

BEN CAMERON'S REMARKS from Arts Day 2011

Thank you. Despite Snooki, Danielle and the Real Housewives of New Jersey, I am proud to stand before you as proud bridge and tunnel trash—a 10 year resident of Maplewood—and I am honored to be here to salute all of you. When we speak about philanthropy—about corporate philanthropy, private foundations, individual philanthropy, government philanthropy—we all too often fail to acknowledge the biggest philanthropic sector of all for the arts: the artists, managers and technicians on whose lives the work is made by virtue of inadequate compensation, long hours, lack of benefits and the like. I salute you all as philanthropists today and thank you for all that you do to make our state better in countless ways.

In the last three years, I have had the privilege of attending numerous local arts community meetings—New York City, Portland, Seattle, Boston, Minneapolis, Chicago, to name just a few, and now to be with you today. Driven by an overwhelming concern for survival and a desperate search for language that can convey the value arts offer for an increasingly disinterested populace, participants in these meetings have at their best embodied the pathway of creativity as described by Angeles Arrien: “showing up—really showing up—listening deeply, speaking the truth, and letting go of predetermined results”—a spirit that I hope will guide us today.

These meetings have given artists an organizations an opportunity to be increasingly thoughtful about partnerships, collaborations, new strategies, shared facilities, joint services, demand based pricing, and the possibilities of mergers—including potentially mergers across discipline lines or involving

complementary organizations, e.g. a playwright development program with a producing theatre. All of these and more must be on the table as we look to a future in new, expansive ways.

For clearly we must think in new ways. And not just because of changes in our national economy.

In conversations sponsored by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation in 2006—more than two years before the global financial crisis—more than 700 artists, managers and administrators in 22 meetings in 14 cities worried about dramatic audience erosion. Two years before the financial crisis, they fretted about increased competition for leisure time, especially from technology. Two years before the financial crisis, they struggled to understand their place in a new marketplace dominated by personalization, customization and convenience—a trifecta of expectations that performing arts in particular were poorly poised to match.

Surely we see ourselves in the words of poet Adrienne Rich in *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...”

In looking to the future, I find inspiration in the words of two different thinkers: our 19th Century American President Abraham Lincoln, who in his second inaugural address 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, the Canadian ice hockey player, who when asked to account for his greatness said simply, "I skate to where the puck will be."

How do we see the present as an invitation in the arts to fundamentally reinvent what we do and how we operate? How do we too begin to skate to where the puck will be?

In this journey, we must begin by asking: why must we exist today? Because we have a building is no longer good enough. Because we have a staff and board is no longer good enough. Because we have a history of critical reviews and awards is no longer good enough. What is it in the world that mandates that we continue forward and flourish today?

Every organization must begin by asking itself three questions:

- 1) What is the value of my organization for my community?
- 2) What is the value my organization alone offers or offers better than anything else? In this competitive world, duplicative or second rate value is unlikely to survive for long.
- 3) How would my community be damaged if my organization closed its doors tomorrow?

If we cannot answer these questions, the only supporters we are likely to find already sit in our seats.

But with the passage of time, I have begun to think that these questions are perhaps too limiting, that they invite us to view our communities through the lens of our organizations as we have known them today. Perhaps the more critical questions are those that lift us outside that organizational context.

To use dance as an example, a dance leader must be prepared to answer:

1. What is the value of dance (not of my dance company) 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.

These questions feel especially pressing to me, because the future is unlikely to offer a return to the past—Tea Party politics notwithstanding—and because we are, I believe, in the midst of a reformation—an Arts Reformation that in many ways recalls the Religious Reformation of the 15th Century. Both that past religious and our current arts reformations have been spurred by technological breakthrough--the invention of the printing press and the subsequent wide spread public access to scripture occasioned by the printing press certainly has parallel in the redistribution of knowledge with the invention of the internet. Both reformations challenge old business structures –

god forbid that the decimation of monastic orders is the metaphoric fate for today's major institutions but only time will tell. And perhaps most profoundly, both reformations at their center challenge the notions of the necessity of intermediation in a spiritual relationship, whether that intermediary is the classic priest or the professional artist.

The Reformation notably reshaped and broadened the universe of how religion would operate, who would be empowered to act, giving rise to new denominations, new religious rituals, new opportunities for the common lay person to assume responsibility for her own spiritual experience. Similarly in the arts, we are witnessing an explosion of arts organizations operating in new ways and the emergence of the hybrid artist: amateurs doing work at a professional level—a group dubbed elsewhere as the Pro-Ams—a group whose work populates YouTube, Film festivals, dance competitions and more, a group who are expanding our aesthetic vocabulary at one end of the spectrum, and professional artists who choose to work outside of the traditionally hermetic arts environment, not from financial necessity but because the work they feel called to do cannot be accomplished in the narrow confines of the gallery, the concert hall or the theatre at the other. These hybrid artists are rejecting past divisions of professional and amateur and are expanding our sense of aesthetic possibilities—even as they assault our traditional notions of cultural authority and undermine the assumed ability of traditional arts organizations to set the cultural agenda. Indeed, a debate I witnessed in Montreal four years ago culminated in a government minister essentially saying, “You people”—(never my favorite phrase)—“should just declare victory and move on. Virtually everyone in my district writes poetry or reads fiction, paints pictures or listens to music, plays an instrument or acts in the local community theatre. You professional artists could disappear tomorrow

and no one would even notice the difference”—a stunning rebuke of the entire nonprofit sector and the professional artist that the assembled found themselves unable to adequately counter.

Now lest you think you hear me crying for the end of classic arts institutions, let me be clear: the Religious Reformation did not obliterate the Catholic Church. Just as 500 years later, many people around the world still find deep meaning in high mass and formal religious institutions, I for one believe that the historic institutions that we have funded to date at their best will continue to be worthy of our investment. They currently and will represent the best opportunities for lives of economic dignity for many artists, and the logical place where artists who need and deserve to work at a certain scale can find an appropriate home. Whatever we do as a community, we must continue to nurture and sustain these groups, and especially support their efforts to adapt and change to the larger world.

But in a world of arts participation—a time in which participation is growing while traditional attendance is declining, and in which technology has democratized the means of both artistic production and artistic distribution for the first time in human history—how do we recognize the impulses and expectations that the internet promotes—expectation of transparency and participation, of personalization and customization? How do we think, not only about presentation, but about engagement—about interacting with this growing tsunami of creative energy that typically exists beyond the purview of our classrooms, our buildings and our performing arts centers? How do we engage audiences in the creative process, not merely in the finished work? How do we expand our vision beyond producing to be the orchestrators of social interaction—interaction in which a performance is a piece but only a piece of what we are called to do—or of moving past concerns

about products to be consumed to focus instead on providing experiences that will serve as springboards to our communities' own creativity?

Of course the ultimate answer is that we don't know—certainly not yet, at any rate. Clay Shirkey in **COGNITIVE SURPLUS**—a strongly recommended read—suggests that we are likely to misinterpret the impact of the changes around us, destined as we are to interpret them through the filters of the past. When the printing press was first invented, he reminds us, everyone assumed that it would produce a homogenous world culture. Suddenly everyone would have a Bible, Plato, Aristotle and the 10-12 texts that were considered central to culture—a vision that focused solely on technology as disseminator. What no one anticipated was the explosive growth in the number of writers—and the tens of thousands of texts that would shatter the stranglehold on the canon as it was then known.

Recognizing this fundamental moment of reorganization for the arts industries in a context where the answers cannot yet be known, the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation has been explicitly supporting organizational innovation for the last five years. We are learning a lot about innovation—that innovators in this context focus on base hits—relatively small scale gambles that can lead incrementally to change—rather than on home runs; that innovation depends on relentless pressure from the top leaders who not only support but model new behavior; that innovators proceed—as Richard Evans notes—down “new pathways to mission fulfillment, discontinuous from previous practice, resulting from shifts in underlying organizational assumptions.” And that—as the authors of both **SWITCH: HOW TO CHANGE WHEN CHANGE IS HARD** and **POSITIVE DEVIANCE: HOW UNLIKELY INNOVATORS SOLVE THE WORLD'S TOUGHEST PROBLEMS** point out, many of the answers we seek may already exist in our own fields—answers commonly called “bright spots.”

One popular case study involves attempts to solve child malnutrition in Vietnam. After fruitless attempts engaging doctors, scientists, and other experts to invent or find a cure for malnutrition, the government turned at last to Jerry and Monique Sternin, giving them 6 months to reverse rising malnutrition trends. The Sternins approached this work through the filter of what is already working. They held meetings in communities, engaging as many villagers as were interested in the malnutrition issue. Having self-identified themselves as poor, very poor or very very poor, villages were asked whether there were any children—especially in these two most impoverished categories—who were not malnourished, but instead who were growing and showed consistent signs of health. The community then studied these children—discovering that their mothers in particular did three things that other mothers did not. The mothers of the healthy children fed them smaller portions but more frequently the day; in stirring the soup, they made sure to dig deep into the pot to provide vegetables and other nutrients to the children that had been lost to other children whose mothers tended to skim the top of the pot, and—perhaps most importantly—they took small handfuls of the plentiful tiny shrimp and crabs found abundantly in the rice paddies and added them to their children’s soup. By adopting these bright spot behaviors, the villagers saw dramatic reductions in local malnutrition.

Bright spots have several characteristics in common:

- 1) Bright spots are “observable exceptions.” In this case, as well as others, the bright spots are identified by others who see them behaving and having success outside of the norm.

- 2) **Bright spots are often unaware that their behavior is exceptional at all. Indeed, they are often surprised that not everyone is doing what they already take for granted as fairly commonplace practice.**
- 3) **Bright spots work with the same resources and face the same conditions as non bright spot behavers. Their success is not the result of more resources, or more money; more history or more time. Instead, bright spots are outliers who succeed against all odds—the same odds their colleagues face.**
- 4) **Bright spots demonstrate that solutions to seemingly intractable problems already exist within the affected community itself, but simply have yet to be understood and adopted by others. The quest for bright spots is essentially an attempt to shepherd existing intelligence and energy that already exists within the community—whether you define that as a single organization, a geographic place, or an entire discipline.**

Gatherings like this one today give us enormous opportunity to reach out to one another, to share the bright spots we may have seen, to find out more about what is working in spite of the enormous challenges facing us.

For me, one of the great bright spots in the country is the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, an organization that is attempting as radical a reinvention of itself as I have ever seen.

The SPCO, as it is called, began this journey by redefining its mission, abandoning the more traditional emphasis of “world class orchestra playing the great repertoire” in favor of a new mission of “patron development”—a mission that has economic consequences to be sure, but that

more critically prioritizes their role in reaching individuals who have had minimal or no relationship with symphonic music and turning them into fanatics for the music the SPCO offers. They have discarded the maestro model, instead signing engage prominent artists—Dawn Upshaw, for example—to staggered multi-year contracts for them to work with administrators and the musicians themselves to chart the artistic destiny of the orchestra. They have decided that the concert hall is not the venue—it is A venue, but not THE venue, and they have radically altered their programming profile to play in schools, ballparks, churches and more. They have redirected the attention of their board to become change agents, rather than guardians of past rituals. And they have rescaled their ticket structure, with tickets now \$10 or \$20, with a small percentage at a \$40 top—an enormous risk in a field where tickets more typically cost in the \$80, \$90 or \$100 region.

All of us are watching them with the greatest interest: already, they have seen their paid percentage of house skyrocket, and questions are now on the table: at these lower prices, will people come more often? Will they be more adventurous in what they come to see? Will they be less resentful of pieces they don't like? Will they recognize this low ticket as a "gift" and contribute in greater numbers?

While bright spots are deeply inspiring, a different school of innovation involves what Steve Johnson in *Where Good Ideas Come From: The Natural History of Innovation* calls "the adjacent possible"—innovation achieved not within a field but through the lifting of an idea from successful neighboring industries to launch breakthrough behavior. Guttenberg, he reminds us, came to the notion of the printing press, not by playing with calligraphers but by experimenting with the wine press, and

arguably the single greatest innovation in the nonprofit performing arts has been the subscription model, lifting it from the world of journalism but applying it to live performance.

There are some thrilling new models to watch that exemplify this “adjacent possible.” ACT Theatre in Seattle has abandoned the traditional subscription in favor of a membership model, based largely on health clubs and gyms—a monthly fee that entitles the member to come as often as she or he likes in a month, seating permitted. On the Boards performing arts center in Seattle has created a video documentation unit called On The Boards TV, borrowing its monetizing model largely from Netflix—rentals for differing periods with options to buy. Perhaps most interesting to me is work undertaken by Springboard for the Arts in St. Paul, MN, replicating the community shares agricultural model of buying a share in a local organic farm and then picking up a box of produce every month. In their CSA for artists, arts patrons buying share in an artist communities and retrieving a box of art every month—a system that sells out, has huge visibility, has led to performances around the box pickups and that has led shareholders to commission and grow their individual collections of specific artists they discover and admire.

Attuning ourselves to the external world—being vigilant in the search for the adjacent possible—may lead us to new insights where the true breakthrough ideas may be found.

All of which brings us back to our time here today. Even as we work incrementally to adapt and innovate in our respective homes in this interstitial moment, what must we do today?

At the most basic level, we must find new ways of working together. In a time when scarcity of resources heightens the competitive urge and can make it so easy to turn on one another, we are elevating the discourse to a vision of an arts ecology, realizing that praising theatre while disparaging dance or opera, arguing for the avant-garde while denigrating the mainstream, pleading the case of the smaller at the expense of the larger ultimately advantages no one and harms us all. We are discovering the power of bypassing competition in favor of co-opetition, as Yale author Barry Nailbuff urges—arguing that we can continue to compete for a piece of a fixed or shrinking pie, or coopetate to grow the pie for us all, even as we continue to inevitably compete for a piece of it.

Indeed this degree of coopetition allowed the arts community to rescue the \$50M earmarked for the arts in the economic recovery legislation when eliminated by the Senate. Cross-discipline coordinated messages, focused advocacy, verifiable data, activism and a carefully articulated sense of our importance to our communities, the power of celebrity spokespeople on our behalf, thank you Alec Baldwin, and the dedication of our Boards and political allies allowed us to make our case and win back funds that had been wrenched away..

We must put our audiences at the center of our missions, not at the side. Like the SPCO or Trey McIntyre Dance Project, which won instant allegiance in Boise Idaho, their home base, by opening their first concert with a documentary film—not about dance or Trey or the dancers but with every dancer giving a personal testimony about what she or he loved about Boise, we must remember that nonprofit arts groups were not founded for artists—they were founded for artists and the art form and for audiences. Despite the commonly accepted mythology that the nonprofit arts movement was

begun for artists, it was begun for artists and the art form and for audiences—and we weaken our own cause any time we focus on one of these to the exclusion of the other two.

We must tune our message, not to what we need, but to speak to where our audiences are listening from. Indeed, in this time, we need to always approach lawmakers, not with palms outstretched prepared to articulate what we need the government to do for us, but proud and confident, ready to articulate what we will do for the world. We will employ significant numbers—of artists yes and carpenters and electricians, caterers and more, we will stimulate economies, as the lure for tourism we will fill hotel rooms and restaurants, the teachers that reach into the educational system and more—plans of action designed to establish us, not as a source of need, but as a part of the solution. We need every legislator to invest, not in the arts, but in the education of our children, in the improved health of our communities, in the creation of inclusive, harmonious societies—all of which they can do through us.

And now we must take the long view. Frankly our opponents have succeeded precisely because they have been willing to sacrifice a current moment in favor of long term gain. They have built think tanks, and permeated education faculties, and lobbied hard to dismantle equal fair balance in reporting—thereby opening the door to Fox News—and extend the copyright in the interest of corporate clients, while we have argued over NEA appropriations and let the real issues go by us. Now is the time to ask ourselves, what will the world look like in 10 years if we succeed in fulfilling our collective vision of the arts—and what must we do now to begin to call that 10 year world into being?

Entire new opportunities for effectiveness now stand before us. While we have been stymied in the past by lack of quantifiable data that “rolls up” to present a case for the aggregate economic power of the arts, the appearance of the Cultural Data Project promises new verifiable numbers that will speak volumes—a power already seen in Pennsylvania, where arts advocates successfully turned back a move to place a sales tax on tickets sold at nonprofits—because they had the aggregate data not only about themselves but about their audiences and ticket buyers.

Our ability to measure our impact on our audiences has been similarly elusive, not only because our tools have tended to measure satisfaction in the short term—the summer camp school of research—rather than impact, both because we have lacked the ability to track our audiences over time as they lose touch, move away, graduate and relocate, or die, but because we have focused on the attitudinal rather than the behavioral. In an age of increasing sophistication about every ticket buyer—single tickets, walk-ups and subscribers as well—and of relative permanence of email addresses even as which typically do not change even as people move thousands of miles away, we may be able to gather information about our impact years after an encounter has taken place. Will we be able to measure that arts rich communities have less hate crimes than arts deprived ones? Will we be able to demonstrate that schools with arts programs have greater attendance rates, less disciplinary infraction, and greater class participation? Can we ask our audiences to translate an important arts experiences from years ago into meaningful action on their part today? What might we find?

Perhaps this too will produce new perspectives on our work work to us. Personally I have begun to question the value of our repeated emphasis on expression that we place on the arts—that we teach kids how to express themselves, for example. In a world of increasing white noise, where every citizen has access to a pulpit through a blog, might our real value lie less in teaching expression but teaching listening—the depth of listening to which every actor must aspire to hear the playwrights intent, to which the writer must heed her community to reflect life as a mirror, to which the painter must metaphorically listen to filter through a world of exploding color to find harmony, and more?

Have we been wrong to conflate art and creativity, or has separating the two in the past been harmful? Personally, I do think the two are separable—not by sector or location or even vocational status, believing that art can be accomplished in the for-profit as well as the non-profit, on television as well as in the museum, by the avocational citizen as well as by the professional. But just as not every cook is a chef or every person who administers first aid is a surgeon, not every creative person is—to my mind—an artist and (even more controversially) may not have the potential to be one, just as I lack the natural aptitude to be a scientist or engineer. The Harvard Task Force notes, “The enemies of excellence in the making of art are very much like the enemies of excellence in chemistry or English, neuroscience or history: inattention, conceit, the impulse to cut corners, a lack of vital engagement, conceptual timidity, a premature settling for routine and conventional answers.” Does this by negation point us to a useful beginning for distinguishing art from the creative? That art is marked by rigorous attention to detail, selflessness, the drive to compete at all costs, vital engagement, conceptual audacity, an unwillingness to settle for routine, a dedication to the pursuit of the unknown and the courage to embrace the new? Can we celebrate the rigor that is part of art, even

while celebrating the creative, recognizing that, while not synonymous, the two are inextricably linked and that, properly conceived, the advance of one should mean the growth of the other?

I for one am optimistic about the future of the arts, although I have not sounded it until now. 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 the arts, with many artists participating on panels and each session followed by a live performance—Vanessa German, a spoken word artist who blew the roof off with her raw evocation of feeling, a hip hop dancer on crutches, a Gospel Choir of HIV+ singers from the African continent.

While arts conferences are often 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 arrogance.

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.

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 lead 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 recognized the ultimate irony of their own success—that prosperity without spiritual enrichment does not bring fulfillment, and in the face of a growing culture dedicated to convenience—to no-iron shirts and microwave meals, to hands free parking and more, all striving to convince us that ease is good and effort is bad, there is value—irreplaceable value in the difficult, in the complex, in the ambiguous and the real. Indeed, if the arts are currency in the economy of meaning, we must strive more and more to ensure that meaning is not overwhelmed by market as an ultimate determinant of value.

Especially now, in an age of demonization and fear of difference, of intolerant social policies and politicians who encourage us to view our fellow human beings with fear and hostility and suspicion—an age of announcements to report suspicious behavior to the authorities nearest us—we must seize our role in the formation of our national characters, remembering that we gather audiences to look at our fellow human beings with curiosity and generosity. However dramatically our business models will change, the urgency of this quest will remain the same. In giving yourselves to the arts, you honor the past, commemorate the present, shape and change the future in a way that does honor to all and violence to none. You are activists, pledged and dedicated to a world of understanding, of tolerance, of compassion, of hope.

I salute you in that regard and thank you for every thing you do; I promise you the hand of friendship is extended from DDCF both now and for years to come; and I thank you for your kindness and generosity in listening to me this morning. Thank you and God speed.

