

2010: An Odyssey of Your Making



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Instead of dreaming about sugar-plums, many nonprofit leaders will fall asleep tomorrow evening dreaming about better times for the organizations they serve. Let's face it, 2009 was a rough year for the vast majority of organizations that provide vital social services, deliver inspired cultural programs, and conduct research and advocacy to eradicate disease and protect and conserve natural resources and the environment. While most charitable organizations struggled, an unprecedented number of nonprofits were unable to survive declining public and private support.

I can recall many years when I lamented how quickly the year "flew by." If the events of 2009 have challenged your normally sunny disposition and hopeful outlook, I imagine you are already looking ahead to 2010. The challenges of the year that is drawing to a close have made many leaders eager to turn the page of their calendars and begin 2010... the sooner the better.

Earlier this week I chose to ignore my advancing years and join my daughter on an ice-skating rink. After a hard fall on the ice I decided to mothball my plans to enjoy the great outdoors and hunker down with a good book. A favorite book that came immediately to mind was [Too Soon Old, Too Late Smart: Thirty True Things You Need to Know Now](#), by Gordon Livingston. I found two of the "thirty things" especially meaningful the second time around. The first item was the statement, "We are what we do." In this section of the book the author explains, "We are always talking about what we want, what we intend. These are dreams and wishes and are of little value in changing our mood. We are not what we think, or what we say, or how we feel. We are what we do."

Reading this section of [Too Soon Old](#) reminded me that as leaders of nonprofits we must do more than dream about a better future. We must translate those dreams into practical steps that are within reach given our missions, resources, and culture. What single step could your organization take to improve the safety of your "brand," strengthen your approach to financial management, increase accountability by staff and volunteers, or minimize the likelihood of a claim or lawsuit by an injured or disgruntled stakeholder?

In the chapter exploring the relationship between happiness and risk taking Livingston writes, "Something is lost in our obsessive concern with safety and security—some spirit of adventure. Life is a gamble in which we don't get to deal the cards, but are nevertheless obligated to play them to the best of our ability."

I invite you to think about the *risks not taken* in your nonprofit. Ask, what bold risks might we take in 2010 that would advance our mission?

We've reached the end of what was a difficult year for most readers. It's time to take a hard look at what we will do in 2010. NCAA football coach Lou Holtz said, "When all is said and done, more is said than done." Let's pledge to say less, and do more. And while you're thinking about what you will do, why not consider taking at least one bold, calculated risk that will advance the mission of the organization you lead.

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feedback on this article and questions about the NRMC's resources at Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org.