

Ben Cameron

Keynote Speech – Transcript

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I am delighted and honored to be back among you all, several years after attending your gathering in Portland, OR. You've chosen yet another glorious city in which to convene—a place especially welcome to those of us enduring the chilly climes of winter in other parts of the country, and I hope your time here is fruitful and joyous.

I stand before you today, a cultural omnivore—a category that transcends and, per its name, consumes the easier category of classical music fan, opera aficionado or theatre addict. Indeed, an omnivore's week might consist of an evening or two at the theatre (perhaps including both Samuel Beckett and a Broadway musical), another at modern dance or opera, 8-10 hours listening to radio or attached to an iPod (an iPod which may house Wagner and Mozart, Rodgers and Hart, gospel rap artist Kirk Franklin, country singer Josh Turner and pop diva Christina Aguilera, among others), several hours of pleasure reading (often concurrently with iPod time and embracing high literature, pulp fiction and historical nonfiction alike), and a heavy dose of television—South Park, Law and Order SVU, Project Runway and Judge Judy (the cases are real, the people are real, the rulings are final). Now I love Judge Judy and will fight any attempt to take her away from me—and indeed, that theoretical week was actually my real week. Yet I believe it is a particular part of that week that is our focus here today—that time dedicated to artists and art, a domain that implies more than expression or creativity alone.

Arts exists in a variety of settings to be sure—in the opera house but on television as well, in the for profit and the not for profit alike—and spans the gamut of expression—from the easily accessible to the obscure and remote, from the tragic to the comic, and more. And while the best art is always engaging and often entertaining, I believe we look

to art to do more than simply amuse: we look to the artist to think more deeply, feel more deeply, express more deeply and to lead us more deeply into unexplored terrain where we have yet to wander. The arts invite us to access, not the easiest or most facile parts of ourselves, but the best parts, the deepest parts, the deepest emotions, the most generous impulses, and yet at times the most urgent fears. “When you meet your life in a great poem, it becomes expanded, extended, clarified, magnified, deepened in color, deepened in feeling,” says poet Jane Hirschfield. “Aren’t we enlarged by the scale of what we are able to desire?” writes poet Mark Doty—a question that invites the reverse: aren’t we diminished by the scale of the easy with which we content ourselves? In the arts, we not only ask for more: we demand more—more of the artist, more of one another, more of ourselves—and it is the arts that I have the honor of serving in my current position.

At the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, our late benefactress charged us to care for artists-- specifically for actors, dancers and musicians—a directive that has led us to support for artists in contemporary dance, jazz and theatre, and the organizations who nurture, present and/or produce them—a reflection of Doris Duke’s personal arts passions.

As we entered our tenth year of grantmaking in 2007, we convened a series of national conversations in each of these fields in order to understand the issues each faced. What we heard was a level of stress and turmoil unlike any I have seen in my 30 years in the performing arts.

These conversations, involving more than 700 participants in 22 meetings held in 14 cities during 2006, were fascinating, and raised three types of issues:

- chronic issues, like artist compensation and organizational under-capitalization, urgent issues to be sure and ones we need to address, but ones we heard thirty years ago or more;
- idiosyncratic issues, pressing for one field but not for others—issues around career transition for dancers, which had no counterpart in jazz, for example, or issues around text translation in theatre, which had no counterpart in dance;

- and four major issues that cut across disciplines, that resonated in every field and that seem especially pressing to this moment we are facing today—issues that were not on the proverbial front burner a decade ago, if indeed they existed at all, but that warrant our most fervent attention if we wish to survive.

Such issues included concerns about the increasing dysfunctionality of the 501(c)3 model—the breakdown of old fundraising strategies, the difficulties of managing boards, and the hunger for new models, as arts leaders, increasingly overwhelmed by the time and effort necessary for fundraising, board cultivation, advocacy and the like, asked “Isn’t there another way for us to finance and support the work we are called to do?”

We heard concern about an impending generational transfer of leadership, as a generation of founders retire or depart. And while much of the concern was around where we might find their successors—especially given different expectations from young people around higher compensation, shorter hours, in essence less patience for the sacrificed lives of dignity and the financial masochism that were the givens for so many in my own generation—this conversation brought to my ears, at least, a new strand of the conversation: the unwillingness of emerging leaders to be mere custodians of organizations they inherit. “There are plenty of us eager to give ourselves to the arts.” they said, “But unless we are given the same authority to reinvent and reshape organizations as you yourselves were given, we are not interested.”—a point of view that raises far more questions about an organization’s capacity for change than about the identity of an heir apparent.

We heard about an erosion of audiences—declining rates in subscriptions renewals, the difficulties in attracting single ticket buyers, the collapse in the window of social planning—the unspoken aftermath of 9/11 when seemingly overnight ticket buyers seemed to commit, not two weeks in advance, but more typically 24-hours or (if lucky) 48 hours before performance—a disorienting shift that continues to plague marketing departments and box office staffs who still struggle to understand the new social rhythm and interpret accurately on a Tuesday the prospects for the sparsely sold upcoming

Saturday performance. Moreover, the ever-accelerating schedule of our lives is producing a populace characterized by unprecedented exhaustion and over-scheduling, a time in which (according to a Yankelovich poll) half of consumers across all income levels say that lack of time is a bigger problem than lack of money, when 42% of men and 55% of women say they are too tired to do the things they want to do and when the #1 answer about most eagerly anticipated use of a free evening is no longer socializing, dating or attending a special event but “a good night’s sleep.” Not surprisingly, in every field, we heard concerns that, after decades of growth, our audiences are shrinking, and that our own financial needs, in tandem with negative shifts in funding, mean escalating ticket prices that threaten to place attendance beyond the reach of many in our communities that we wish to serve.

And, perhaps most significantly, we heard the struggle to understand more fully the impact of technology on the performing arts—the area that especially for an over-50, cranky Luddite like me can be the most perplexing, the most astounding of all. The potential of technology as a marketing device is, if anything, too effective: in trying to attract the attention of potential ticket buyers, we now compete with the at least 3,000 different marketing messages a typical American sees every day, according to Peter Whybrow in his book *AMERICAN MANIA: WHEN MORE IS NOT ENOUGH*. In fact, technology has emerged as our biggest competitor for leisure time: Gen X-ers spend 20.7 hours every week on television and online combined. Gen Y-ers spend even more—22.8 hours—with the majority on line and growing, and last year, computer gaming outsold movie and music recordings combined. According to Google CEO Eric Schmidt, a new blog is being created every second of every day. Most profoundly, perhaps, technology is altering the basic assumptions of consumption: thanks to the web, we believe we can get whatever we want, whenever we want it, customized to fit our personal needs. We can shop at 8 at night, 3 in the morning, expectations of customization and personalization that live performing arts organizations—a field that demands set curtain times, specific geographic venues and the attendant inconveniences of travel, parking, forced scheduling etc.--cannot meet. In an age when young people especially can get their culture on demand through You Tube and iTunes any time they want it and at little

or no apparent cost, we must ask what will it mean in the future when we ask someone to pay \$100 for a theatre ticket when that customer has become accustomed to downloading on the internet for free or at most for a mere 99 cents a song?

In trying to keep pace with these changing times, we've launched websites, expanded our box offices to embrace on-line ticketing, moved from hard tickets to print your own, abandoned newsletters in favor of email blasts. With late dawning awareness, we have come to recognize the internet—not as a broadcast and marketing space, but as a social space—its true purpose—and we have moved beyond our own websites to My Space to Facebook to Second Life—yet nothing we do seems to be quite hip enough, quite fast enough and or quite adequately resourced.

We are, in short, in a time of seismic change, and the future looks uncertain and mystifying in ways that it has never quite looked before. As Adrienne Rich wrote in her poem, "The Dream of a Common Language XIII," "We're out in a country that has no language, no laws.... Whatever we do together is pure invention. The maps they gave us were out of date by years..."

Aren't you glad you invited me here to brighten your day?

Especially for a quasi-Luddite like me, the world of technology has loomed like a dark shadow on the horizon, mysterious, foreboding, threatening. Two years ago, I decided to plunge myself into the belly of the proverbial beast and attended Pop Tech, an annual conference in Camden ME for 500 high tech folks, bringing them together to listen to—and interact with—high level thinkers of every stripe and description. Contrary to my expectations, this was not a conference designed to talk about startups or financing: it was—and is—a conference where we listened to world thinkers about the human brain. Global warming. International warfare and terrorism. AIDS research. And more.

While the traditional arts conference is characterized by the furrowed brow, the deep thought, the deep intake of breath and the constant nodding of heads, PopTech is characterized by euphoria, celebration, exhilaration.

While arts conferences are often notable for the air of earnest concern—gatherings where we seek refuge with comparably beleaguered colleagues behind closed doors, PopTech is a festive gathering of celebration, where strangers are sought for provocation, and where absolute transparency reigns—far from closing the door, the entire conference—start to finish—was broadcast live through webcasting, and every Q and A included questions from online observers.

And while arts conferences are dominated increasingly by prospects for survival—how will we compete in a market-driven world? How will we keep ourselves on the funding agenda? What will it take to raise an endowment?—the issue of survivability was never raised at PopTech. The assumption is that many will not—and perhaps should not—survive. Instead, here the issues were not how we will survive financially, but how we will change the world. How we will solve global warming. How we will solve AIDS. How we will leave the world a healthier, ecologically balanced, less poverty ridden place. Indeed, the unspoken agenda was that there is nothing that we cannot do, and in the world of high tech, truly anything is possible.

You might call this folly of youth—and indeed, many of the participants are young.

You may call it hubris.

But what became clear to me is that within this world of infinite possibilities, there are new possibilities for us in the arts.

Chris Anderson, editor of Wired magazine and author of *The Long Tail*—a book you must read if you haven't already—sees one consequence of technology as the unleashing of a veritable tsunami of creative artistic energy. With the invention and now

affordability of cell phones, mini cams, computer software and more, he notes, the means of artistic production have been democratized. In the 1930's if you wanted to make a movie, you had to work for Warner Brothers or RKO, for who could afford a movie camera, studio space, lights, editing equipment and more? Now who among us does not know a 14 year old hard at work on her second, third or fourth film?

Furthermore, the means of artistic distribution have been democratized. Warner Brothers and RKO again played this role in the 1930's, but today anyone can release anything on line, through blogs, through YouTube and more.

This double impact is occasioning a massive redefinition of authorship and or the cultural market. Today, everyone is a potential author. We are seeing the emergence of a class of amateurs doing work at a professional level—a group dubbed elsewhere as Pro Ams—a group whose work populates You Tube, independent film festivals, dance competitions and more. And knowing that we graduate 400,000 MFA's in this country every year—a number far too high for the arts industry to absorb—this highly skilled, professionally capably yet avocationally driven artistic pool is destined to increase—a time predicted perhaps by our Secretary of State, a trained concert pianist who continues to play chamber music with professional musicians, even as her career has called her elsewhere. (This will be the only even vaguely kind thing you'll ever hear me say about her.)

In essence, we are facing a realignment of cultural expression and communication—a realignment that is shaking the newspaper and television industries, the publishing and book industries, and (in an indication of what may be yet to come for many of us) has left the recorded music industry largely in disarray. In this shifting landscape, the increasing challenge and opportunity for us in the arts world lies in this new marketplace defined by participation--an economy where value will no longer be consumed but where value will be co-created. Let me say that again: in the future, value will no longer be consumed. Value will be co-created.

Nothing exemplifies this better than the ubiquitous Mp3 player. Anyone know how many of these different MP3 players are on the market roughly? Roughly? A couple of hundred? According to futurist Andrew Zolli in his keynote to Arts Presenters in January 2007, there were 11,292 different models on the market—a figure that makes most people gasp. For most of us, if I say MP3, you have one thought: I-Pod. I-Pod. Not because it's the cheapest. It's not. Not because it has the biggest memory space. It doesn't. Not because it's the easiest to download. It's not. Not because it has the longest battery power. It doesn't. Not because it has the best sound reproduction. It doesn't. I-Pod seized the market because they alone emphasized I-Pod as part of an exchange - of creating an experience. You didn't buy an iPod merely to download, you bought an iPod to create personally curated playlists of your favorites, to download Podcasts by others and potentially to create podcasts of your own, to enter a world where you the consumer can become the creator as well. And through that emphasis, iPod cornered the market.

We already see the power of consumer participation in other industries. The monolithic power of the restaurant critic has been shattered by Zagat where the collective consumer passes judgment and defines a restaurant value. “Dancing with the Stars,” “So You Think You Can Dance,” “American Idol”—all are predicated on the active involvement of the consumer.

This sense of co-creation is an invitation—an invitation to dismantle irrelevant (not germane) distinctions between professional and amateur, a status once exalted as more precious than professionalism, capturing as it does in its etymological roots the love of practice. This is an invitation to dismantle arts education programs and replace them with community engagement programs. This is an invitation to seeing our mission, not merely in creating products to be consumed, but in offering experiences that will serve as springboards to our audience's own creativity—to nurture what Henry Jenkins calls a Convergence Culture, utilizing multi-platform narrative and marketing, inviting everyday people to reassert their right to actively contribute to their culture, channeling creative

energies to come together. This is a call to a field to see ourselves, not as presenters, perhaps, but as activators, engagers, harvesters of creative energy.

Can we make this shift? And indeed, what are we to do?

I take to heart the words of two very different thinkers. Abraham Lincoln, who said, “The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. As our case is new, so must we think anew and act anew.”

And Wayne Gretzky (and when was the last time you heard Abe Lincoln and Wayne Gretzky quoted in the same speech), who, when asked why he was such a great hockey player, said, “I skate to where the puck will be.”

Regardless of the stress of the present, regardless of the uncertainties, how can we—individually and as a community—shift from the reactive to the proactive? How can we skate, as it were, to where the puck will be?

We must begin by asking, why must we exist today? Because we have a building is not enough. Because we have a history and awards and a reputation is not enough. What is it in the world—in an external world—that mandates the flourishing of the arts in our communities today?

On the one hand, this invites groups to be value specific about what we do. Indeed, every arts organization needs to be able to answer three questions:

- 1) What is the value my organization brings to my community?
- 2) Harder; What is the value my organization alone brings or brings better than anyone else? Second rate or duplicated value will not stand for long in this economy.
- 3) Hardest: How would my community be damaged if we closed our doors and went away tomorrow?

Even these questions can be a trap, filtering our communities through our organizations. Too often we try to serve orchestras and forget that we are really called to serve symphonic music; we try to fix theatre companies without the larger lens of examining the connection between dramatic art and our communities. Perhaps the better sequence of questions—and the scarier set—would be:

- 1) What is the value of dance for my community?
- 2) What is the value dance alone has or that dance fulfills better than anything else?
- 3) How would my community be damaged if it were abandoned by dance tomorrow?
- 4) And how might my organization be optimally structured, poised and focused to be my community's best conduit to dance?—a question that invites us not to jettison all we do, but to keep what is most central and viable, to expand to embrace the new possibilities we may not have seen, and to discard past behaviors that do not and will not serve us in the future.

For many, this work has already begun. Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago has reoriented itself from its actor-ensemble roots, driven by collective desire of which roles they would like to undertake, to a new driving purpose, seeing themselves as a center for ongoing civic dialogue. The major symphony in Tennessee is in the midst of asking wrenching questions, shifting from a concert orientation to a desire to be the primary conduit of symphonic music that occasionally manifests itself in the concert format. And in the most visible example of all, the Metropolitan Opera is now broadcasting live performance into movie theatres across the nation—and soon around the world—a shift in multi-platform broadcasting that keeps at the core the best asset the Met has always had: live production of big scale opera with big star names. The core assets of the company are not changing: the delivery mechanism, however, is undergoing significant change that reverberates across the organization in programmatic change (note especially the reformatting of broadcast and intermission feature formats), change in capital structure and change in organizational culture, taking a risk-averse culture to a risk-receptive one—a increasingly using the artist—whether through open rehearsal, artist blog or using Renee Fleming herself to conduct interviews during the intermission

features—as the primary bridge, holding the door open to an audience anxious to engage. Indeed, the artist is perhaps our most critical and under-utilized ambassador.

This is scary terrain—and I think people frequently hear in this a disregard for the past, a charge to reject our past—a past which we still love, which many of our patrons still love, which indeed still provides meaningful, deep connection to people’s lives.

So let me be clear: I am not arguing for rejection of all we have done before. I am arguing for strategic innovation and adaptation where possible. And I fully am aware that this is an invitation to risk—a word I use sparingly, knowing that many will equate it with irresponsibility. But what I mean here is risk—reaching toward the unknown, pushing past our comfort zones, not haphazardly but armed with our best instincts, our history of knowledge, the input of others expert in ways that we ourselves may not be. Risk—that capacity that lies at the heart of growth and learning, recognizing that without risk, a business does not grow; without risk, your marriage or partnership will grow; without risk, the artist—that central agent whose work we all exist to facilitate and present-- will be doomed to a life of technical expression that, regardless of competence, will never reach the essence of the true artistic moment. Indeed, the three greatest regrets of retirees should serve as a bold admonition to us all, as individuals as well as for our organizations. When asked what they most regretted about their lives, they answered: We didn’t spend more time in reflective thinking. We weren’t clearer about the purpose of our lives. We didn’t risk more.

We must not and cannot lead lives or create organizations we will regret.

The perils of this technological explosion, unspoken to this point, are clear and sobering. Ellen Ullmann, a wonderful thinker whose “Museum of Me” article led us to invite her to a theatre conference several years ago, reminded us that, convenience of on-line ticketing aside, there is great social value in standing in a ticket line beside someone not like you for 5 or 10 minutes—indeed that societies are strengthened through such causal “social abrasions,” casual encounters that make us rub up against others and that lie at the heart

of a coherent social fabric. With the increasing convenience of the web comes the increased loss of these abrasions, - and the rising sense that our larger social fabric may be unraveling.

The internet compounds this social fraying and easily “silos” us: no matter how paranoid your fantasy, there is a website out there to confirm your point of view. Graham Leicester of the International Futures Forum has called this “a conceptual emergency”—a time in which knowledge, which we once believed would set us free, now leaves us more confused: “where for every solid hypothesis substantiated by data, there is an equal and opposite scenario just as well supported; where plausibility is as powerful as truth and we are all left struggling to make coherent sense of the whole.”

We in the arts must tackle this challenge and recognize the core purpose the arts have always had: the quest for common meaning.

At the time of the great explosion of arts philanthropy in the early 1960’s, McNeil Lowery, who was the head of the arts division at the Ford Foundation, which began the great philanthropic arts movement in the United States, was challenged to explain why funding the arts was important, he said, “I will give you ten reasons.” And here are his ten reasons:

- They are important, he said, because of their importance to the image of American society abroad.
- They are important because they are a means of communication and consequently of understanding between this country and others.
- They are important because they are an expression of national purpose.
- They are important because they are an important influence in the liberal education of the individual.
- They are important because they are the key to an American’s understanding of himself, his times and his destiny.
- They are important because they are a purposeful occupation for youth.

- In their institutional form, they are vital to the social, moral and educational resources of an American community.
- They are good for business, especially in new centers of population.
- They are components for strengthening the moral and spiritual bastions in a people whose national security is threatened.
- They are the offset to the materialism of a new and generally affluent society.

The “good for business” argument aside, Lowry argued at every turn for the role of the arts in exploring and defining meaning. These reasons—even more resonant today perhaps than in 1963, are in our very DNA and call us to rally ever more to their fulfillment, and even while we have in the last century evolved and adapted enormously as fields, our purposes have been constant. Like the participants at Pop Tech, we can no longer think only about how we will survive: we too must think about how we will change the world.

I for one, believe that through the arts, we engage in a struggle for our national character, for the emerging sensibility of the young, especially the young, who prioritize the “bombardment” of sensation through violent film and video over the contemplation and deep understanding of experience, especially in a popular cultural context that often seems to value humiliation over humanity. We are living reminders of what it means to be humane rather than merely human, and we insistently—in an age of demonization and fear of difference, gather audiences to look at their fellow human beings with curiosity and generosity. If we have ever needed such capacity in our nation’s history, we need it now.

I for one am hopeful about the future for the arts, even though I may not have sounded so until this moment—not least of all because of my experience at the aforementioned PopTech. What I didn’t tell you was that every session was followed by a performance by a live artist—a cellist playing using technology to create a quartet of sound, a hip hop dancer dancing on crutches, a remarkable spoken word artist Vanessa German who blew the roof off with her passionate poetry and raw release of feeling. These tech leaders

responded both to artists who did formal plenary presentations about the creative process—to Elizabeth Streb who knocked their socks off, for example—and to the performers, but their response indicated something deeper.

On the one hand, I was encouraged that this group fought to get there. Camden, ME is not an easy place to access, and if any community can convene virtually, this one can. Yet through PopTech and TED and more, this community insists on coming together because of the unique value of live, face to face, collective experience, to conspiring—meaning to breathe together, to breathing the same air. And throughout PopTech, a minor chord, a palpable hunger throbbed in the background. This group was desperate to slow down, to led less frenetic lives, to find the courage to live for their passions. More and more, they placed premium on contemplation, on captivation, on focus and extended surrender to single experience—experiences that would captivate, resonate emotionally, at its best enhance spiritual value—to the very things that we in the arts do.

They responded deafeningly to Daniel Pink, (interestingly enough a man in his 30's) in his new *A WHOLE NEW MIND*, writes of the emerging emphasis on right brain thinking, “one that prizes aptitude the capacity to detect patterns and opportunities, to create artistic and emotional beauty, to craft a satisfying narrative and to combine seemingly unrelated ideas into something new—as well as the ability to empathize with other, to understand the subtleties of human interaction, to find joy in one’s self and to elicit it in others, and to stretch beyond the quotidian in pursuit of purpose and meaning”,” to quote him.

And I am heartened by marketing expert Bill Breen who tells us that consumer desire is increasingly linked to authenticity, defined by four criteria: a sense of place, a strong point of view, the service of a larger purpose and integrity. God knows if we cannot position ourselves in this environment, we do not deserve to exist.

In closing, let me offer an image that many of you have heard me use before. A public poll conducted in the United States more than a decade ago asked respondents, “If your

house is on fire, what's the first thing you'll grab when you run out the door?" The overwhelming answer: "family photographs".

And I say to you, the arts ARE our family photographs.

As a man whose ancestors came from England, Ireland, Scotland and Germany, the plays of Beckett, the plays of Shakespeare, the plays of Goethe, these are my family photographs. As a man born and raised in the southern part of the United States, the plays of Tennessee Williams, the stories of Carson McCullough, the novels of William Faulkner are my family photographs. As a man in contemporary New York, the plays of David Mamet, the plays of David Rabe, are my family photographs. As a gay man, the dances of Bill T. Jones, the plays of Tony Kushner are my family photographs. But as an American, an American, the novels of Toni Morrison, the poetry of Maya Angelou, the songs of my native American brothers and sisters, the poetry of my Asian aunts and uncles, these are our family photographs. And if we do our job right, they will live and breathe as testaments to who we were, what we thought, what we felt, - just as we turn to the plays of Aeschylus, Socrates and Euripides as the living photos of ancient Greece - not to some record of wars worn or lost.

Many of us did not choose this work; it chose us. But when we choose to answer that call, what we really do is, we honor the past, we commemorate the present, we shape and we change the future in a way that does honor to all and violence to none. I don't care how much opponents may try to shame us from that path. For those of us who are spiritually inclined, it is God's work we do.

In that light, I would like to thank you for your part in doing God's work throughout this country. I would like to assure you that our hands at Doris Duke remain outstretched to the national arts community, treasuring you for all you offer. And I'd like to thank you for your kindness and patience in listening to me this afternoon. God speed you in your work.