

How Do Fish See Water? Building Public Will to Advance Inclusive Communities

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“There are these two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, ‘Morning, boys. How’s the water?’ And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, ‘What the hell is water?’”

—David Foster Wallace¹

Cultivating more equitable and inclusive communities is challenging work. In addition to the technical challenges of fostering such communities, there also is the added conundrum of how we build public support for policies and investments that make equitable and inclusive development possible. On the public will-building front, this work is made exponentially tougher because it generally means asking people to problematize an issue—racial and economic segregation—that they do not see as a problem that threatens the values and vitality of the communities in which they live. Unlike climate change, health care, education, or other social “issues” that are well-understood as requiring public intervention, racial and economic segregation operates so ubiquitously that it is often ignored as a “thing” to be solved. It just *is*. And, when people are asked explicitly to reflect on the high level of concentrated segregation that characterizes their communities and to consider the well-documented negative consequences of us living so separately, many struggle to “see” this as a compelling policy problem with the same shaping force of other issues requiring national attention. Perhaps most importantly, they struggle to see their stake in shaping solutions and supporting policies that cultivate more equitable and inclusive places. Because segregation is so fully woven into the environments around us, we behave like fish—ignoring the water surrounding us.

More often, segregation and its consequences are understood from a set of distinctive public narratives (or commonly shared beliefs that dominate the public discourse).² Those narratives are: (1) *consumer preferences and racial difference* (i.e., the idea that people make rational choices to live with others who are like them, especially in the context of race); and (2)

¹ David Foster Wallace, *This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005).

² “Public narrative is a form of social reproduction in all societies, invisibly woven into the fabric of everyday life. These shared systems of meaning, mostly taken for granted and unremarked, exist as themes or stories in our consciousness. They give coherence to group experience, particularly how the world works. Expressed in legal codes, the arts, mass media, and corporate discourse, core narratives provide the necessary mental models, patterns, and beliefs to make sense of the world and explore our place within it.” See: Corrina Wainwright, *Building Narrative Power for Racial Justice and Health Equity*. Edited by Bisola Falola and Steffie Klinglake. (Open Society Foundations, July 2019), 4. <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/publications/building-narrative-power-for-racial-justice-and-health-equity>.

both on the front end (as new developments are proposed) as well as on the back end (after investments have been made). This kind of assessment offers up the ability to evaluate the long-term impacts of their investments. Moreover, and most importantly, it offers up the opportunity to report those impacts – both the financial returns and the social returns, on those investments. Social returns – like their ability to cultivate multi-use, multi-racial, more inclusive developments – help to focus and prioritize the public conversation on the narrative of inclusion.

Implications for Residents and Community Members.

- Advocacy and community organizing groups must be pro-active in aggressively engaging nontraditional audiences that often oppose equitable development. This means working to engage new champions for equity by focusing on how we build stronger ties across sectors, factions, political parties and community organizations.
- Advocacy and community organizing groups must refocus on powerful storytelling that positions how inclusive communities work to the benefit of a great many people in their communities. As such, this storytelling must strategically focus on telling the “story of us” and recruiting a wide range of community members to reinforce the narrative of interdependence in our stories. As more people begin to see themselves reflected in our narratives of change, it offers up new possibilities for cultivating inclusive policies.

“The point of the fish story is merely that the most obvious, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about...”

—David Foster Wallace³⁵

³⁵ Wallace, *This Is Water*

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