



Speech by Rip Rapson:

## **The Imperative of Acting on Our Values**

Oct. 25, 2017

*Remarks after accepting the 2017 Daniel Hart Krichbaum Visionary Civic Leader Award from the Interfaith Leadership Council in Detroit, Michigan.*

Good evening. Thank you, Shirley (Stancato), for such an extraordinarily gracious introduction. I must tell you how overwhelming it is for me to accept an award in Dan Krichbaum's name. I got to know Dan during his service both to the Michigan Roundtable for Diversity and Inclusion and to Gov. Granholm. He defined what it means to be a public servant: kind, selfless, compassionate, possessed of bedrock integrity and utterly committed to the pursuit of the common good. It is a deep honor to be mentioned in the same breath as Dan.

It is an honor as well to take my place in a line of awardees that includes Nancy (Schlichting) and Shirley. Shirley was the very first person outside the foundation whom I met when I arrived in Detroit. I've carried with me ever since her wise counsel about Detroit's legacy, its challenges and its promise. And Nancy is one of my heroes – if it weren't enough to have strengthened the commitment of the Henry Ford Hospital System to the City of Detroit during a time of impossible financial and social challenge, she also ratcheted up by 13 notches the standard by which visionary and skilled executive leadership is measured.

And finally, it is a profound pleasure to follow Eide Alawan to the stage – what an absolutely remarkable career of community service. Deepest congratulations.

### **How the Environment Has/Has Not Changed**

When I wrote the observations quoted in the program, it was 12 hours after the November election results were certified. I expressed a 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. 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 faith, of our values, of what we stand for. That is the why the council and all it does and represents is so terribly, terribly important.

You need to be joined – and you are – by other organizations and institutions that share an abiding belief that our every action must reflect what we believe to be good and true and just.

I would like to believe that Kresge is one of those organizations. Permit me to describe as clearly as I can what we 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.”<sup>i</sup>

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.<sup>ii</sup>

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

## **The Ethical Imperative 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.<sup>iii</sup> But those 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 disenfranchised, threatened, and often deeply disempowered communities look for physical, spiritual and emotional shelter and support. The symbolic importance of who is gathered in this room tonight reflects just how central a role our mosques, churches, synagogues and temples already play in safeguarding individual and group expression and affirmation through the warrant of worship.

But we also have to strengthen the broader civic membrane needed to hold acts of courage. These are the organizations that have gotten proximate to those most affected by injustice. They are vehicles to amplify community voice. They are antidotes to the democratic degeneration precipitated by apathy and indifference.

Their plate will be increasingly full, and we must support them. From ACCESS to Affirmations, from Detroiters Working for Environmental Justice to the Economic Justice Coalition of Michigan, from New Detroit to MOSES.

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

Foundations cannot 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 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, philanthropic, nonprofit and civic 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.

Thank you very much for listening. And good night.

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

2. With thanks to my great friend, Alan Stone.

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