

1+1=10: A new equation for social change

By Robby Rodriguez

Here's a story that helps me think about the possibilities of our work in a different way. For much of the last century and into this one, scientists have been trying to figure out something called the Theory of Everything. The theory of everything is what is supposed to tie together Einstein's general theory of relativity and quantum mechanics in order to explain the nature of space and time. Einstein's theory helps explain the world from afar, while quantum mechanics helps explain the world from up close. Both theories are not wrong. However, they contradict each other. That's where the theory of everything comes in—it is supposed to either make sense of the contradictions or make them disappear.

The leading theory that could be the theory of everything is string theory. But the problem with string theory is that there are billions and billions of permutations—it's like 10 to the 500th power. With current technology, it is going to take scientists forever to test all the possibilities. However, one young scientist in particular, a woman named Fotini Markopoulou, has developed what many scientists believe could be a major breakthrough in string theory that could lead to the theory of everything.

Markopoulou has put her life work into this particular strand. In an interview I read in *Scientific American* she was asked, What if you are wrong? Her response: "There are so many theories out there that aren't even wrong. To be wrong would be exciting."

To be wrong would be exciting.

I've thought a lot about that statement, especially about how we view failure in our work and how we might change that perspective. But her statement has also helped me think of us as the string theory scientists busily working on our breakthrough, hoping to be wrong, so that we are one step closer to being right.

I'd like to share with you some observations and ideas from the field that come as a result of being wrong.

The Social Change Organization Dilemma: "We know we can't do it all and yet what we do isn't enough."

What is this dilemma? It's that even if we executed our mission to perfection, it would not be enough to create the world we want to live in. So, some may say, then we have to do more. This may be true, many of us want to increase our capacity to get to scale, to do our work better, to have greater impact. But even if we increased our capacity it still wouldn't be enough to see the change we dream of. So, we come to the conclusion that we know that what we do isn't enough and yet we can't do it all. This is not news to many of us, and I know that many of us are working through this dilemma by forming coalitions, alliances, and partnerships, and that is good.

But by and large, those coalitions tend to be tactical and not strategic. That is to say, they have a short-term focus instead of a long-term outlook. These tactical coalitions that we build are important, but for us to break through, the solution to the dilemma that "We can't do it all and yet what we do isn't enough" must be at the forefront of our work. It is that dilemma that should be on the table as we make our strategic plans and work plans and proposals that help us to fulfill our missions. Our own organizational plans need to be addressing the dilemma. In part, that is what movement building is about.

Which leads me to my next point: we need a new equation for maximizing our potential.

A New Equation for Maximizing Our Potential: $1+1=10$

Right now, the way we work as a movement, most of the time, is $1+1=2$. But we can't afford to keep that pace. The world is in peril. We are at a crossroads. For us to live in the world we dream of, $1+1$ must equal 10. And it is already happening.

The US Social Forum took place a year ago in Atlanta, Georgia. More than 10,000 people working for social change from all over the United States and abroad gathered under the banner that in order for another world to be possible, another United States is necessary. Grassroots groups from all over the country came together in a spirit of cooperation and against all odds put together the largest gathering of social justice activists in a generation. And the possibilities for change that came out of this gathering were endless.

To quantify the outcomes of the Social Forum would take a supercomputer—the number too big to understand. Kind of like string theory: so many possible wrong answers and each of them exciting.

And just in the last year, since the US Social Forum, some amazing things have happened:

- The Right to the City Alliance—an alliance of base-building organizations from cities across the country as well as researchers, academics, lawyers, and other allies—have come together to build a united response to gentrification and the drastic changes imposed on our cities. Last month they organized a march on the US Conference of Mayors in Miami and held a convening demanding affordable housing, protection of public space, improving our schools and transportation systems, and discussing a people’s platform for a US urban agenda.
- Domestic Workers United—an organization of Caribbean, Latina, and African nannies, migrants, housekeepers, and elderly caregivers in New York, organizing for power, respect, and fair labor standards—just hosted the first National Domestic Workers Congress, which took place in June. For four days, more than one hundred nannies, housekeepers, and caregivers came together in New York City—one of the most important domestic-work capitals—to share their stories and to strategize solutions with regard to their collective mistreatment.

- Groups who participated in the Peoples' Freedom Caravan—a bus caravan on the way to the US Social Forum that took 400 people from the south and southwest to learn from and lend support for more than a dozen communities—just convened for the second time since last July in Albuquerque and have renewed their commitment to building racial unity and regional solidarity between the people of those two regions. On that caravan I saw $1+1=10$. We shared culture, values, interests, and needs. I saw the potential for a new southern strategy that defies conventional wisdom with a vision for change from the grassroots.
- And then there's the National Day Laborer network, the Pushback Alliance, the Building Movement Project, the Media Action Grassroots Network, the Grassroots Global Justice Alliance, and the list goes on and on.

I believe this is proof that when we come together in a different form of collaboration that puts our issue silos and institutions to the side for a moment, our work grows exponentially.

$1+1=10$ is also the equation of grassroots fundraising. Because $1 \text{ gift} + 1 \text{ gift} = 2 \text{ gifts}$, but two gifts also bring two donors, who have at least two friends each, and who themselves may make two or three gifts every year for years and years. And this is how many small nonprofits have become larger—by leveraging the power of their donors.

We know $1+1=10$ has to be the norm for how we do our work.

Abundance vs. Scarcity

When it comes to the challenges to recreate this world, if you listen to us, sometimes we can be pretty negative. Local groups don't have the resources of the national groups. Organizing groups don't get the financial support that policy groups get. The funding gap between environmental justice groups and conservation groups is enormous. And so on. We look at our challenges from a perspective of scarcity. So we compete with each other and we talk trash about each other and criticize one another. We don't have

a healthy respect for each other's work. Again, this type of thinking keeps us from working together more creatively, and it keeps the equation at $1+1=2$ or worse.

One way this relates to fundraising is that all this competition and talking trash about each other is about positioning ourselves as the best group, the most politically developed, the most effective in our work, the most connected to who's important in the world, etc, so that we can convince funders to give *us* the biggest grants and invite *us* to the important convenings, instead of thinking about how *all of us* need to be in this movement together.

What if we brought a perspective of abundance? If we did, we could honestly say, "We may not have much, but let's not underestimate what we do have." If you were to map out the social justice infrastructure, even just mapping the infrastructure represented by people in this room, you gotta say it's not too shabby. In this room alone we have years of experience in 36 states and four countries. We have dozens of board members and volunteers, and hundreds of development directors and executive directors. And when we added up the total amount of all the budgets of all the groups attending this conference, it came to \$431 million! Forget about not too shabby, that is damn impressive!

So when we come from a perspective of scarcity, we shortchange and underestimate ourselves. We have to focus on our potential, and there's tons of it.

This potential, reminds me of a T-shirt I saw this week while walking around San Francisco. It said, "So many men, so little time." I want to create a T-shirt that only people like us would understand: "So many givers, so little time." Why do we think there are so few people who will help us, when seven out of ten adults give away money? Far more Americans donate money than vote or go to a house of worship or volunteer. We have plenty of potential donors, we just need to get out there and ask them. I'm amazed when I think about how many people have not been given the chance to say no to me yet!

I want to briefly talk about another example, the Obama Campaign. (This is a nonpartisan event and we endorse no candidates, but it's a great example.) If you would have asked us four years ago whether the Democratic nominee was going to be a black man whose name is Barack Obama, we would have said no way. Ain't gonna happen. Not in this country. And look, it's happening. Not only is it happening, but he has inspired millions of people—millions of disenfranchised people—to participate in a movement for change and hope, with a motto of “Yes we can/Si se puede.” Sound familiar?

When I ask my friends how, in less than two years, could the Obama campaign accomplish what it has accomplished, many say, “If we had \$100 million, we could do that too.” Guess what? We have that. We have way more than that—just in this room! Not only do we have more money than that, we have the experience, the expertise, and the creativity to match what the Obama Campaign has assembled.

But it is trapped in the dilemma of “We know we can't do it all and what we are doing isn't enough.” It is trapped by the equation of $1+1=2$ that dominates our sector. It is trapped by the politics of scarcity over abundance. And it is trapped by the fear of being wrong.

Coming Together

When we aren't afraid to be wrong, and in fact when we say, “To be wrong would be exciting,” we can recognize the dilemma we are in—that we can't do it all and yet we know that what we do isn't enough. And when we recognize our dilemma we can start thinking about new forms of collaboration.

We can think about coming together to build power instead of thinking within our issue silos. We can think about collaborating with different types of groups—organizing

groups collaborating with service groups, artists with organizers, schools, and communities.

We can think of working across generations, so that we are not just thinking about replacing leadership, but transitioning it, expanding it, mentoring it, and sharing it in ways we never thought possible so we begin to aggregate all of our knowledge, expertise, and creativity. When we do this our impact is exponential. It is 10 to the 500th power. It becomes a number we can't pronounce.

End Note

We have to remember that the world we seek to create we have yet to experience. We've never lived in that world—it exists only in our hearts and in our dreams. The world we seek to create comes from our imagination. So it is important that we also create the opportunities to feel and hear and smell that world. To keep our mind's eye on the prize.

Here is a poem by Martín Espada that brings to life a place called the Republic of Poetry. It was a place he experienced after being a part of a poets' gathering on the 100th anniversary of Pablo Neruda's birth in Chile (and, by the way, everything in the poem actually happened). What does the Republic of Social Justice, that is funded from the grassroots, look and feel and smell like? I hope this poem and this conference help you imagine the world we are trying to create.

The Republic of Poetry by Martín Espada

In the republic of poetry,
a train full of poets
rolls south in the rain
as plum trees rock

and horses kick the air,
and village bands
parade down the aisle
with trumpets, with bowler hats,
followed by the president
of the republic,
shaking every hand.

In the republic of poetry,
monks print verses about the night
on boxes of monastery chocolate,
kitchens in restaurants
use odes for recipes
from eel to artichoke,
and poets eat for free.

In the republic of poetry,
poets read to the baboons
at the zoo, and all the primates,
poets and baboons alike, scream for joy.

In the republic of poetry,
poets rent a helicopter
to bombard the national palace
with poems on bookmarks,
and everyone in the courtyard
rushes to grab a poem
fluttering from the sky,
blinded by weeping.

In the republic of poetry,

the guard at the airport
will not allow you to leave the country
until you declaim a poem for her
and she says *Ah! Beautiful.*