



Speech by Rip Rapson:

Arts and Culture In Dangerous Times

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Closing Plenary of the Grantmakers in the Arts Annual Conference, held in Detroit, Michigan.

What a pleasure it is to have you all in Detroit. I hope your time here has made clear how vitally central arts and culture have been to the resetting of Detroit's trajectory. I wanted to expand the aperture just a bit to say a word about their importance in helping us navigate our current national circumstance.

The Primacy of Values

In the immediate hours after last November's election, I wrote about the hope felt by so many of us that the vulgarity, bombastic certitude and mean-spiritedness of the campaign season would yield to a rational consistency of governance norms across party lines, across systems of belief, across idiosyncratic temperaments.

Well, things didn't quite turn out that way.

We have instead been catapulted into an existential crisis that forces each of us to look inward, to excavate the unalterable bedrock of our values, of our faith, of what we stand for. And each one of you in this room does exactly that – every hour of every day. Valorizing an abiding belief that our every action must reflect what we believe to be good and true and just. That is what it means to be a mission-driven organization.

Indeed, philanthropy's privileged position in society carries with it elevated responsibility to ensure that there is no confusion or equivocation about what we stand for. So, I wanted to set out as clearly as I can what Kresge *does* stand for:

- We stand *for* the animating energies of the pursuit of truth – *not for* fealty to the indefensible and depreciation of reasoned discourse.
- We stand *for* opportunity structures that dismantle and substitute for the persistent and pervasive racial, economic, and political barriers that so shamefully impede pathways to equality and justice – *not for* the enshrinement of those barriers in public policy, in the perpetuation of racial and ethnic division and in the corrosion of compassion for the least fortunate among us.
- We stand *for* the principled stewardship of our shared destiny and the promotion of structures of mutual support – *not for* the legitimization of a malevolent machinery of feigned and nonstop outrage and vilification that undermines confidence in our most fundamental democratic institutions.

- We stand *for* the power of a creative problem-solving that calls on community wisdom, intergenerational exchange, and respect for difference – *not for* the false comfort of facile judgments and rhetorical hyperbole about complex, inter-braided problems.
- We stand *for* the embrace and ennoblement of every individual’s inherent dignity, worth, and decency – *not for* a denigration and demonization of those whose skin pigment, physical conditions, sexual orientation or faith differs from our own.
- And we stand *for* an abiding optimism about the perfectibility of the human spirit and the power of faith and grace and beauty – *not for* the dismal brew of a calculating and cruel cynicism placed in service of an unyielding pursuit of self-advancement.

The Imperative of Action

Those are our values. They don’t need to be everyone’s. But for all of us in one degree or another, the question is what do we do when what we stand for comes under assault.

Garrison Keillor, the humor laureate of Lake Wobegon, took one option off the table – lacerating the idea that those who felt aggrieved by last November’s election could simply wait matters out.

“The government is in (someone else’s) hands,” he wrote. “Let them . . . build the wall and carry on the trade war with China and deport the undocumented and deal with the opioids. (We) – by which I mean librarians, children’s authors, yoga practitioners, Unitarians, bird watchers, people who keep books on their shelves, that bunch – can go for a long, brisk walk and smell the roses.”¹

The acidity of Keillor’s irony underscores the point: the ethical imperative of action is searing.

This country is so rich in aspiration, yet so big and sloppy and diverse in every other possible way, that there is room in the interstices of even the most deleterious policies, dehumanizing rhetoric, decimated regulations and dismantled programs for Americans of every walk of life to build in the unappreciated silhouettes of marginalized communities the spark that makes light.²

But how? I want to suggest three principles that seem paramount in understanding how arts and culture can help.

¹Garrison Keillor, “Trump voters will not like what happens next.” *The Washington Post*, November 9, 2016.

²With thanks to my great friend, Alan Stone.

The Ethical Underpinnings of Action: Three Principles

First, we must bear witness.

It's understandable for community workers, nonprofit organizations and philanthropists to question whether their voices matter in an environment saturated with "information chaff" – insomnia-induced tweets, bot-distributed misinformation and troll-generated diversionary feints – all intended to lock our attention onto bits of data, alternative facts and other intellectual flotsam and jetsam that obscure the real issues of the day.³ But these voices do matter – enormously. And the arts are powerful instruments of creative amplification.

The arts cast our values in bright relief, providing unequivocal compass toward the North Star of a just and humane society. They are needed to tell the stories of ordinary people working in dignity to improve the economic, social and political conditions of community life. They are needed to jolt people out of a sense of defeatism about the inevitability of power structures smothering authenticity and conviction. They are needed to give us the courage to persevere.

Second, we must fortify the vehicles to surface our courage.

Because arts and culture can tap deep reservoirs of heritage, bridge across difference and erect new platforms of civic participation and community agency, they can animate consummately democratic spaces such as libraries, community centers, parks, places of worship, even alleyways and abandoned railroad beds, creating places of safe harbor and physical, spiritual and emotional support for threatened, disenfranchised or otherwise deeply disempowered citizens.

By its essence, moreover, artistic and cultural expression reinforces the broader civic membrane needed to hold acts of courage.

- Because the arts can interrupt our certitude by seeking to explain rather than resolve.
- Because they can dislodge our inertias by drawing us outside ourselves to question the ways we see the world.
- Because they can substitute the unexpected and fresh for the conventional, insular and stale.
- Because they can surface a vision of connection as an antidote to the democratic degeneration precipitated by apathy and indifference.⁴

³See the brilliant blog "Silence" by Heinz Endowments President Grant Oliphant, January 10, 2017. <http://www.heinz.org/Interior.aspx?id=480&post=39>.

⁴See also Tusa, John. *Art Matters: Reflecting on Culture*, page 22 (Methuen Publishing, Ltd., London: 1999).

Third, we need to forge alliances around the non-negotiable.

In no time in my memory has it been more important for arts and culture to become part of a larger movement of social justice – helping strengthen the alliances necessary to speak and advance those truths of equity, fairness and justice that we know to be inviolable:

- That climate change is a social justice issue.
- That unequal educational attainment is an injustice no civilized society can tolerate.
- That health disparities driven by social, economic and environmental deprivation undermine the best intentions of our public health system.
- That no neighborhood resident in the City of Detroit, or any city for that matter, should have to cope with entire blocks of blight, neglected and unusable public parks and community centers, corner convenience stores substituting soda and chips for fresh food.
- That an effective and affordable local and regional public transit system is prerequisite to getting and holding a job.

We are all interwoven into what Dr. Martin Luther King called the “inescapable network of mutuality.” That means that institutions like Kresge have to invest – generously and without hesitation – in ensuring that individuals, organizations and movements possess the tools they need to organize and mobilize, to educate and advocate, to rebuild the sinews of social capital and strengthen the musculature of citizen-based problem-solving.

Conclusion

Our conceptions of risk and safety are sliding like sand from out beneath us. Acts that were once risky, are now elementary and insufficient. Fundamental democratic norms that were once safe, are too often trivialized as transitory, relative or out of touch.

I choose, however, to view this moment as an inflection point, not a new stasis. It is a call to reassessment, recalibration, recommitment. The nonprofit and philanthropic sectors have spent decades trying to create and assemble the building blocks of opportunity and justice. That architecture is woefully incomplete to be sure. But it is an architecture at once complex, dynamic and resilient. Our charge is to continue fitting together those building blocks in a coherent, inclusive, impactful way.

This is no time to put down our trowels and mortar. We need to keep building and rebuilding, even when the building inspector tells us we don’t have a permit – even when the demolition crew drives onto the site.

Sorry to be trite, but my father was an architect and a planner. In this climate, we all need to be.