

A R L E N E G O L D B A R D  
W W W . A R L E N E G O L D B A R D . C O M  
C E L L : 4 1 5 - 6 9 0 - 9 9 9 2 A R L E N E @ A R L E N E G O L D B A R D . C O M

*This is the text of a keynote speech I gave at the 2011 Association of Performing Arts Service Organizations Conference in Austin, Texas.*

### **The Wellspring: How Your Work is Transforming The World (Whether You Know It Or Not)**

In the voice of his character Junebug Jabbo Jones, my old friend John O'Neal stated an intention that is sound advice for public speakers: "I'm going to tell you what I'm going to tell you. Then I'm going to tell you. Then I'm going to tell you what I done told you."

I'm going to take his advice.

In the next forty minutes, I am going to tell you that the world is becoming new in ways that will bring our understanding of art and culture from the margins—*perfectly fine if you go in for that sort of thing, but not very consequential*—to a rightful place at the center of public attention and civil society.

I'm going to tell you that your work brings beauty and meaning into the world, cultivates empathy and imagination, and weaves a social fabric from the disparate threads of a community, state, or nation. I'm going to show you that the way we understand our work can make all the difference in how we do it, in how it feels, and in its impact; that the exact same information can have totally different meanings, depending on how we choose to see it. I'm going to show you how we are on the cusp of a major transformation and how seeing the world— and our own work—through new eyes, we have the power to help it along.

But first, friends, I'm afraid we have to acknowledge the herd of elephants huddled in the corner of any arts gathering these days. This is a challenging moment for artists and creative organizers. In fact, many of us are behaving exactly like the residents of a conquered province: apologizing for our existence, lowering our horizons until the most we dare hope for is to be hurt a little less than anticipated. State arts agencies are threatened with elimination, arts in education is being de-funded, even the current year National Endowment for the Arts budget has been cut more than a quarter by one house of Congress, from \$167 million to \$124 million.

All of this has happened quickly, and it doesn't feel over. The tiny portion of public funds going to arts and culture has been accurately described as the equivalent of a rounding error in categories like public spending on the military or prisons. Nevertheless, when budget-cutting happens these days, culture is treated like a significant center for cost-savings. Politicians use the arts as a form of symbolic speech, to signal a get-serious attitude. In return, they get a lot of credit for almost no impact on the deficit.

It reminds me of a joke that's making the rounds, inspired by recent events in Wisconsin: a CEO, a Tea Party member, and a union member are sharing a plate of cookies. The CEO takes 11 of the 12 cookies, then turns to the Tea Partier and says, "Watch out! That union member wants a piece of your cookie."

The truth about arts funding is even more stark: for the last decade, we taxpayers have been spending the equivalent of two annual NEA budgets a day, seven days a week, on war. In the recent legislation extending Bush-era tax cuts, the U.S. Treasury lost \$225 billion in revenues from tax breaks specifically tailored to benefit high-income taxpayers. In our version of the joke, the CEO is the world's largest war and prison industries; the union member is an artist; and the Tea Partier is all the other social programs duking it out. But it isn't one cookie out of a dozen we're fighting over; it's barely a crumb.

Whenever new cuts in arts spending are threatened, letters, phone campaigns, and petitions begin whizzing through cyberspace. But even as arts advocates are mobilizing, to much of the rest of the country, the whole thing resembles a very busy day on an ant farm: something that's of vital interest to the direct participants, and nearly invisible to everyone else. If people see it at all, they tend to regard it as just another special-interest campaign, as the direct beneficiaries of public spending lobbying for their own livelihoods.

In the face of this massive indifference, mainstream advocacy organizations keep doing the same things over and over again, marshalling weak economic arguments that fail to connect with voters' hearts and minds. It's true, as they assert, that the creative sector generates jobs and other economic activity, as when theater-goers spend money on transportation or restaurants. But virtually all economic sectors can make identical claims. They capture nothing of culture's unique public-interest value and importance.

Yet, the dominant view in mainstream arts advocacy is that you have to reduce everything to numbers to get through to policymakers. Last week, I was interviewed by a reporter for a major national news outlet. When I talked about alternatives to numbers-based arguments, she said she agreed, but that they were impractical. "Compared to what?" I asked. "An imaginary ideal, or actual existing advocacy approaches?" I noted that there has been a decline of more than half in the real value of the NEA budget since Ronald Reagan took office; it would have to be more than \$400 million today just to *equal* the spending power of 1980.

The reporter was quiet for a minute, and then said she'd have to think about it and call me back. Regarding a failed strategy as practical, clinging to that strategy despite its overwhelming failure—these are signs of the urgent need for new thinking. The way we spend our commonwealth reveals our national values and priorities. Does it reflect your deepest truths? The question now isn't "Funding the arts, yes or no?" That keeps the conversation focused on crumbs. It's time to ask this instead: Who are we as a people? What do we want to be known for: our stupendous ability to punish, or our immense creativity?

Think of the public interest in culture as the national equivalent of the passionate attachment most of you feel for music, dance, or theater, multiplied by millions. I'm astounded at the huge gap between the actual public interest and the type of ant-farm advocacy that has taken hold. When I lift my gaze from the inside-baseball of arts advocacy, everywhere I look, I see powerful

arguments for culture's role in cultivating resilience, in our hope of living together in a social order of justice tempered by love.

You and I may not know each other personally, but we all belong to the fellowship of those who have experienced the awesome grandeur of human creativity and who know, through lived experience, that art is the secret of survival, the wellspring of sustainability. To have been granted the gifts of expression, communication, and imagination is a sacred trust—one that, like love, has meaning only when you share it. Each of us here today has the knowledge, conviction, and passion to tell this story in a new and powerful way. It is written on the world in holographic fashion, in both small gestures and large happenings. You can tell this story starting anywhere. Today, I am going to begin with the historic events unfolding in North Africa.

When Latifah Taormina invited to me this conference, I had no idea how many surprises the world would churn up before the date arrived. The early months of this year have seen popular uprisings in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and beyond. Two months ago, even the most reckless gambler wouldn't have risked real money on the prospects of overturning leaders who were expected to rule for life. Yet they're toppling, yielding to public demands for self-determination, decent livelihood, and freedom of expression.

On January 25th, as the revolt in Tunisia was ripening, I wrote an essay about Slim Amamou, the 33 year-old blogger, Twitter aficionado, and software developer who had been named Secretary of State for Youth and Sport in the interim government. I said that while it was true that social networking had been a powerful tool of the movement for freedom in the Mideast, the implications were larger than Twitter and Facebook. "This is a story about culture," I wrote, "about the centrality of culture to identity and self-determination, and about the unbounded world slowly being created by people who recognize this, and who can no longer allow themselves to be contained by those who don't see it."

At the time, Amamou's Twitter stream was the object of much attention, including a story in the *New York Times*. It revealed a vocabulary shaped by music and other cultural reference-points. For example, when he was denounced as a sellout for joining a government that included some members of former president Ben Ali's team, Amamou replied this way: "It is similar to an underground artist who signs with a major label and is criticized by the purists and the masses." Amamou delivered a talk back in September at TedX Carthage, moving seamlessly from French to Arabic and back again, with a sprinkling of English tossed in. Some things are universal. When tech problems delayed the start of his talk, he vamped for time by singing a popular comic song called "*Chrigui bigui bgui baw*," half in French and half Arabic—with half the audience singing along.

Within five minutes of publishing my tribute to the cultural revolution then beginning to unfold in Tunisia, Amamou sent me a message of thanks via Twitter.

Six skills have been needed to actuate the social transformation that appears to be dawning in North Africa. As I describe them, you will immediately recognize them as artists' core methods and essential habits of mind. They are the capacities that each of you has mastered, that you mobilize daily in service to your mission, and they helped bring about a tipping-point in human events that none of the experts predicted.

First, the young activists driving these nascent revolutions need *social imagination*. This is the capacity to perceive existing reality clearly while rejecting the propaganda generated by every social order—*our way is the natural, the right, the enduring way*—in favor of imagining a much fuller, freer, more permeable set of arrangements, one that supports individual initiative and cultivates community. Human beings learn to see beyond what is to what could be by encountering difference. The people who drive change in most communities are those who've discovered alternate realities, often through creative depictions: books, videos, plays, music. Next time you read about a young activist in Tunisia or Algeria or Egypt, try Googling that person: very often, you'll find a blog, and within it, playlists featuring music that expresses the boundary-crossing liberatory spirit of the emergent world, suggesting horizons as broad as the planet.

Second, social transformation needs *empathy*, the capacity to feel something of another's experience and to cast oneself in the place of the other. The activists who filled public squares in Egypt and Tunisia came from many walks of life and diverse social classes. They included numbers of technically savvy, multilingual, plugged-in young people who had not personally experienced the extreme pain of someone like Mohamed Bouaziz, the unemployed vegetable-seller who set himself on fire outside a Tunisian government office, choosing to use the only thing he possessed—his life—to make a statement that has echoed around the world. But instead of saying, *Oh well, it's not my problem*, they allowed another's story, very different from their own, to enter their awareness, to resonate with their own feelings, to ignite compassion leading to action.

Third, these activists need the ability to *improvise*, to face a situation that has no precedent, no blueprint or master-plan, to retain a sense of perspective and a connection to a central core of values, and to dance their way through whatever challenges may arise. They have improvised communication networks, mass demonstrations, interim governments—and often, if their blogs, interviews, and tweets are to be believed, they have done it with the sense of sacred play that is the essence of art.

Fourth, to change an old order, people need awareness of *cultural citizenship* and the aspiration to inhabit it fully. I'm not talking about citizenship in the narrow legal sense of papers and voting rights, but about the inner sense of belonging that allows us to feel that we are welcome in our society and community, that our contributions count, that our heritage and our expressions are respected. In our own society, even many people who possess the right to vote feel keenly the extent to which they are denied the fullness of cultural citizenship on account of race, religion, ethnicity, economic status, or other characteristics seen as social deficits. The right to cultural citizenship is core to virtually all liberation movements; without it, what are you fighting for?

Fifth, in this new world, activists need *connectivity*: as many people have pointed out, their facility with social networking was a key factor in their ability to communicate and mobilize rapidly. Slim Amamou and others who were imprisoned in Tunisia attribute their release to online pressure.

But it's not so much the method—the technology—as the understanding that any attempt to dislodge repression must be built on relationship, especially the person-to-person horizontal relationships that create community.

Sixth, above all, helping a new world to be born requires *creativity*, the ability to generate something fresh, which entails the innate capacity to face a problem, to see possibility arising from the broken scraps of the old answers, and to actualize it. It is far easier to tear down than to create something new. In a world morphing at light-speed into something none of us can foretell, fear and loss can be paralyzing. Creativity is the antidote: it is both our greatest challenge and our greatest need.

You can see these same capacities in action when we make music, dance, or theater: we collaborate, expressing a shared passion for beauty and meaning, stretching to accommodate each other, negotiating differences, holding space for everyone, and thus expanding possibility. Artists rehearse for life's challenges through imagination and improvisation, exploring the limits of their powers and the synergies that can be created when they are aligned. Making art, we learn how to move past the easy and obvious into essence, how to discard what no longer serves and explore the unknown. We draw on the past for the sources of our resilience and strength. We remain present while envisioning the future and its possibilities.

The skills that enabled new realities to surface in North Africa are not only the core strengths of artists and activists; they are precisely what all of us need to navigate a world in constant flux. Reflect on the business world: in IBM's most recent biennial CEO study, *Capitalizing on Complexity*,<sup>1</sup> interviews with over 1,500 CEOs and managers from both the private and public sector in 60 countries and 33 industries revealed that the "single most important leadership competency" needed to navigate an environment of escalating complexity was *creativity*, manifested through engagement with the full range of stakeholders.

Yet I need only mention two letters—BP—to raise the question of what blocks this type of creativity in the corporate sector. Many individuals who rise to power there possess formidable drive, talent, and energy. Many are able to use their gifts in valuable and creative ways. But sometimes, a switch has been flipped, and the deep desire that accompanies such abilities gets channeled into a type of wanting marinated in surplus aggression: more money, position, the power to dominate others. These individuals may carry tremendous latent capacity to express and experience other types of desire—to be seen and see truly, to be loved for oneself, to experience the satisfactions that only come if one is willing to stand unmasked, risking extreme vulnerability.

If they accept that those capacities cannot be expressed in the world they inhabit, everything is channeled into acquisition and dominance until it becomes second nature. And instead of

---

<sup>1</sup> *Capitalizing on Complexity: Insights from the Global Chief Executive Officer Study*, IBM Corporation, May 2010

benefiting from the remarkable gifts such individuals could bring to public and private relationship, everyone affected by their actions suffers the consequences when empathy and connectivity fail.

How can those capacities be regained? More than anything else, engagement with art creates the possibility of being completely awake and alive in all four dimensions of being: body, emotions, intellect, and spirit. This experience of integration and wholeness recalls the most potent of relationships, love. Plato saw Eros as the attraction to what is beautiful, good, and true in all things. In precisely that sense, art can eroticize experience. Human beings in love desire the well-being of the beloved, want to know the beloved as deeply and fully as possible. Just so, the integral state of engagement with art can kindle the desire for knowledge and wisdom, for an embrace of our full human capacity. When I look at the corporate sector, I see very clearly that our collective future depends on bringing artistic creativity to bear on realms in which art may have been seen as distant or irrelevant.

No matter which window on the world you peer through, the view is the same. Evolutionary scientists are learning that artistic creativity was central to human development during the Pleistocene era. Humans learned to create beauty in many forms, inventing storytelling as a way to learn from experience and solve problems. These capacities were favored traits for sexual selection. When seeking mates, our earliest ancestors valued innovation, dexterity, grace, and other forms of skillfulness associated with art. Social imagination, connectivity, improvisation, cultural citizenship, empathy, creativity—these are not only important to us today, we owe them our existence.

In the biological sciences, brain development researchers like Antonio and Hanna Damasio have pointed to art's value in generating a moral sense. The best argument for arts education is that children today practice endlessly interacting with machines, developing a certain type of cognitive facility. But without the opportunity that arts education affords to face human stories in all their diversity and particularity, to experience emotional responses in a safe space and rehearse one's reactions, to feel compassion and imagine alternative worlds, their emotional and moral development will never keep pace.

Harvard neuroscientist Dr. Gottfried Schlaug has shown that brain-damaged individuals can regain the power of speech through singing, and there is a growing body of research demonstrating other healing powers of art.<sup>2</sup> Neuroscientists have also found "mirror neurons" in the human brain. When we observe someone else (or imagine ourselves) experiencing a feeling or performing an action, these nerve cells are activated very much as if we had performed the same actions with our own bodies. Mirror neurons are essential to empathy, aiding our understanding of other people's perceptions, actions, and feelings.

---

<sup>2</sup> Richard Alleyne, "Encouraging severe stroke victims to sing can help them regain the ability to talk, new research claims," 21 February, 2010.  
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/health/healthnews/7285154/AAAS-Singing-helps-stroke-victims-relearn-language.html>

But while the ability to feel empathy is encoded in our physical beings, empathy does not automatically infuse our own life-choices, any more than possessing the physical equipment for dancing or singing means we will actually do either. Moving from the latent capacity to the practice of compassion must be learned. When we sit in a theater, opening our minds and hearts to stories very different from our own, the tears, laughter, or perplexity we feel activates our motor neurons, setting that learning in motion.

In politics, the work of cognitive linguists has been revising our picture of how the mind works. It turns out that instead of operating like calculating machines, we use what George Lakoff calls “real reason.” People make decisions about the important things in life, including politics, through story, metaphor, physical sensation, and emotion—again, by using the embodied, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual vocabulary of art, along with logical calculation.

In education, despite cut after cut in arts education, nearly every study mirrors the conclusions reached by The Partnership for 21st Century Skills that “Students’ capacity to create and express themselves through the arts is one of the central qualities that make them human, as well as a basis for success in the 21st century.”<sup>3</sup> The Partnership highlights a slew of strengths that can best be taught through arts education, including critical thinking and problem solving, communication, collaboration, creativity, innovation, information literacy, media literacy, flexibility and adaptability, initiative and self-direction, social and cross-cultural skills, productivity and accountability, and leadership and responsibility.

Beyond these specific capabilities, there is a profound truth of our changing world: students today are preparing for jobs and social roles that have not even been imagined yet. They cannot be trained in the narrow sense for jobs that do not yet exist, but they can learn social imagination, connectivity, improvisation, cultural citizenship, empathy, and creativity, and that learning can equip them to respond to emerging challenges and opportunities, whatever they may be.

Knowing this, it is even more horrifying that the decline of arts education has been felt most severely in communities of color. A recent NEA study reports that:

[T]he decline in the rate of childhood arts education among white children is relatively insignificant from 1982 to 2008, just five percent, while the declines in the rate among African American and Hispanic children are quite substantial — 49 percent for African American and 40 percent for Hispanic children. These statistics support the conclusion that almost the entire decline in childhood arts education between the 1982 and 2008 SPPAs was absorbed by African American and Hispanic children.<sup>4</sup>

In community development, we know that caring, reciprocal relationship is society’s connective tissue. As in the human body and brain, the more connectivity in the body politic, the more functionality and capacity. Participating in creative expression creates connectivity, as people join together to sing in a choir or community chorus, to take part in dance classes, to play in garage bands, to create and exchange playlists, communicating through music what cannot be expressed with words alone.

---

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.p21.org/documents/P21\\_arts\\_map\\_final.pdf](http://www.p21.org/documents/P21_arts_map_final.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Nick Rabkin and E. C. Hedberg, *Arts education in America: What the declines mean for arts participation*, National Endowment for the Arts, February, 2011.

Many thousands of artists in this country work in community, choosing to use their gifts in service to democracy. These artists are the stem cells of the body politic, generating the many forms of beauty, meaning, and connectivity essential to our survival, our resilience—indeed, to all hope of a sustainable future.

Every window on the world is showing us the same view, a new world aptly characterized by Carlos Fuentes' assertion that ours is an era of "cultures as the protagonists of history."<sup>5</sup>

Wherever I travel, I see people plugged into their iPods, listening to music as they move about their cities and towns. Some commentators regard this as a social problem: we are isolated, we don't talk to each other anymore, and so on. But I see it as exactly the opposite: I think we are self-medicating, prescribing for ourselves music that attunes our bodies, feelings, minds, and spirits to precisely the support, inspiration, beauty, and meaning that will sustain us through the day and its challenges. When we want to express identity, understand each other better, connect to sources of strength, find inspiration, create pleasure, celebrate and commemorate peak moments, we turn to music, dance, drama, still and moving images.

Whenever we human beings have free choice in how we use our time, for a huge number of us, the choice we make is art. We, the fellowship of art as the secret of survival, know this in our bones. It is inscribed in our own stories of becoming artists or those whose path in life is to manifest creativity in other ways, building arts organizations or teaching those who will become practitioners. Think for a moment: what set you on your path?

Perhaps you were taken to the theater as a child, and when the lights went down, new worlds exploded into being, shattering your old world and creating something far more exciting in its place. Perhaps you lifted your voice or instrument and felt your whole being focused with absolute congruence in music. Perhaps you borrowed a video camera, and felt the power that filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard hinted at when he said—referring to an older technology—that "Cinema is truth twenty-four frames per second." Perhaps you held a pen or a brush, and making a mark on paper, experienced the ability to create worlds. Perhaps you moved your body and discovered the magic of speaking volumes without uttering a word.

It may be that you grew up cradled in a perfectly supportive family, where everyone made music together on Sunday evenings, and all your crayon drawings wound up on the refrigerator, setting a template of self-expression that has shaped your life ever since. Everyone's story is different, but if you fit the general outlines of the more typical artist's profile, yours, like mine, may be the opposite: that you felt unseen, unmet, and out of place, and as artists have done for centuries, you converted the energy of that alienation into a lifelong desire to see more, to feel more, and to understand more.

---

<sup>5</sup> Carlos Fuentes, *Latin America: At War With The Past*, Massey Lectures, 23rd Series, CBC Enterprises, 1985, pp. 71–72.

Now, I'm guessing that the way I just described the process of becoming artists and creative organizers is not the story you heard from your high school guidance counselor. It kills me that so often, the artist's story is framed in a way that shrinks its meaning to the size of a pea: someone has a talent for drawing or singing, acting or dancing; that person finds a way to study and practice; questions of livelihood become part of the conversation; compromises are made; and so on. It's not that all that isn't true, just that it's merely one truth, and neither the deepest nor the most enlivening.

Regardless of our individual stories, our choices reveal an awakening that must be characterized in spiritual terms, as an encounter with the ineffable, with something that can never be adequately expressed, but which ignites in our hearts the desire to keep trying.

I'm pretty sure I'm not the only person in this room who can say that my young life was saved by art.

Imagine for a moment that your experience of the ineffable through art is completely real and true, not your personal secret, but instead, the secret of a livable, sustainable world, in which each person can experience the alignment and integration that nourishes imagination and empathy, that creates awareness. Consider what it would mean if the experiences that shaped your choices actually mattered to the world as much as they matter to you. How would your life be different if your story were colored by the knowledge that you are essential to the survival and well-being of civil society, rather than merely seeing yourself as someone who paints or writes or dances, or who makes it possible for others to do so?

How does that feel? What sensations arise in your body? What emotions flood your heart? What thoughts dance through your mind? What experience of connection arises when you allow yourself to believe for even a moment that this is true?

If we allow this truth to suffuse our work and our advocacy, we will have an opportunity to initialize change very much as did the young activists of North Africa.

There is changing behavior and changing minds. The first is easier, especially if you have the ability to punish or bribe: you can get people to behave differently as long as you provide compelling incentives or disincentives. When those are gone, they are likely to spring right back to their old ways. But changing minds is both more difficult and more lasting: once accomplished, a change of mind sends its ripples into many streams of behavior.

Howard Gardner—who will be familiar to you from his work on multiple intelligences—has identified seven R's as paths to mind-changing: *Reason*, or logical argument. *Research*, such as compelling data, observations, and case studies. *Resonance*, presenting new content and presentation that moves recipients' hearts and minds. *Redescription*, using multiple media and symbol systems to convey new ideas. *Rewards and Resources*, which I've already described. *Real World Events*, such as those in North Africa, changing conditions to reveal new truths. The

last is *Resistances Overcome*, which entails understanding and neutralizing resistance to a new idea.

In the workshop this afternoon, I am going to explore some of these with you, engaging in an eighth R, *Reframing*, finding potent metaphors, images, and concepts to frame the public interest in culture to both resonate and overcome resistance. Mainstream arts advocacy, which has left us in the pickle I described at the beginning of this talk, has largely relied for three decades on the second R, generating data and studies, mostly deploying modes of communication that are better at conveying quantification than resonance.

Why have mainstream advocacy campaigns been so boring and ineffective? Why are the vast and powerful gifts that artists possess not being brought to bear on this problem? Perhaps it isn't as important to answer those questions as to explore what you and I can do to remedy the way that culture's earthshaking, transformative energy has been trivialized into a bunch of bar graphs and insipid slogans about "supporting the arts."

The first thing we can do to change this is to change the story—the story we tell ourselves, as well as others. As we live them, our lives are just a string of incidents: I was born here, I liked strained peas, I played with Barbie dolls or Tonka trucks, I had the measles, I had a birthday, I got a job, I fell in love and then I fell out again, and so on. Life is merely one thing after another until we create the narrative that gives it meaning. We can't have true sight or draw true understanding until we give our experiences coherent form. The way we shape our stories shapes our lives.

Consider how the very same actions take on completely different meanings, depending on how we shape the story. Imagine yourself standing at a kitchen counter, chopping vegetables for dinner.

First, imagine that the meal you are creating is for the person you love the most in the whole world, and as you chop, you are anticipating the delight you will feel when your food makes that person smile and say, "Delicious!" Nice image, hmm?

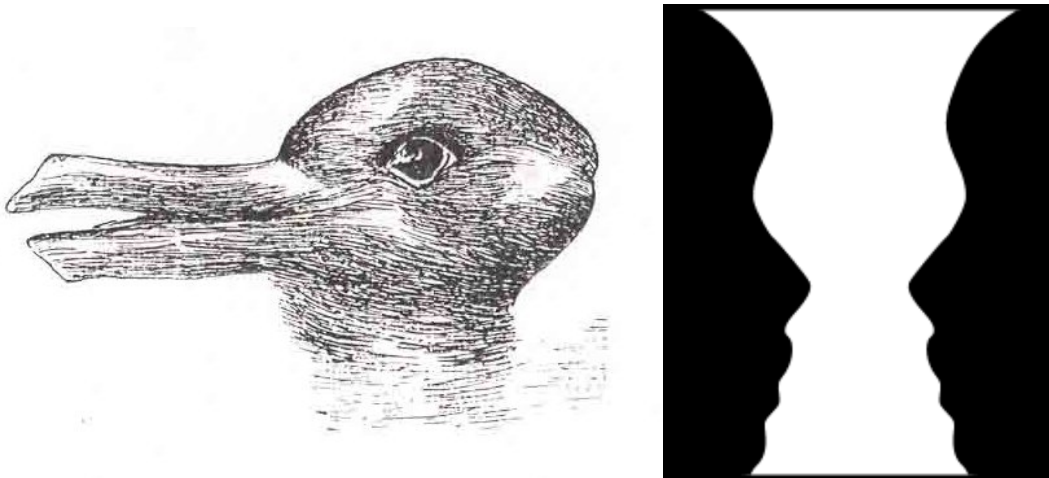
Now imagine that you're on KP duty in the dining hall of a state penitentiary, and the food is going to be tasteless, hastily consumed, and probably not much different from the last meal or the next, for a dozen years to come. Same actions, different story, not so nice.

Yet there are people in our world who choose to put themselves in situations very like the latter and find a way to feel as if they were experiencing the former. If you worked as a vegetable-chopper in a refugee camp or field hospital, and as you chopped, you saw yourself extending love in the form of food to people whose lives might be lifted out of misery by that small gesture, then you might not be daunted by the mud and blood and chaos surrounding you. The way we shape our stories shapes our lives.

I have the choice to see myself standing here as the harbinger of a new paradigm—a new way of understanding art’s purpose and meaning—or as the advocate of a far-out view that can never compete with the dominant perspective. You have the choice to see yourself as someone skilled at making images or words, or at using the voice or body, or creating the container for those acts, and who hopes to exchange those skills for money or attention. Or you can see yourself as someone who is always in the process of becoming an instrument of beauty and meaning, who is always learning to show up in an integrated state, fully present and engaged in all dimensions, and who therefore has a very special role to play in the world. The choice is yours, but if enough of us make it, a tipping-point will be reached and a paradigm shift will take place.

Now, the term “paradigm shift” gets thrown around a lot, often watered down into a simple switch of perspective. But when historian of science Thomas Kuhn proposed this term for a change of scientific consensus, he meant something specific. A paradigm shift takes place when an older system of understanding can no longer hold newly emerging knowledge. If you are sure that the earth is flat, and evidence accumulates that ships sailing over the farthest horizon return, rather than plunging into nothingness, your old model of planetary reality shatters, making way for a new one.

In a paradigm shift, it isn’t the world that changes, but how we see it, the story we construct to describe it. Indeed, the same information can have two completely different meanings, depending on your framework of understanding, like an optical illusion. All it takes to switch from one meaning to the other is willingness and attention.



Look at the image on the left. What do you see? Some will see the profile of a duck, facing left, its bill slightly open. Do you also see the rabbit? Think of the duck’s bill as the rabbit’s ears, and it will come into focus, a rabbit in profile, facing right. Gazing at the figure on the right, you will be able to switch between a white vase centered on a black ground and two human profiles in silhouette against a white ground.

Kuhn used optical illusions to convey the essence of paradigm shift, because this is exactly how people's ideas about the world change. Every significant social change of the last century has been actualized by a simple shift in perspective. The civil rights movements of the sixties were triggered by people realizing that their minds had been colonized by what the great educator Paulo Freire called "internalization of the oppressor." In this phenomenon, we come to adopt views that serve those more powerful than ourselves, even though they may be antithetical to our own real interests. At the very beginnings of the Black liberation movement, for example, an anonymous organizer uttered the phrase, "Black is Beautiful." That triggered something like a cascade of dominoes, in which countless oppressive, internalized self-images were recalibrated to a new reality.

Right this minute, as hard as it may be to believe, we are poised on the cusp of another paradigm shift. The conventional discourse about art and cultural policy is like the notion of a flat earth: it can no longer contain even a fraction of what many of us have always known and what experts are just now proving to their own satisfaction about art's astonishing power. The new model of reality is emerging, however much it is resisted by those who cannot yet surrender their attachment to the old one.

Some people have to stare at the duck or the rabbit a long time before the other animal flips into view. But once they see it, they always see it. The way we understand and talk about the emergent reality can make a huge difference in others' ability to perceive the shift, but often, our words don't reflect our deepest truths. What stops us from dropping any anxiety or embarrassment we may feel, any vulnerability that may attach to seeing the world this clearly in a time when a great many other people are seeing something very different? What would it take for us to stop pledging allegiance to ant-farm ideas and strategies, far too small to represent what we know, and invest ourselves in new thinking and action? Apart from the fear of being thought foolish by those who value whatever can be quantified over all other things, is there any reason not to? Think what a relief it would be to step into a way of understanding and speaking about the public interest in art that is fully commensurate with seeing the world truly.

When I started this talk, I said that many of us are behaving exactly like the residents of a conquered province. That feeling emanates from the conviction that our cause is on life-support, or at least badly wounded. I hate to see that mind-set contaminate our conversation about the public interest in culture. I hate to see it convincing us to be far smaller and weaker than we are. Because in truth, we haven't actually tried the paths to mind-changing that hold the most promise. And despite pervasive gloom and doom about arts funding, we haven't the slightest idea whether—as in Tunisia or Egypt—the aggregate of individual actions could cause a radical shift in possibility, overturning apparent certainties. Everyone possesses the capacity to break the chain of causality, to reject what has failed and to try something new. We can't be certain whether or not others will use that capacity, but without a doubt, each of us can make that choice for ourselves.

I promised you the opportunity to look at the world through new eyes. Gaze around the room, at the shining faces and full hearts that surround you. You are preparing the new world that is now emerging. There is nothing more important than cultivating social imagination, connectivity, improvisation, cultural citizenship, empathy, and creativity. There is no job more important than midwiving the new paradigm. You possess the secret of a livable, sustainable world, in which each person can experience the alignment of body, emotion, intellect, and spirit that nourishes imagination and empathy, that creates awareness. Our power to persuade is at its height when there is absolute congruence in the story we tell ourselves and the world, when there isn't a hair's-breadth of distance between what we know and what we represent.

Instead of shrinking ourselves to fit others' limitations, we can enlarge the debate to full-size: the whole plate and not just a few crumbs. When we show up as who we really are—as the stem cells of the body politic, the stewards of the wellspring—no one can take our power away. Together, we can use it to turn the notion of the public interest on its head, bringing art and culture to the center, where they belong.

# # # #