Birthrights and Stonecatchers

“... And with our beaten bodies and abandoned dreams we collect each other
  Whispering affirmations
  Absorbing the tears
Remembering that this world that has us on the bottom is only there off the strength of our bodies
  Light of Our souls
  Depth of Our love
And my heart breaks ever so slowly and melts into the earth below”
– Marie Deveaux

A birthright is a particular right of possession or privilege one has from birth. It is synonymous with legacy—the historical things given to us by our ancestors.

I recently read a blog post entitled, “Wellbeing is your Birthright.” I immediately paused and thought, “No, no, it’s not.” Because while this may be true for others, and I certainly agree with the sentiment, this right has been consciously denied to me and people like me.

Well-being is the state of being comfortable, healthy or happy.

While my birthright for many historical reasons does not include the fullness of this definition, it is full of something else.

I was born during a time of Black power and acute political awareness in North America. As a result, the air in my home was generous, brilliant and proud. The earliest memories of my life are filled with dashikis, soul food and R&B and gospel music. Born in the ’70s, my parents and their siblings poured their consciousnesses into my identity.

My adulthood gave birth to an integrative racial and cultural awareness, and I benefited from the regular affirmations of my parents and loved ones. This was the incubator in which I was formed and still remains the mecca of my well-being. This safe space was intentional, fiercely protected and full of love. Black power personified and a true reflection of God, I think.
My culture is a mosaic of all the tragedies and triumphs experienced by my freedom-seeking ancestors. My family escaped slavery in the United States but was met with segregation and racism in Canada. In order to survive “Canadian culture,” conformity was required. Despite this reality, through a graceful intelligence, my family and many other Black families found a way to maintain their identity.

When I look back at my life, there were many people who gracefully held space or caught stones for the cultivation and protection of our community. My grandparents, parents and Black colleagues (including me) have this gifted ability as our legacy. In many ways, this is how we achieve well-being. We create space to gather and receive the affirmation and care refused us in society. Like water, we go to the lowest point to reach each other. We offer shelter, validation and rest to those in need of healing from the daily indignities and injustices of oppression, segregation and racism. When we gather, there is a collective strength, validation and healing.

In my world, to achieve well-being, someone must sacrifice. There are few spaces for people of colour to gather, share and lean on each other. These spaces must be intentionally created and defended. And we create safety and offer comfort despite our wounds. I believe it is our strength in vulnerability that qualifies us for this human work.

My definition of well-being is having opportunity and security. Having food, shelter and support. Space to contribute and share. Dignity! Hope. Therefore, well-being is directly linked to your life’s work, your career.

Philanthropy is human work. It is the love of humanity. It is the desire to promote the welfare of others. I love the power of philanthropy because it has the capacity to offer well-being to the community. Many Black people are drawn to the philanthropic sector because of this power and their acute understanding and experience with
marginalization. Yet in the work, in this “love” sector, the well-being of people of colour often remains elusive. Why? Because for the most part we live segregated lives in Canada, and the mosaic of Black and Brown people is widely unknown.

The philanthropic sector is meant to be in the business of loving people and thereby creating solutions to improve people’s ultimate well-being. But often, an ocean exists between intentions and impact, which is why I believe the development of cultural fluency, taking strategic action and growing empathy for the vulnerable, is the only hope for change.

Why cultural fluency? Because this is how effective communicators use language to connect with others, how they break and transcend the rules, and how they feel and flow in communication with others. Cultural fluency is understood through first understanding one’s own identity and ways of being. And then subsequently, it’s taking time to study other people’s ways of being and communicating.

In addition, there are competencies that help foster successful relationships among people in different social groups, including re-scripting our individual stories, revealing each other’s stories, building critical consciousness and repatterning systems. These acquired skills require time and should be a fundamental part of our regular skill-building and training programs. It is from these proficiencies that strategic action should flow. Otherwise, the work will be culturally tone deaf and exclusive.

When cultural fluency is absent, diverse people are often misunderstood, penalized, and forced to conform to dominant norms.

Developing empathy requires the willingness to get close to the problems we want to solve. This means confronting the discomfort of the unknown, suspending the idea that the dominant culture is the authority on best practices, and spending more time understanding the realities of other social groups.

This work begins at the top, with boards of directors and executive teams. In my experience, it is rare that all three of these ingredients exist in most nonprofits in Canada. This is because this work requires more than a superficial interest. It requires a commitment to understanding and valuing the marginalized, the vulnerable and people belonging to nondominant groups.

**What if the nonprofit sector decided that indeed well-being is everyone’s birthright?** How would that change how we are and the way we work in the community?

“Part of being a revolutionary is creating a vision that is more humane. That is more fun, too. That is more loving. It’s really working to create something beautiful.” – Assata Shakur
Nneka Allen is a Black woman, a descendant of the Underground Railroad, an Ojibwa of Anderson Nation, a Mother and a sixth generation Canadian.

Born in the 70’s, Nneka was raised during a time of Black power and acute political awareness in North America. As a result, the air in her childhood home was generous, brilliant and proud. Her parents and their siblings with great intentionality poured their consciousness into her multi-ethnic identity.

As a lover of justice, Nneka inspires philanthropy as a Fundraising Executive in the non-profit sector. She honours the spirit of generosity in all people and is passionate about the many contributions of Black Canadian philanthropists and fundraisers.

Nneka is also the principal and founder of The Empathy Agency. She helps organizations deliver more fairly on their mission and vision by coaching leaders and their teams to explore the impact identity has on organizational culture and equity goals.

Nneka’s ultimate joy is her daughter Destiny, an Environmental Scientist working with Indigenous communities in British Columbia. Together Destiny and Nneka continue their family legacy of philanthropy and activism in Canada.

Nneka Allen, CFRE