



Laurie M. Tisch The Big Idea: Food Remarks

Good Afternoon

When I look around the room I see many "Baby Boomers" (myself included) so I trust that you will not mind when I take some liberties in referring to "our day" and hope that you will understand and recall some of the past references that I will make.

And, it is in that context, that I will take a few minutes to speak about my Big Idea which I have subtitled, Those Who Can, Should.

In the 1960's many of us were deeply involved in some very visible and often voluble social movements, specifically those having to do with the war in Vietnam and issues surrounding race and inequality.

We raised our voices and sometimes our fists and, to a great degree, we were heard. From that activism flowed significant changes in policy and practice: the Vietnam War ended and the Civil Rights Act and Affirmative Action were passed. Over time, old forms of discrimination ceased to be an acceptable practice in education, employment or housing for people of color or for women opening vast opportunities where before there were too few.

More than 40 years have passed during which time our generation got busy focusing on career, family and personal growth and fulfillment. Some of us remained active but, many of us



struggled with financial and time constraints that made it tough to focus on larger social issues in that same deeply personal way. My big idea Those Who Can, Should suggests that this has to change. It's time for us to get back in the game.

We are again, at the crossroads of a unique and special time in history as we witness the convergence of two transformational events. Except for perhaps the Gilded Age, we are in the midst of the largest transfer of wealth in United States history. And at the very same time our country is in the midst of the deepest economic downturn since the Great Depression. This plays out in a growing and increasingly glaring gap between the "haves" and "have nots". The disparities manifest themselves in health status, health insurance coverage and now, in access to healthy, nutritious food.

I am not an economist so I won't try to tell you why these crosscurrents have occurred at this time or in this way or what should be done about it. But I do know that this is truly a pivotal time in the history, culture and politics of our country.

It is a time when the old way of doing things is simply not working well enough. And when no single person or administration has all of the answers about how we can come together to repair our nation and our world, and rebuild our economy, and our communities hardest hit by extreme poverty, disadvantage and the many problems that accompany it.

As I see it, this is a time when living the expression "The Personal Is Political", has never been truer or more important as a standard to follow when conducting one's life.



We might consider doing something to help but are often overwhelmed by the 24 hour news feeds telling us about global warming, terrorism, historic rates or unemployment, corruption, food shortages internationally as well as in our very own cities, record foreclosures – the list goes on.

But then a different kind of story breaks through, and we get word about something amazing being done by someone who understands these enormous challenges but who is undaunted in their belief that they can make things better.

So what does all of that have to do with the The Aspen Health Forum and this Big Idea Food plenary?

Very simply, to me it means, as I said when I began, Those Who Can, Should.

It means that each one of us has to pay attention, take stock and figure out how to take advantage of this truly defining moment in which we find ourselves and our country. Sitting out and ignoring the hardships of so many is not an option or at least not a very good or productive one.

This is the time for heroic acts of generosity.



And while no single person can take on or solve all of the challenges we face, each of us has a unique ability to do more, like MANY of you who are in the audience today.

My Big Idea, is that people with means and wherewithal have an obligation and opportunity to step up and help with time, money and expertise. We can take on the challenges we face in the near term so our country, our citizens and communities can get through this difficult transition and come out stronger in the years ahead.

Those Who Can, Should is something I have always taken to heart and a principle I try to live by. But it has taken on greater urgency and importance. I started a foundation almost two years ago in response to my own conscience and values. And to make manifest my growing belief in my responsibility to make things better -- an expectation and obligation taught by my parents and one that I want to pass on to my daughters. I was disturbed by the growing inequality and disparities and I was fortunate to be able to use my resources to make a difference.

The first grant we made at the Laurie M. Tisch Illumination Fund was for something called NYC Green Carts, an effort to take the ubiquitous street- food culture of New York City (think Sabrett's hot dog guy with a cart on the street) and make it work in neighborhoods where there was little fresh, healthy food available (imagine fruits and vegetables instead of chips and soda).

At first I was skeptical. I didn't believe that in 2008 in New York City, a modern, cosmopolitan city, that there were people getting sick with heart disease, hypertension, diabetes and obesity among other diet-related illnesses, because they had little or no access to fresh produce or



other healthy foods. I was shocked to learn that grocery stores in low-income neighborhoods stock low-grade produce -- misshapen, bruised, and quick to spoil, at higher prices than I find in stores and on the streets in my own neighborhood.

But one trip to a grocery store in Morrisania in the South Bronx convinced me. Imagine feed-grade carrots lumpy, knobby and four inches in diameter; moldy cauliflower, bunches of wrinkled grapes, potatoes with buds ready to sprout. Disgusting, expensive and inedible.

It was clear that there had to be a way to make fresh produce available in neighborhoods where poor access and concentrations of diet-related illness were occurring. I was deeply troubled by the fact that there were people, in NYC who were hungry or unwell because of a lack of nutritious food. This wasn't the developing world, this was in my own city.

We joined forces with the Mayor's Office and Department of Health who crafted legislation and a new licensing process to create a unique kind of street vending permit for fresh fruits and vegetables in disadvantaged neighborhoods we rolled out NYC Green Carts. Quite simply, with private funding and government initiative we were able to create a new retail food supply chain and meet a major public health challenge at the same time!

Our grant to the Mayor's Fund includes: support for business development: up to 1,000 new vendor businesses and jobs and micro-credit that provides start-up capital to aspiring Green Cart vendors; advertising and community education; and marketing materials.



(You can hear more about NYC Green Carts at our panel on "A Healthier Bite of the Big Apple". Sunday at 9am).

Getting back to the Big Idea, Those Who Can, Should, my point is that each of us should take a look around. There are many opportunities to get involved.

There will always be someone we think is better suited, is in a better position or who knows more. But, why wait for someone else before taking action?

The key is to find your passion, whether it is food access and availability or healthy eating or exercise and fitness to reduce obesity -- there is no lack of opportunity -- find what you care about and then spring into action.
