

I started noticing in groups that I was a part of and groups that I work with that every time questions of money came up there was always conflict. The artistic part of me started inquiring into what is that about? What's not being addressed in this field that every time we come to that little money moment a whole other set of identities shows up at the table?

Add to that—so that's just the money piece—add to that the whole question of race and class, which is huge in this, in our daily lives, and in the world, and in this country. I feel if we don't have this conversation, then we are basically at the mercy of the anger, which I experience also at large in the world.

—John

On Valuing Vocation

You hear that joke about well, you better go to school or you are going to end up flipping burgers for the rest of your life—which is exactly what my father did. He spent 30 years flipping hamburgers. So when I hear, “oh, you'll end up flipping hamburgers” —part of me is like damn it, that's honorable work!

—Nicole

Harmful Policy

Things are structured in a way to support the privileged upper few, and how that creates a kind of lock-down on power that is really hard to break, and how, quite frankly, they are not going to break it—that you really have to do yourself. When you have all these major kinds of systems and policies that kind of push you down and there are limits to what you may be able to do, there has to be personal responsibility in terms of what you do.

I have gotten to this point where I have personal pain. I'm feeling it even more because I grew up in the '60s and there was Black Power and the sense that things were going to change, people could vote, and you felt this sense of hopefulness and pride. I saw people connect with each other, and I feel like I've just seen everything go downhill from there at a time when I thought everything was going to go up.

—CJ

People that have been treated unfairly have a right to be angry when interacting with people who think that the system is fair. It's part of the reality of the system we live in, that there's understandable anger from people who have been treated unfairly on the basis of their race or class or other—or of gender or other identities that—because our system claims to be fair. It's not, and there are people on the short end of it.

—Eric

Identity and Environment

I grew up in Brooklyn, and next door was a guy who was a cop, so it was middle class people. We were very poor, but I had like different kinds of role models to think maybe I could actually get a job or whatever, and do things, and go to school. Within a few months we were in the projects, and I was in a place where everyone stacked high, and everyone was as poor as I was, and I lost those connections, the sense of a vision, and more and more that's how people are—I see kids on the bus and that's all they've known. What does that do to people? I never thought that would be such a defining moment in my life.

—CJ

A College Experience

You go to college and everything is fixed. You get the American dream at that point. But when we got there, we were like “what the hell is this place?” It was only 40 miles from where I grew up. It was just a totally different world. I didn't know Phillips Exeter Academy was a real place; I thought that was something in movies. I thought what the hell is a boarding school? Why would your parents send you away? I would look around, and the white kids who were there were there because they were smart. I was constantly reminded that the reason I was there was because of my background.

—Nicole

The Power and Protection of Money

What we say, my parents and I, is really protected by the money. So you can use that power to make change, too, and to say things in communities where maybe your voice isn't normally heard. I can say anything I want and the money protects you. You are not going to really get hurt in a lot of ways.

—Armando

Class and Relationship

I think we both realized at some point in our friendship, then relationship, and then in marriage, that one of the most important things that we have that connected us is that we both grew up poor, and that the second generation Latino experience in California is so much like the second generation Irish experience in Boston.

I always thought it would be really important for me to marry a Latino, for example. But what was way more important was to marry somebody who came from the same class as me, in terms of being able to communicate with each other.

—Nicole

Wealth and Privilege

I'm thinking about the question around how to work with people, whether it's working with white people or people with wealth its like—there are those defense mechanisms that go up for people who are privileged or who have benefited historically from the privilege of their people.

—Eric

The Long Story of Discrimination

My husband is Irish, and his father got a chance to go to school after World War II, because he was a soldier, right? And they were able to buy a house; they got equity. That didn't happen in my community. I think it's very easy for people just to say oh, that was then, but no one tells them how that's the beginning of a long story that needs to be understood, and it's not just about something that happened then. It's about something that is living now.

—CJ

Perspectives on Consumption

I always envisioned the less-consumption movement led by white people. I think there is a reason to consume less. I get it—to show modesty, to be good to the earth, to not spend all your money like your nutty buddy. I get all those things. At the same time when an immigrant family comes into the community, comes into this country, and they want to buy a new truck, I say "Right on!" I'm glad they want to buy a new truck. I think it's great. I'm not going to go up to them and say you need to consume less. I get angry about this consumer stuff because I agree with it, and I don't agree with it.

—Pilar

Attitudes about Money

My wife and I are now going to spend a lot—to me what is a lot of money—to go talk to this woman who is a financial advisor specifically for couples. It's not just about where to invest your money, but it's how do you think about money? How do you relate to money? And I hate money. But money sucks. I don't want to talk about it. I don't want to look at it. I don't want to look at my bank account. My wife says, "We need to have a plan." I don't have a plan.

—Paul

I have a husband who grew up pretty working-class, and I was from the poor/working-class, so that's good. We have some common ground around that. But the one thing where we don't have common ground is he really hates rich people. We share a kind of ignorance about money, but I don't hate money. I don't make it the center of my life as a conscious choice, but there are times when I feel like I'm at a real big disadvantage in that I didn't understand money.

—CJ

Money and Desire

There is—this is my money-self speaking—there is a desire nature in all of us that is connected to the material world. It is just very real. We each individually create our own mythology around that desire nature, about our relationship to it. I'm willing to bet that there are cultural myths or permissions by culture to create certain kinds of myths around that desire nature. Regardless, we all have a desire nature, and we are all drawn to this material world through the money.

—John

The Secrets of Wealth

I got involved with the field of philanthropy and working with major donors, people of high earned and inherited wealth—and this is 16 years ago—for a really particular reason. I felt there were secrets that rich white people had and I wanted to know those secrets. I wanted to share those secrets.

But the secrets of wealth—I kept saying there's got to be something I'm not getting here that they didn't teach me in school. Sometimes I was bold enough to ask rich white people how did you do it? Tell me what your parents taught you. Tell me. And I heard remarkable stories. One gentleman told me, he said, "Do you know what I got, Pilar, for my 15th or 16th birthday?" I said, "What?" He said, "An accountant."

—Pilar

I feel one of the realities of our [society] is people don't talk about how much money they have, and that one of the ways that wealthy people stay wealthy is that nobody talks about it. They actually just want to keep it a secret because it's in their best interests to do so.

—Eric

As long as the core mentality and the culture of this society is to get ahead—because it's really all about getting ahead—that's why people have secrets. How you can get yourself ahead of the other person and that's the way it's supposed to be. Their ideal is that it shouldn't matter what your culture or your background is; if you are in America you can get ahead. As long as that's the real paradigm and culture, is there any further discussion we can have about really making change until that's different?

—Paul

Talking about Money

I had to beg my dad to talk to me about money. And he still won't. My mom will, but my dad absolutely won't talk to me about the money they're spending or that they plan to spend or how they are spending it, or the decisions they are making. I think he's still embarrassed—even with his own child.

—Armando

Money, Values, and Integrity

One of the things I haven't yet found a way to do is to show up in my community, as me, and say, “Look, let's just own that we're not living this stuff. We're showing up here with all of our fancy cars, and we're thinking ourselves as good Catholics. I'm sorry, but the Catholic Church had something to say about social justice, and this ain't it!”

—Rose

Perception and Reality

One brainwashing part of that is that anybody can and should be able to pull themselves up to another level. We're very eager to hear those success stories and don't pay attention to the statistics of the many who didn't for every one of those people who did. And we should somehow look to that as the beacon as opposed to all these people who got lost along the way and are living in poverty.

—Nicole

Money and Identity

If we did engage in a more authentic relationship with money, it would take away some of its power in some way, or make it less important in some ways. And I think that's very challenging to people. So many people, their whole identity is tied up with money. So to

renegotiate that relationship, to make it more authentic can be very threatening to people, because they've based their whole lives and sense of self-worth on the quest for money, the hoarding of money, everything that has to do with money.

—CJ

Interdependence

On the individual level, I feel like one of the myths that I certainly grew up with around money was that I need to be financially responsible and independent. And, of course, that's never been the reality of my life. But it wasn't really—for me, the journey through life falling apart is when I really understood why a mutually interdependent community is not optional. It's because I need other human beings, and they need me. But I grew up with a very individualistic world view, and it wasn't until life fell apart that I understood.

—Rose

The Race, Class, Religion Card

What I found for myself is that whenever something didn't go the way I wanted it to in my closest relationships there's no bigger card than the race, class, religion card. There's nothing else. You can't respond to it. So then I win. That's part of flipping the privilege of being poor and brown. You go, "Okay, well, I'm poorer and browner than you." You can't respond to it, especially if somebody's a conscientious white person who is into social justice. It's going to crush them. I say this to reveal the underside of using race and class status to make a point that we want; it's not just wealthy people that do it.

—Pilar

Money and Beliefs

More than anything, I think my faith, in a way, reinforces the idea that money is evil, because it's part of this illusion that's not going to last. And so you should be focusing on the things in life that are real, which are the human beings, the love, the compassion, the relationships, you know, and not things like money.

—Paul

Money is essentially a sacrament. I'm coming from a Catholic framework, and sacrament meaning something physical that expresses a deeper, mystical truth. I think about money as a sacrament of my relationship with other people. It's that physical thing that connects me with other people, and I feel like it has the potential to be that sacred bond that connects me. So that's why it matters. It's just a symbol for how we are connected. It's not real in itself, but the connection is.

—Rose

I see money as an expression of development of human consciousness. It's nothing more than what we created it to be, for all that comes with that, the beauty, and, I would say, the beast of it, as well. And so it's a language in the same way art and music are expressions of consciousness. Of course, there are different and subtle qualities of money.

—John

It would be hard for me to ever probably be part of any kind of organized religion. And yet the spirituality I've been able to extract through my values is an important thing that keeps me having a more balanced relationship with money.

—CJ

Nor do I see that religion or spirituality is why I'm a good person. To me those are separate things. My values come out of people who need things. Or I think that that organic impulse to want to help or be generous does not come from a church, and it doesn't come from a white person, and it doesn't come from anybody else. It's inside me.

—Pilar

The Value of Conversation for Making Change

I was just thinking of just how wonderful that we are all so odd, and dare I say courageous, to come together with a bunch of strangers to talk about our personal lives. But what makes it even better and more strange, is that we're talking about money, race, and class, which is a really complex set of issues in a culture that wants sound bites. And that's really intriguing to me about how you start to shift the culture to where people are willing to deal with the messiness, the nuances, and the complexities in a healthy way. I think that's where you start making change.

—CJ

END