

The Foundation Review

Volume 13
Issue 2 *Shifting Power in Philanthropy*

6-2021

Book Review: Delusional Altruism: Why Philanthropists Fail To Achieve Change and What They Can Do To Transform Giving

Steve Wilson
Council of Michigan Foundations

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/tfr>



Part of the [Nonprofit Administration and Management Commons](#), [Public Administration Commons](#), [Public Affairs Commons](#), and the [Public Policy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Wilson, S. (2021). Book Review: Delusional Altruism: Why Philanthropists Fail To Achieve Change and What They Can Do To Transform Giving. *The Foundation Review*, 13(2). <https://doi.org/10.9707/1944-5660.1569>

Copyright © 2021 Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy at Grand Valley State University. The Foundation Review is reproduced electronically by ScholarWorks@GVSU. <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/tfr>

Delusional Altruism: Why Philanthropists Fail To Achieve Change and What They Can Do To Transform Giving

Book Review by Steve Wilson

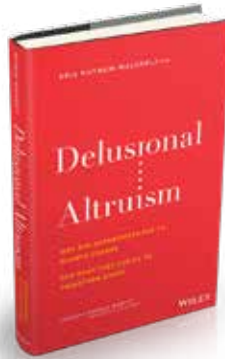
*No one buys a book entitled *Delusional Altruism* unless they recognize they might be making some mistakes and genuinely want to fix them.*

— Author Kris Putnam-Walkerly

Nearly everything but its title suggests *Delusional Altruism* is about the transformative role effective grantmaking can play in community life. Kris Putnam-Walkerly's book is partly a study of what happens when the best altruistic impulse gets mired in unintended consequences. Yet mostly it's a study in recognizing delusion's clever disguises, especially within the confines of institutional philanthropy, and offers dozens of strategies to turn good intentions into equitable and meaningful impacts.

Subtitled, *Why Philanthropists Fail to Achieve Change and What they Can do To Transform Giving*, these 256 pages show the reader how the journey of transformative grantmaking is most often a bumpy ride obstructed by mistaken assumptions, shiny objects and asking misguided questions. Putnam-Walkerly unpacks what happens when professionals in philanthropy are blinded by delusions like "Donor Distraction Disorder," with symptoms ranging from chasing philanthropic squirrels to getting pulled apart from within. She then contrasts that delusion with transformational suggestions, such as, stepping back to ask yourself and your team, "What are all the ways we can do this?"

Delusional Altruism is filled with clever phrases like "strap on your systems change goggles" and "create aerodynamic funding." The author's



Delusional Altruism: Why Philanthropists Fail To Achieve Change and What They Can Do To Transform Giving
Kris Putnam-Walkerly
Wiley, 2020
ISBN: 978-1-1196-06062

description of delusions such as "complexifying the simple, rather than simplifying the complex" are designed to make you laugh at the truth, whether you're a foundation program officer or CEO.

Other books on this compelling and timely topic come out of the behavioral sciences or are more academically based. *Delusional Altruism* is written in the form of a contemporary management book, filled with stories, interviews and brief case histories drawn from the author's 20-year career as a global philanthropy advisor. The jargon-free clarity of her voice is welcomed and very readable.

Topping Putnam-Walkerly's list of seven delusions is the scarcity mindset, which she effectively contrasts with the abundance mindset. For instance, Chapter Seven, "You Ask the Wrong Questions," is followed by a chapter entitled, "You Start with the Right Questions," that kicks off the largest section in the book, focused on Transformational Giving. The first of those right questions is "Why?" giving a nod to Simon Sinek's recent bestseller, *Start with Why*. Right question number three is "What Do I Know Already?" and is illustrative of the scarcity vs. abundance tension, pointing out that funders often run at such an intense pace they fail to pause and reflect upon what they already know.

Given philanthropy's hundreds of billions of dollars in endowments in the United States alone, one might easily believe the abundance mindset would be prevalent among philanthropists and their staff. Yet the author asserts just the opposite is true:

Many people naturally assume that wealthy people, foundation leaders, and celebrities feel abundance. And we assume their mind-set reflects this abundance. After all, they have big money, big ideas and often big passion. While it's true that they do have an abundance of resources and desire to do good, that doesn't mean that they themselves have a corresponding abundance mindset. Instead, they often feel guilty about investing in themselves, their organizations, and their philanthropy. Their mind-set is one of scarcity, not abundance.

An eight-question Scarcity Mindset Quiz in the first chapter points out how that mindset is revealed in workplace cultures valuing working harder, not smarter, or failing to make regular investments in talent, or too frequently asking "What's the cheapest way we can do this?" True to the form of widely esteemed management books by Peter Drucker, Jim Collins, and Patrick Lencioni, *Delusional Altruism* is framed around dozens of descriptive lists like these:

- Six ways philanthropists are overwhelmed
- 13 examples of bad behavior in philanthropy
- Two signs you suffer from donor distraction disorder
- Beginning with 12 "right" questions
- Nine ways to get time back in your day
- Seven steps you can take today

The author addresses equity as a critical component of transformative philanthropy, with several references to helpful guides, like Annie E. Casey Foundation's (2015) *Race Equity and Inclusion Action Guide*, and reference to discussions with nonprofit equity advisor Maggie Potopchuk. Yet equity is noticeably absent in the book's the first 78 pages, focused on delusions. Is

not one of our greatest delusions denying philanthropy's long history of entanglement with wealth, power, and the deeply embedded structures of racism within our communities and our philanthropic institutions? Directly addressing delusions around race and philanthropy could be strengthened with an interview or case histories of BIPOC foundation staff discussing the overt and covert pressures they experience as a part of mainstream philanthropic cultures.

Always present throughout the book is the deep knowledge and optimism of the author's engaging personal voice. For instance, when talking about philanthropy's worst behaviors, she suggests, "Look, I love a gossipy tidbit just like everyone else, but that's not what this book is about." *Delusional Altruism* devotes more than 150 pages to addressing altruism's seven delusions by lifting up the seven contrasting traits of transformative giving, which are:

1. You start with the right questions
2. You see and act abundantly
3. You are fast
4. You transform lives
5. You are unstoppable
6. You found your North Star
7. You do what it takes

Here is where Putnam-Walkerly's passion for transformational giving really shines, with specific transformative suggestions, such as encouraging funders to make a strategic sprint, by offering seven-week or seven-hour approaches to strategy formulation. Or how to declutter the grant application process to speed up the work of transformation.

This book is written for those who show up every day to do the work of philanthropy, whether that be a staffer at one the world's largest foundations, or a small-town community foundation with a staff of two. CEOs seeking

to pivot their organizations by adopting 21st century best practices, will find the well-framed steps ready to be put into action. Those who are newer to the field will find the suggestions encouraging and practical. *Delusional Altruism* will also be helpful for trustees involved in the governance of foundations on behalf of their family or community; or when setting up a corporate foundation for the first time. Nonprofit leaders, especially development officers, may draw upon the book's insights as they engage with the program staff of their funders:

Pure and simple, delusional altruism prevents philanthropists from being as fabulous, catalytic, and impactful as they can be. Now is the time to take a deep look within yourself and within your organization to see if the seeds of delusional altruism have begun to sprout. The key is to act — and act now.

Kris Putnam-Walkerly has effectively captured the insights, the encouragement, and the humor of her presentations honed over 20 years in advising grantmaking organizations around the world. *Delusional Altruism* is a sensible and pragmatic guide for philanthropists that points the way to transformational giving.

To learn more, visit <https://putnam-consulting.com/delusional-altruism>.

Steve Wilson is a member of The Grantmaking School faculty and senior advisor at the Council of Michigan Foundations. He previously served as president of both the Frey Foundation and the Ruth Mott Foundation, and has been a leader in strategic philanthropy and community engagement in the state of Michigan for decades.