



Tim Sarrantonio

Today we're honored to welcome Jen Shang. Jen is one of the leading voices in philanthropic psychology and co-author of Meaningful Philanthropy. Her research has fundamentally reshaped how we understand generosity, showing that giving is less about transaction and more about identity.

She's also been a major influence in my own life. I obtained a certificate from the Institute for Sustainable Philanthropy a few years ago. And she also had to deal with me crying in the middle of the United Lounge last year after we talked about my father's passing.

So so obviously, Jen, you know I'm excited that you're here. But I can say with absolute confidence that I would not be on the path toward a much happier and healthier life without her in it.

I'm so honored to connect her and Kerrin.

Kerrin Mitchell

Yes.

Tim Sarrantonio

Yeah, I know, right? Like this is this is so exciting to get...

Kerrin Mitchell

So I am. I know I really it been very what I read about you because unlike Tim, I hadn't known you um to date and he brought you into my like sphere to say this is someone that's so compelling. And I was blown away by how much it quickly influenced me, that sort of idea about, you know, how generosity, how to think about it. um So I'm just so happy. Welcome, Jen.

Jen Shang

Thank you. Thank you for having me here.

Kerrin Mitchell

Yeah. And for those that are not as familiar, again, I was a newbie to your work, but thrilled now to have that in my world. um Would you mind giving us a little bit of a quick background on philanthropic psychology, you know how you see it sort of influencing current frameworks, how it should be influencing traditional frameworks going forward? Love to hear a little bit more about some of your thesis.

Jen Shang

Yeah, absolutely happy to do that. um ah Philanthropic psychology is the scientific study of how people love is really as simple as that. There's a lot more. There's not a lot more to it than that's what it is. It's a social scientific discipline. It holds us accountable to define terms that we deem central to our practice.

Okay, thank you. ah Thank you for having me here today. um Philanthropic psychology really is as simple as the scientific study of how people love.

There is not that much more to that simple idea of just focused study on people's experience of love. It is a social scientific discipline. I hope it can help um help us hold us accountable to define terms that we deem central to our practice.



For me, the concept of identity, love, and psychological well-being are central to fundraising. These concepts were not properly defined, researched, taught, or practiced when I entered the field of fundraising some 20 years ago.

So I honestly don't see philanthropic psychology as a competing view or of anything, really, because really everything that I've been doing is something that hasn't been done. So really, it's just adding something that could potentially become quite complementary to whatever else everybody else is already doing. um so you know we but there are a lot of research that primarily focus on motivations for giving why people give how they give how we can help them give sustainably. These research are obviously valuable they are however, not about who people are, how they love and how we can help enhance people's psychological well-being when they love so when we define different terms to think about these concepts and to ask these questions, or simply just challenging ourselves to think slightly differently and to do things slightly differently.

And this is not to say that the study of other motivations for giving is not important and cultivating giving in and of itself is not worthy of pursuit. It simply is saying that philanthropic psychology brings to the table something a little different and something could potentially be quite complementary.

Tim Sarrantonio

I mean, obviously agree. And not only that, it's also helped influence how to approach problem solving in the sector in a really revolutionary way, in a lot of different ways. But I do want to... Look, I'm carrying the torch here, Jen. You know that. But especially because we're introducing this to a broader audience of fund foundations, funders, board members, technologists, right? Like, that's why I was so excited to bring you on here because I don't think a lot of times that audience understands or hears this approach and perspective. And so you've, you've written about giving, you know, not necessarily being an experience of sacrifice, but an affirmation of self.

And so when we shift thinking ah just away from donations and, and the idea of the gift, right, toward identity, what actually have you found changes that underlying understanding of just generosity, especially as it might apply, maybe you could kind of weave it in toward that foundation space a little bit more too, because I know that's a that's an area that we haven't explored, I say collectively here.

Jen Shang

Yeah, I was actually quite intrigued when you asked about foundations because we actually just completed a piece of research that is in collaboration with an online giving platform called Instrumentl. They help nonprofits find the foundations that are suited for them.

Kerrin Mitchell

Mm-hmm.

Jen Shang

So in that project, we spoke about 50 people last year who are from family foundations and their partners. This includes founders of family foundations, board members, executives, as well as program officers and fundraisers.

And I must say that as a philanthropic psychologist, every time I enter into a conversation, for me, I'm always interested in identity, like love and psychological well-being. So whenever people engage in conversation with me, they always come and engage with me on those three pillar concepts.

So I could potentially have a very biased or like a particular maybe considered narrow perspective to family foundations. But really the first thing I would say is that if we were to understand foundations in this way, then the first thing that we notice is that a foundation is made of many different people.

They bring their own background into their professional roles. So when we ask them about their own sense of who they are as an individual, we get to understand their personal beliefs, values, professional preferences.



We're going to understand how they live their family and identities to be a grandparents, a parent, a son, a daughter, a sibling, alongside of how they practice their profession.

Kerrin Mitchell

Mm-hmm.

Jen Shang

I understand I'm in this sense in a very privileged position that I'm able to ask that person as a just a neutral party that I am just interested in how they live their lives, not necessarily with particular interest for funding in those conversations.

So what I found is the degree to which people can live their life authentically is different in different philanthropic environments. How coherent a collective people can live out their authentic self, again, is different because of the environment that they're in.

So what we found really um intriguing to me is how an environment can facilitate the discovery and the growth of someone's authentic self.

Kerrin Mitchell

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Jen Shang

But again, we only get to see that side of family foundation if we ask those questions. Because those questions are not commonly asked strategy or even impact questions, we may often have a blind spot of what that side of people might be. And I think for me, simply surfacing them in conversations like the one we're having today might be in and of itself enough or valuable

Kerrin Mitchell

It's really interesting because you you think about today, we think about today, and we're really in this almost relational era, right, in which um essentially people are building, they're bonding, they're bridging, they're weaving, whatever term you want to use around certain ideas, people, structures, you know, things they they care about. If authenticity is now at a forefront and opaque sort of, you know, strategies aren't, aren't having to sit behind political lines or aisles. I mean, where can you see, or how have you seen this change the results of ah potentially how grants are made?

And Tim, I think you understand what I'm saying. I'm feeling like I'm doing like a very funny career in roundabout way.

Tim Sarrantonio

Well, yeah, because what I think you're almost –

Kerrin Mitchell

I'm like excited about this idea of relational.

Tim Sarrantonio

You're talking about professional masking in a way.

11:53.56



Kerrin Mitchell

Yeah. Right.

Tim Sarrantonio

And and yeah, because if there's a pressure in the United States to remove certain language about equity, for instance, and you've long been an organization that has valued equity –

Kerrin Mitchell

So, right. Right. Right.

Tim Sarrantonio

How do we navigate that?

Kerrin Mitchell

Right.

Tim Sarrantonio

And we don't, and and especially, Jen, because a lot of the work that you do is on individuals and things of that nature.

Kerrin Mitchell

There you go.

Tim Sarrantonio

We don't want to draw too many conclusions about organizational psychology versus individual psychology.

Kerrin Mitchell

Right,

Tim Sarrantonio

So we're putting professional barriers in our sandbox here.

Kerrin Mitchell

Right.

Tim Sarrantonio

But I do think that the concept of masking almost here, like I think France Fanon, Almost right. Like where, where somebody walks into a room and they have to wear a different mask in order to navigate that situation.

Kerrin Mitchell

No, it's real. And that's exactly it. Tim, thank you for translating Corinne-isms. You translate Corinne very well. But no, it's exactly that.



Tim Sarrantonio

Thank you.

Kerrin Mitchell

How do we, how do we, where have you seen this show up where people by asking questions differently around identity instead of strategy, have you seen those results come forward? Have you seen big changes occur or, you know, where, where does this sort of come into play in your, in your, um, studies and and in your, your theories?

Jen Shang

I mean, for me, I think um because of the way I ask questions, and usually I only have about 45 minutes with people, I get to see a lot of behind the scenes kind of thinking that people have... before they get to any strategies or any impact statement. So for me, the way I think about how we tell our stories and um how we communicate or build a relationship in any given circumstances, they all start from how we define our sense of who we are as a collective.

Right, so from the perspective of the board themselves, they ask themselves, who are our board? Do we have expert voices from the community representing themselves in the board?

Can we make sure that their wishes and hopes are the wishes of the hopes of the foundation from the very boardroom that granting decisions will be made?

And this could happen in a sense where family foundation boards engage community members who have obtained expertise. But at the same time, it can manifest itself in founding family members, getting degrees in social works, clinical psychology, primary school education, They become experts from their own angle. So when they speak, they don't necessarily speak from the perspective of the funders as much as professionals who practice like everybody else in that field that they want to make a difference in.

So for me, that almost in a way, unspoken way of transforming who our collective self is, is a much more powerful way of driving change than attempting to engage conversations where we overtly state our values, if that makes sense.

Tim Sarrantonio

Well, what's really fascinating about that is... almost like it kind of really syncs up with how I've tried to think about the world too, in terms of like, you have to experience it, right? Like we have at least in, in you know, depending on who you ask one life, but, ah but at least for what I know, this is what we have. And so for me, even when I was first entering the nonprofit sector back in 2008, cause that was a very jarring identity shift. And so now I have the tools to think about it because of you, in all honesty, in a lot of different ways.

Jen Shang

Thank you.

Tim Sarrantonio

Back then, I didn't have that. And I thought I was gonna be an academic. I'm a failed academic. That's how I define my identity now is that I didn't go down that path. So when my father flew to Chicago and said, you got to get a job, bro.

We're not paying your student loans anymore. I'm sorry that you didn't get into your PhD programs to study labor history with 13 other people in the middle of a cornfield in Illinois, but trying to get a job. And so that identity shifted not because of necessarily want and desire, but of economic necessity. And I think a lot of people end up moving into different spaces and jobs and things like that, because at least a third of our life could be defined solely by work in a lot of different ways.



But the nonprofit sector in particular has much more of a siren call to people who want to do good and change the world and things about that. But especially in the United States with 97% of those organizations who end up hiring these people making under \$5 million. Dollars. Most of them are very small nonprofits. There's a power imbalance here. And it makes people sometimes question their own identity of, well, I want to do good, but boy, this feels awful. to actually make the sausage happen.

So if we step back and we even think about the role that foundations have and in helping kind of dictate that, because what I've started to see is the ones who are really powerful about helping us navigate this environment are the ones who understand their identity in a very strong way. So very similar to what you were talking about. But let's even get down into, and I'll land the plane here in a moment.

Because ultimately, this is about moral identity in a lot of different ways. And so I'd love to get your thoughts on how philanthropic power gets exercised in moral identity conversations and processing. And how do we guard against that becoming something that is solely self-protection rather than genuine contribution? The love, basically. How do we get that engine of love going?

Jen Shang

I think um there are a lot of ways that we can state the answer to this question in an overt and active way in the sense that, oh, what can we do? What can we do to build things? What can we do to break down barriers? What can we do to make progress?

Here is just a thought in the attitude of curiosity. What if the way we think about it, instead of to say, let's build, let's progress, let's be active, we say, let's sit back, let's listen, and let's give people space. Because the only thing that I have learned that can't be forced is genuine love. It can't be bought. It can't be made. It can't be persuaded. It can't be taught. It can't be educated. People either want to love or they don't want to love.

And so I think. to have the patience to give people the benefit of doubt, to say, I'm here, I'm with you. I'm here with you when you love, and I'm here with you when you don't love. But I am here with you, and I love you whether you love or not. I just want to be with you.

Kerrin Mitchell

Tim, you're, you guys can't see Tim smiling, but Tim's smiling in the video. Tim, what's going on for you right now?

Tim Sarrantonio

Well, it's it's it's it's because I also reflect on on how deep that answer is, understanding your definition of love, Jen, because it is so layered and and fluid in a lot of different ways, but still anchored in that purity of purity because people love in different ways and they love things in different ways and they love different people in different ways. And um and I think that they hear, we might hear that word in the nonprofit sector and it's and it's almost an extraction form.

That's my concern is that the filter that we've created for things that you talk about, it it automatically gets mucked up in a lot of different ways because of things we cannot control in the nonprofit sector. Definitions of love. Love is blind.

Love on the spectrum, right? Like all of these different things that from a pop culture standpoint, and I'm way going off script as usual, Kerrin, but like,

Kerrin Mitchell

No, no, no. I mean, it's interesting what you're saying though, but here's, here's the question mark that, that, that I'm, I'm sort getting that I'm like noodling on is around, you know, love is so pure



Tim Sarrantonio

Yeah.

Kerrin Mitchell

And then you bring in funding and fundraising and fund dynamics and power dynamics of who's giving you money. And it changes love sometimes, right? Like, does it change?

Jen Shang

Thank you.

Kerrin Mitchell

I mean, the reason people give is for love, but does it ever feel like when a foundation or an institution gives that it creates obligations or creates structures that make that harder?

And while it is coming from a place of that care, that love, that part where it's honoring the identity of who they are, how money sort of can mess things up sometimes. So I'm wondering, like with both of your experiences, like, does that change anything?

And that's where my head went, is like, love is so wonderful. And giving from a personal perspective, yes, but when you bring it into an institution or one where obligations come into play, does that change anything? And I realize I'm kind of going off script too, just curious.

Tim Sarrantonio

Well, and this is how I think we can get it rooted back because what you're asking and talking about, Kerrin, does remind me of some of the conversations, Jen, in meaningful philanthropy.

Kerrin Mitchell

Right.

Tim Sarrantonio

So I know it's not necessarily foundations, but I think we can draw some lessons out of out of what the interviews that you did with some of these individuals, too.

Jen Shang

Thank you.

Kerrin Mitchell

No, yeah, yeah. I'm curious. Like it's such an interesting dynamic that gets added on top of what I think is meant to be love, caring, coexistence and community. And I'm wondering how to preserve that love, that dignity, that concept. um So it's a little bit of a vague question so much as just to say in your interviews, conversations, how did you see or did you see, maybe you didn't see a big difference occur. And I'm making up that money causes problems. But I'm curious what you think of that.

Jen Shang

I mean, I'll go back to the disclosure I made about the way I interact with people, which is that I come in wanting to find the most beautiful thing that people do.



Kerrin Mitchell

Hmm.

Jen Shang

Their most beautiful sense of who they are. So the way I ask questions most often get people to tell me, wow, this is my most beloved experience in philanthropy. And for some of those sharings, they would say, you know, here there's the family foundation here. In every interactions I have with them, they make me feel seen and heard and known and loved. And this is not just my program officer. You know, this is everyone that I've met in that foundation.

Kerrin Mitchell

Yeah.

Jen Shang

You know, so is it possible for foundations to live pure love with money?

Kerrin Mitchell

Yeah.

Jen Shang

I think it is possible. Is it possible for foundations to genuinely help people to discover or even curate their own sense of authentic self? Yes, absolutely. I've heard stories of how foundations can help individuals do that. Can foundations genuinely grown to be part of a community who is fighting some of the toughest social problems?

Yes, the stories there are practically unending. So why in the presence of all these beautiful stories, we still feel like we're overwhelmed by the power associated with money instead of the love associated with money? That is a question I genuinely don't have an answer for.

Because I've seen pure love and I see pure love with money, right? So do I also see money without love? Absolutely, I do. But then if we go back to I'm here with you and I'm here loving you, whether you love or not, then again, that doesn't change much what I see, if that makes sense.

Tim Sarrantonio

You know what this does remind me of, taking me back maybe to week one or two, perhaps, of the Certificate in Philanthropic Psychology. But also in Meaningful Philanthropy, you talked about some folks who had pretty sizable wealth, but they also then carried guilt with it. So maybe we could talk a bit about what psychology points to on navigating concepts of guilt, shame, et cetera, because that was always very helpful to me early on to helping address exactly what we're talking about here too. Because I think that's what's carried in a lot of people there, especially fundraisers. They feel guilty for asking people for money, for instance. And then you also have it on the philanthropic side, on the reciprocity of somebody who wants to give. So but kind of a general open-ended exploration of guilt and shame

Jen Shang

I think it is a very worthwhile journey for an individual to go on. to allow themselves to curate their identities out of guilt and shame, whether it is something someone with wealth or someone raised money. And I find the best way to navigate that area is by clearly defining our sense of who we are, who are the people we genuinely care about, who are the people we want to use our wealth to help. How we can best use our wealth to help others for their own well-being, not our own. You know, like all these questions that people can explore.



But then as a result of this, once they gain clarity and confidence in their own narrative, what I would predict that what they will find is instead of the diminished diminishing of their sense of ta self, they gain They gain a higher level of gratitude and appreciation for their sense of who they are because they can see the beauty in their lives. They can see, look, I genuinely care about these people. I have done everything absolutely i can do for these people.

And they tell me they feel loved, they feel seen, they feel known, and they feel heard when they experience my philanthropy. So when someone can reach that kind of state, I personally don't know where else they can go. But it could be that I haven't got there yet.

Tim Sarrantonio

So... This is where I get to be a bit selfish because I could talk about the influence you've had on me and the things that you've empowered me with because I want to use this as an opportunity to help others understand that because for me, um especially about a year ago, my father had passed away in January. And I started also experiencing a different type of feeling in my work. One that I hadn't experienced from a sense of worth in a long time.

Because sometimes working at a tech company can be a bit of a bummer. And so I started not Fluxx., by the way, but um but the practical realities are that there was a lot of shaking of identity happening last year.

I am convinced that part of the reasons that I didn't relapse into my alcoholism, that I was able to be more connected to my wife, my children, are because you helped point out the tools to take. And I think that's an important distinction here because sometimes you could talk to folks in pseudo-psychology and they're like, I have all the answers. And you are not that type of person. You are almost, I'm going to give you the garden to explore. And that's what I feel like you've been able to do for me. But I don't think I'd do it justice to explain how you think about creating that garden, so to speak. I can only tell you my specific walk around it.

Jen Shang

Thank you.

Tim Sarrantonio

So I'd love, in your words, how are you developing tools, resources, and spaces for people to actually explore their identity and take this into their own work and their own ways? Because you've done it for me, but it's been, you've grown and you've been doing so many other things. So I want to hear about it from you, what you're working on and how people can take advantage of that.

Jen Shang

Absolutely. I think if I were to speak from a professional perspective, um the concept of identity, love and psychological well-being, they are... concepts that emerged out of 15 years of research. But I didn't start with just three concepts. I started with 500 to see how they drive giving. And then I learned from my data, my donors, my fundraisers, my interviews that these three They keep coming back. They keep coming back. They come back in mass donors, in major donors. They come back in new donors, in returning donors. They come back in predicting behavior intentions as well actual behavior, especially in retention. So I was convinced by my data that these are the most important identities.

And so that's the first thing to say, which is this is a research exploration to come to these concepts. And then what I also learned is that using these concepts to care for donors and raise money is not necessarily intuitive for everyone. And if people have not had an interest in psychology, it might take a while for them to get used to them. That's why we develop our four week, four week / eight week type courses where people can be exposed to the concept in a reasonably safe environment, practice in a lot of examples, take them away and choose what to do with them, if anything, and then sit with them.



And the most successful applications of the concepts that I've heard from people, they have all applied the concepts not only to their fundraising, but their personal lives. They bring it to the dinner table, they bring it to their conversation with their family, with their children. with themselves and it helps people through um like yourself Tim, grieve and for other people they help them through career transitions, challenges in their organizations, year-end stress. like When people apply these concepts to themselves and their own teams, they experience the difference that these concepts can make for themselves.

And because they have experienced it with this benefit, they then help donors experience the same thing. It becomes authentic for them. So that is how I would say professionally how these concepts and these educational environments can help people.

But from a personal perspective, when I apply these concepts, I have to say that the hardest lesson for me to learn in applying them is to first and foremost come to the realization that, Jen, you can't help everyone. And these concepts are not for everyone.

Tim Sarrantonio

I mean, that's lovely. And that's like a really great spot to kind of help encapsulate all the different things that I know that you've taught me that I know that Kerrin has enjoyed listening to. Is there anything that we haven't asked you that you wanted to make sure that, that people will explore or think about heading into 2026. And then I know Kerrin is going to help us have a little fun with our rapid fire game at the end here, but want to give you a little bit of spot to wander.

Jen Shang

I think it's great that you end this kind of podcast with game. You know, with something fun that is for more yeah for no other purpose but to just give people something fun to end the day with.

Kerrin Mitchell

Let's do it.

Fun. I love a good, I mean, I'm always here for fun. I root for fun every time.

Tim Sarrantonio

I like fun, obviously, given what I want to do with my life now, but

Kerrin Mitchell

Yes. So here's how we rock and roll.

Okay. So here we go. My go-to move when I need to instantly boost my mood is

Jen Shang

Think about something really nice I can say about other people.

Kerrin Mitchell

There you go. Nice. I like that. The most unexpectedly valuable lesson I've learned recently is.

Jen Shang

Beauty exists in the most unexpected places. So just be ready for it.

Kerrin Mitchell



Yeah. All right. Last one. If my friends had to describe me in one surprising word, it would be.

Jen Shang

Calm.

Kerrin Mitchell

Oh, there you go. I like this. One day, Tim, I'm going to flip this on you make you do it because I haven't. We haven't done this one yet. Anyway, um...

Tim Sarrantonio

Yeah, the game changes set almost every episode.

Kerrin Mitchell

The game changes every season. I know I don't get to play these games with you. We just need to have like one podcast where I just ask you all my annoying questions.

Tim Sarrantonio

It's just us going back and forth.

Kerrin Mitchell

Yes, I'm here for it. Thank you so much, Jen. That was wonderful. Obviously, you know, folks can learn more about you and your work. Where should they go on the, which website, which tools, which resources would you like them to go to learn more about you?

Jen Shang

[Institute for Sustainable Philanthropy](#). They can type it in and they can find us. Everything we do is right there.