



Speech by Rip Rapson:

Our Common Future

Oct. 26, 2017

Plenary address at the Independent Sector Annual Conference in Detroit, Michigan.

Thank you, Donna (Murray Brown) for such a gracious introduction.

What an extraordinary, uplifting, sobering conversation. We honor Rosanne (Haggerty) and Sarah (Eagle Heart) today, but they honor us every day through their strength, compassion, clarity of vision and profound commitment. It is leadership of the highest order.

And permit me to underscore the leadership that Stephen Henderson has provided to this community. When our political leadership was mired in an abyss of dysfunction and moral corrosion, he was unflinching in his insistence on integrity. When our economic situation reached rock-bottom, he arched our conversation toward clarity about causes and urgency about solutions. When we began a downtown renewal, he elevated the moral imperative of putting our neighborhoods and their residents on equal footing. He is a treasure.

After listening to Rosanne and Sarah and Stephen, I'm under no illusions that I can say anything about leadership that hasn't been said – thank you very much Dan Cardinali and Rob Collier for that. But let me offer a few thoughts about how we at Kresge are viewing leadership in such a disturbing time in our history.

The Primacy of Values

First, a news-flash: This is a challenging environment for principled, authentic leadership.

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 – indeed cruelty – 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. Indeed, the term "wishful thinking" doesn't begin to do justice given the violence with which that hope has been shattered.

We have 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, each organization in the independent sector, 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. That is what it means to be dedicated to improving the life circumstances of the homeless, native communities or others who are disenfranchised or marginalized. That is the why the membership of Independent Sector, the Michigan Council on Foundations, and the Michigan Council on Nonprofits and all that they do and represent is so terribly, terribly important.

A philanthropic organization like Kresge is no different. Indeed, our privileged position in society carries with it elevated responsibility to ensure that there is no confusion or equivocation about what we stand for. So, let me try to be as clear as I can about 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, interbraided 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 – *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 *Prairie Home Companion's* 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.”ⁱ

Keillor’s acid 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.ⁱⁱ

But how? I can only answer for Kresge, but three principles seem paramount.

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 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.ⁱⁱⁱ But these voices do matter – enormously.

They are needed to 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 create the space to surface our courage.

The power of places of sanctuary will only grow in importance as threatened and deeply disempowered communities look for physical, spiritual and emotional safe-harbor and support. The tapestry of those gathered in this room today suggests just how central a role that consummately democratic institutions of public gathering such as libraries, community centers, social service agencies, places of worship and countless others already play in safeguarding individual and group expression and in affirming the power of informal networks of mutual assistance.

But those gathered here this afternoon also remind us of the importance of strengthening the broader civic membrane needed to hold acts of courage. These are the organizations that have gotten proximate to those most affected by injustice – like Rosanne’s, like Sarah’s, like yours. They are vehicles to amplify community voice and build community agency. They are antidotes to the democratic degeneration precipitated by apathy and indifference.

Their plate will be increasingly full, and we must support them generously and without hesitation.

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

Foundations can't lobby or advocate for particular legislation. But that doesn't mean that we can't help build and 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.

So, institutions like Kresge have to invest in what Dr. Martin Luther King called the “inescapable network of mutuality” – 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. This room is a collective reminder that we have spent decades trying to create and assemble the building blocks of opportunity and justice. That architecture is woefully incomplete to be sure. But we have created a complex, dynamic and resilient nonprofit, civic and philanthropic infrastructure to fit together those building blocks in a coherent, 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.

ArtAttack

And now, for something a little more uplifting and optimistic.

Since 2008, the Kresge Arts in Detroit program has contributed over \$4.5 million to the local creative economy through the Kresge Eminent Artist Award, Kresge Artist Fellowships and Gilda Awards in Film & Music, Literary Arts, Live Arts and Visual Arts. This investment in artists working in Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties empowers culturally minded thinking and strengthens Detroit's position as a major center for arts and culture nationally and internationally.

We recognize Kresge Artist Fellows for their creative vision and commitment to excellence through this support. The diversity of talents reflected amongst the Artist Fellows is breathtaking. Their talent, accomplishment and aspiration are a reflection of our community's broader cultural and artistic wealth. Detroit's resilience and revival cannot be understood without reference to the work that artists in every corner of the city are pursuing – to improve community life, to pioneer

new forms of expression, to connect our past and present to our future.

I'm delighted that two Kresge Fellow alumni are joining us now.

Chace Morris "Mic Write" has continued to win prestigious awards since his 2013 Kresge Literary Fellow recognition, including a 2015 Knight Arts Challenge grant. Growing up in Detroit, Chace says, "we don't write the poems, we are the poems." Chace's work has been featured through a wide variety media including NPR, The Offing, Muzzle, Bandcamp Daily, Mother Jones & The Village Voice. His latest project, ONUS Chain, was hailed by Okayplayer as "one of the best protest records of 2016."

Chace is joined by Chi (chee) Amen-Ra in a first-ever collaboration between these two artists. Chi, a 2016 Kresge Arts Fellow, the African Drum instructor at the Detroit Institute of Music Education, and guest educator at universities throughout Michigan, is a percussionist who focuses on rhythms of the African Diaspora. He believes that the range of music reflects the range of humanity.

Please welcome Chace and Chi.

ⁱGarrison Keillor, "Trump voters will not like what happens next." *The Washington Post*, November 9, 2016.

ⁱⁱWith thanks to my great friend, Alan Stone.

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