

Remarks

Ben Cameron, Executive Director, Theatre Communications Group Keynote lunch address, Oregon Cultural Summit

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Thank you so much for inviting me to be with you. Ever since my first visit to Portland five years ago or so, I have fallen wildly in love with this city—how can you fail to love a city that has Powell's? If no one will ever offer me a job here—and hey, I'm open—I may just have to open a West Coast office for TCG.

I'm especially delighted to be here in a gathering of for profit and not for profit leaders—leaders spanning both sides of the giving table. Whatever our professions or sector, I believe we have common cause: we all hope for and work towards a literature, thoughtful, empathic society—as well as towards an economically vibrant and prosperous one.

I met a number several years ago at the Breakfast of Champions, a community wide celebration honoring arts supporters, where I was asked to articulate the importance of the arts to a vital community. I referenced my time at Target Stores (formerly Dayton Hudson), when, as the manager of the philanthropic program, I was often asked about our 50+ year track record of donating 5% of pretax profits to community groups and specifically of supporting the arts. Typically, we cited our history of giving to the arts--- a grant to an orchestra in the corporation's very first year--- as the origins of the policy. Additionally, we cited the livability of communities as enhanced by the arts--- its value to our own employees and its impact on our ability to attract them to our marketplaces. More formally, we often cited economic impact studies which prove that arts organizations typically leverage an additional \$5-7 for the local economy for every dollar spent on a ticket--- dollars for local restaurants, parking, and gift shops, for local printers who print programs, for sign makers who fashion marquees, for the piano tuners who tune the instruments, for the caterers who run the concessions, etc. If the arts are imperiled, we knew, the entire local small business community would feel the reverberations.

These economic arguments have been expanded and deepened in the last few years by two men. Richard Florida, in his landmark research, links true civic vitality and prosperity, not to sports teams—think Cleveland, Detroit, Pittsburgh, all major cities with massive sports industries and huge civic problems—but to the presence of creative people—people initially attracted by the presence of other open, creative minds, but who need a healthy arts and culture infrastructure to insure their loyalty and entice them to stay. And more recently Daniel Pink, in *A Whole New Mind*, heralds the onset

of the post-information Conceptual Age, an era springing from a sense of material abundance that is deepening our nonmaterial yearnings, globalization that is shipping white collar work overseas, and powerful technologies that are eliminating certain kinds of work altogether—an arts animated age. That's why, already, Bob Lutz, CEO of General Motors has said, "I see us as being in the art business. Art, entertainment and mobile sculpture, which coincidentally, also happens to provide transportation"—an echo of BMW's Chris Bangles, who said, "We make moving works of art which express the driver's love of quality."

For those of us who deal in the arts traffic in the world of the human spirit, this emphasis on retail and economic advantage can seem a bit mercenary. With the advent of new research, we in the arts community have become increasingly sophisticated about quantifying our value in other dimensions. Researcher Shirley Brice Heath of Stanford University—not an arts researcher—was charged with studying all forms of after school programs—sports teams, church groups, scout programs, the arts and more. Much to her own surprise, she found that it was the arts students dramatically outperformed their non-arts connected peers in significant ways. Working with high risk students in inner city east Palo Alto—far from an affluence neighborhood—Heath found that arts students are four times more likely to win academic awards, four times as likely to participate in math and science fairs, show significant reduction in disciplinary infractions and perform better on verbal and math SAT scores than students without arts experiences. These studies were reinforced by a Harvard study focusing on students working with Shakespeare, work that promotes greater complexity in thinking, greater verbal acuity, tolerance of ambiguity, interpretive skills and increased sense of self-discipline and self-esteem.

That's why President Lee Bollinger has staked his administration at Columbia University to the creation of an entirely new arts campus.

That's why Syracuse University President Nancy Cantor has aggressively insisted that arts and culture must be at the center of the curriculum, given their unique ability to teach playfulness and responsibility.

And it's why Sir Ken Robison has said that the failure of modern public education—a system devised to solve the problems of the industrial age—can be corrected in our post-industrial world only if we place arts and creativity at the top of our priorities, rather than at the bottom where they currently languish.

My own favorite argument, however, addresses our consistent failure as a nation to transcend our racial and class divisions—ugly divisions that Katrina has glaringly reminded us still exist in our contemporary world. In response to that ugliness, I especially cherish a UCLA study that proves that high school seniors who participated in the creation of theatre are 40% less likely to tolerate racist behavior than kids who were not theatre participants, and was I the only one who registered the New York

Times features on Columbine--- features where the students repeatedly said the ONLY place they felt a sense of community, where the cliques lost their power, and the disenfranchised felt welcome was in the performing arts center?

These principles—economic vitality, educational and intellectual achievement, and social harmonization—are the bases of our advocacy and policy arguments in a competitive society. And our audiences, our customers, our guests are in touch with these values far more than we often credit them with being. 93% of Americans in some polls want their children to have arts education, for example, and when pressed can be articulate about the impact of the arts in their lives.

These essentially were the arguments I made on my maiden voyage here five years ago, and while I believe they remain sound, the world has changed in complicated ways.

Regardless of our political points of view, few among us would deny that we now live in a time of unraveling social discourse.

We live now in a nation divided—admittedly over simplistically—into red states and blue states, where antipathies of elitism vs. authenticity often trump substance and civility.

We live in a time of rancorous debates in our national and state legislatures, with legislators in Texas literally fleeing the country to forestall business, of grotesque and contorted gerrymandered districting, and news coverage that emphasizes personality and character assassination at the expense of substance and intellectual discourse.

We now have a presidential debate format where the candidates are not allowed to address one another but only engage in tepid and often meaningless sound bites in parallel, where personalized e-newspapers promise to shield us from encounters with ideas that make us uncomfortable—disturbed by stories of Iraq? Profile yourself on line and get a paper where those stories will never be included. And, according to Fast Company magazine, this will soon expand: within two years, television technology will allow us to block an incoming signal from any group we find offensive. Don't like one of our major political parties? Program your TV accordingly and you'll never see their candidates or their ads at all.

Amy Gutman, the President of the University of Pennsylvania, captured it far better than I when she described the consequences of these changes:

The signs of disrespect are all around us. In the ferocious assault on the judiciary. In the shrill debate over Terry Schiavo. And worst of all, in the hateful ad hominem attacks that issue daily from radio and TV talk shows. We are living in a smash-mouth culture in which extremists dominate public debate to

the point of hijacking it. You cannot have a reasoned discussion about abortion when one side is slandered as “baby killers” and the other side is smeared as “religious wing nuts.” It is hard to pursue a reasoned debate about the Iraqi war when opponents of the war are accused of treason and the president of the United States is compared to Hitler. Reach across the aisle, pursue collaborative solutions or explore any shade of gray on any charged issue, and you are likely to be ignored or dismissed as indecisive. That is, if you’re lucky. More likely you will endure crude and often malicious attacks on your intelligence, faith and patriotism. You may even face death threats.

Today, we face a populace as divided as any in my memory—a populace fractiously divided by politics, divided by faith, divided by race and sexuality and more. In the arena of arts and entertainment, we saw what happened last year when Linda Ronstadt dared to dedicate a song to Michael Moore—a dedication that resulted in drinks thrown, posters destroyed, and her contract prematurely terminated, with the assurance that she would never work in Vegas again.

Susan Booth at the Alliance Theatre in Atlanta tells us that, when a character in a new play said, “If I had time with W, I’d tell him to play nice with others and share his toys,” people did not wait for intermission but clambered over one another noisily to exit, volubly expressing their displeasure at seeing their president mocked.

Those of us in the theatre ask ourselves, what does this polarization mean for the theatre, the form to which many of us have given our lives—the form that embraces and thrives on the unfamiliar, the uncomfortable, the unknown? More critically, what does this mean for our world, for our society, especially as we confront problems of unprecedented dimension?

Especially in this moment, it becomes easier and easier to demonize, to distort, to retreat in fear when confronted with the unknown or the other. Those of us who have lived in New York feel it in insidious ways on a daily basis: we feel it in the selective security searches on our commuter train platforms. We feel it the oscillating levels of yellow and orange security alerts. We especially feel it in perhaps the most blatant daily reminder of our shifted world—the announcement in every train station, every subway station, that looped reminder of “Ladies and gentlemen, please report any suspicious persons or packages to the authorities around you.”

In a time when we are increasingly asked to view one another with hostility and suspicion, the arts invite us to view one another with curiosity and generosity.

And in so doing, the arts play a unique role in community and community formation.

When we come together in many public arenas—at sports teams, at alumni events, at church—the first thing we do is sing. Whether it's the national anthem, the alma mater or *Faith of our Fathers*, it is in singing that our individual differences are put aside and community is made.

When young people come together, whether across racial or national lines, the bass lines start thumping, the bodies start dancing, and break moves start breaking. And it is in dancing together that heritage and language are overcome and community is made.

When we want to remember and commemorate, we photograph, we paint, we gather to see the images on our eyeballs that bind us as a society. It is through Walker Evans images from the Depression, the Grant Wood couple in front of their farm house, even the irreverence of the Jasper Johns flag that we recall our history that binds us as a nation and in which our community is made.

When we want to analyze and understand, we write—novels at times that allow us to find connections to others, even in the privacy of our own living rooms—or plays, where we come together to explore the most private of feelings in the most public of spaces, where we breathe the same air, actor with actor, actor with audience, audience with audience—a sacred space where difference is confronted and considered in a safe place, where essentially community is made.

When we need the counsel of our ancestors, we revive; when we need to give voice to our contemporary pain, we create; when so much encourages us to recoil in the presence of those we do not know, we are invited to find delight in their presence instead—in short, to convene where community is made.

When I worked at Target, I often traveled to new communities as part of a “swat team” to introduce a store before it even opened. We’d arrive and explain Target’s remarkable policy of donating 5% of pre-tax profits to not for profits in communities where they operate. “We’re coming to town,” we’d say. “We’re giving money away, and here’s how you can ask for a piece of that pie, if you share our three funding priorities of education, domestic violence prevention or the arts.” In every town I visited, sooner or later a hand would go up and someone would say, “In our town, we have AIDS exploding through the ceiling. We have welfare to work issues. We have a homeless shelter without enough beds, a library system that can’t afford to buy books, a food shelf without enough supplies to feed the hungry. Why the hell do you people give so much money to the arts.” I’d stop and ask, “How many of you grew up singing in the church choir or acting in the school play or painting pictures in art class.” Almost every hand would go up. “What did you learn from that?” I’d say. Someone would say “I learned stage left” and someone else would mention learning to read a musical scale. But then someone would say, “You know, I learned punctuality. You could ditch class or show up late at my school, but you can’t show up at 8:15 when the curtain goes up at 8.” “I

learned teamwork, because when you sing in the choir, it's not about how well you sing-- it's about how well you listen and blend with others." Others talked about delayed gratification, how they could practice those musical scales a hundred times and then suddenly one day they'd bloom without warning. Stamina. Physical rigor. My favorite was a retired Marine in Jacksonville, NC, who said, "I didn't learn discipline in the Marines; I learned discipline playing the French horn." And when it came to theatre, people would say, "I learned to see the world. I learned to hear the world. I learned to feel the world through someone's eyes and ears and heart, other than my own." When it comes to problems of AIDS and declining education and hunger and the host of other problems we as a society face, if we don't have that empathic ability to see the world through each other's eyes and ears and hearts, we can't even have the conversation.

Especially in a time of competing and conflicting priorities, the financial health of arts organizations has never been under greater pressure. I'd be happy to explain to any of you why the arts resist downsizing, efficiency strategies—the impossibility of doing complete Shakespeare with less than 16 or a Mahler 8 with fewer than 100 musicians, not to count the chorus. I'd be happy to remind you that ticket receipts typically cover only 53% of the expenses the theatre incurs—that a \$5 million arts organization typically has to raise \$54,000 every week in contributions, 52 weeks a year, and in week 53 it starts all over again. And I'd be most happy to remind you of why we persevere—Indeed, our very terminology can obscure our motives, defining us by negation as being not FOR profit: can you imagine how differently we would value our role if we were the FOR COMMUNITY sector and the corporate was the NOT FOR COMMUNITY sector? Nevertheless we often lose sight of what we are *for*: equitable access for all citizens, challenging ideas, community formation, innovative artistic practice, civic dignity, and more. Indeed, the very premise behind the creation of a not-for-profit sector was that certain services or activities, fundamental to a healthy society, could *not* be sustained by the marketplace—a visionary recognition that forward movement, progressive ideas, and innovative practice often demand resources beyond those the market can ever provide or indeed can even alienate the market in the name of progress.

This all requires work—hard, hard work and sacrifice and more. Only you can answer whether it is worth it. And only you can measure the will, the determination and the resources you can muster to support the arts here in Portland.

But every theatre and every arts organization—large and small—that I know started with a dream—and came to life only when that dream was shared by individuals willing, not only to dream, but to work and sacrifice and share.

That's the story behind Roadside Theatre of Whitesburg, KY—a world renowned theatre sitting in impoverished Appalachia—where coal miners not only see themselves and their stories onstage, but form new connections while touring to Welsh miners in Wales

or while hosting visiting companies of Latino, African American and Native American workers.

That's the story in Bloomsburg, PA, where a group of graduate students more than 30 years ago settled in the Alleghenies and now occupy an abandoned movie theatre as the Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble, producing not only the great classics of the American and larger world stage, but new work drawn from letters to the local editor written over the last 50 years.

That's the story of Dell'Arte Theatre of remote Blue Lake, CA—a logging town now the home to one of the world's outstanding commedia troupes, now offering an MFA to aspiring artists who flock from Europe and North America and South America and Asia to study there.

And that's the story of the Guthrie Theatre, where more than 180 volunteers sold 21,000 subscriptions for that inaugural season before the first actor stepped on the stage and spoke the first line; the story of South Coast Repertory, where a passionate and active board of directors have recently raised more than \$50 million to renovate and expand a performing arts complex and endow the organization in perpetuity. In some level, it's the story of every successful arts organization in America: a dream, a vision owned by a community who bring it to fruition through work and sharing and sacrifice.

So please hear me when I say to those of you who support the arts, your gift is more than to just arts and culture. Your support is a form of social activism. It is a statement of belief in the power of community. It is a passionate cry that we can only grow together as a society if we find the strength to confront and consider ideas that may make us uncomfortable or may not be our own. And indeed that a community without art has no voice, has no memory of its aspiration is perhaps not a community at all.

Is this worth it? Clearly this is a determination that only you can reach. But I challenge you out of my love for Portland, which is admittedly only five years old, to join me when you realize that your businesses deserve the arts, your children deserve the arts, and your communities deserve the arts. And none of them will have the arts without provisionary and most strenuous ongoing support.

If we had more time today, we could explore the specific environment in which we operate, for frankly we've done little today to acknowledge how difficult times really are. So in closing, let me leave you with an image, one which many of you have heard me use before but that I offer you again in hopes that will inspire and sustain you in these unprecedentedly challenging times. Years ago, a public poll asked the question, "If your house were on fire, what is the first thing you would grab as you ran out the door?" The answer: Your family photos. Today, I say to you with all sincerity, the arts, culture, and humanities of this nation are our family photographs. As a man whose

ancestors came from Scotland, Ireland, England, and Germany; the plays of Shakespeare, the plays of Goethe, the plays of Beckett, are my family photographs. As a man who was born and raised in the southern part of the United States; the novels of William Faulkner, the short stories of Carson McCullers, the plays of Tennessee Williams, are my family photographs. As a man of faith in American, the chorales of Bach, the oratoria of Handel, the music of Sandy Patti are my family photographs. As a gay man in America today, the dances of Bill T. Jones, the plays of Tony Kushner, are my family photographs. And as an American, as an American; the novels of Toni Morrison, the poetry of Maya Angelou, the architecture of Maya Lin, the songs of my Native American brothers and sisters, the poetry of my Chicano/ Latino aunts and uncles, these and more are our family photographs. And if we do our work right, these photographs will live and breath as testaments to who we were, what we thought, what we felt, just as the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, are the living photos of ancient Greece—not the record of wars won and lost.

When I left Target stores, I left what many people said was the best job in the world. Frankly, it is the best job in the world--if somebody offers you that job, you just take it. There's a saying when you enter Target's charitable division. They say, "Welcome to corporate philanthropy: you've just had your last bad meal and your last sincere compliment." But I was honored when TCG asked me to return to the side of the giving table where I now sit, because I believe with every fiber of my being that what we do when we give ourselves to arts culture and humanities 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 our opponents may try to shake us from that path, for those of us who are spiritually inclined, it is God's work we do.

In that light, I'd like to thank you for your role in doing God's work here in Portland, whether you work directly in the arts community, or whether you support it politically, or through your business.

I'd like to assure you that the hand of TCG is stretched out to you if we can ever be of any help to you at any time.

And I'd like to thank you for your kindness and your patience in listening to me today. Godspeed to you in your work.