

## Keynote Address by Ben Cameron

June 7, 2012

Whose Business is the Arts?

Thank you. I am delighted to be back in Pennsylvania, considering myself as I do a Lehigh Valley-ite once removed. Although I was born and raised in North Carolina, my father was a native of Easton. My favorite aunt and uncle worked the line at Binney and Smith; and Christmas always meant the box of 72 Crayola crayons—complete with sharpener, of course, and I am happy to proclaim a deep and abiding love for scrapple with white Karo syrup. A Southerner I will always be, but with a distinctly Pennsylvanian twist.

For the last decade or so, I have had the privilege of attending numerous local arts community meetings—New York City, Portland, Seattle, Boston, Minneapolis, Chicago, San Diego, even Edmonton and Calgary, to name just a few. Participants in these meetings have at their best embodied the pathway of creativity as described by Angeles Arrien that I hope we will all follow through the day: “showing up—really showing up—listening deeply, speaking the truth, and letting go of predetermined results.”

Today offers you the opportunity not only to consider new ways to organize, fundraise and reinvent your own organizational practices, but 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—ideas that 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 our country’s economic challenges. Indeed, I would suggest that the real crisis we face is not merely economic.

To explain.

In 2006, two years before the economy turned, the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation convened more than 700 arts professionals in 22 meetings across the country to articulate the challenges the arts were facing.

In 2006—two years before the economy turned—we heard about changes in audience composition—demographic changes in race, age, gender, national heritage and language that, on the one hand, offered thrilling new opportunities for expression, collaboration, discovery and more, but on the other challenged a presumed allegiance to traditionally Eurocentric art forms—and in audience behavior, with erosion of audiences in every field—declining subscription renewals, difficulties in attracting single ticket buyers, increased “churn”—a term reflecting the high percentage—typically 70-75%—of audience members who attend a single event in a season and do not return—the collapse in the window of social planning post 9/11, when seemingly overnight audiences shifted from committing, not two to four weeks in

advance, but more typically purchasing on the day of or, if you're lucky, 24-48 hours in advance—a disorienting shift that continues to plague box office and marketing departments who struggle to understand the implications on a Tuesday for a sparsely sold Saturday performance. Two years before the economy turned, we faced a populace characterized by over-scheduling and exhaustion—a time in which 42% of men and 55% of women said they are too tired to do the things they truly want to do, and where the #1 answer to the question of most eagerly anticipated use of a free evening is no longer dinner with friends or a movie or a performing arts event, but is instead “a good night’s sleep.” After decades of growth, our audiences were shrinking and our own financial needs, driven in many cases by escalating fixed costs of facilities, insurance, health care and more, in tandem with negative shifts in funding meant escalating ticket prices that threaten to place attendance beyond so many in our communities we wish to reach and serve.

Two years before the economy turned, we heard the struggle to understand more fully the impact of technology on the live performing arts. The potential of technology as a marketing device has proven, if anything, too effective: in trying to attract the attention of potential ticket buyers, we now compete with (depending on who you read) between 3-5,000 different marketing messages a typical American sees every single day. In fact, technology has emerged as our biggest competitor for leisure time: Gen X-ers spend 20.7 hours of leisure time every week on TV and online combined, the majority TC; Gen Y-ers spend even more—22.8 hours, the majority on line—and by the time Net-geners reach their twenties, they will have spent more than 20,000 hours on the Internet and an additional 10,000 hours playing video games. Indeed, we now live in a world where computer games are reviewed in the New York Times arts section and outsell movie and music recordings combined.

Most profoundly, technology has and is altering the very assumptions of consumption: thanks to the internet, we believe we can get anything we want, whenever we want it, customized to our own personal specifications, delivered conveniently to our own doors. We can shop at three in the morning or ten o’clock at night, expectations of convenience and personalization that live performing arts organizations—organizations who depend on set curtain times, specific geographic venues, and attendant inconveniences of parking, travel and the like—simply cannot meet. And in an age where young people especially access culture on demand through YouTube and iTunes any time they want it and for little or no apparent cost, what will it mean in the future when we ask a potential audience member to pay \$100 for a symphony, opera or dance ticket, when that consumer has been accustomed to downloading on the internet for .99 a song or for free?

Yet however particular these issues feel to us, however, we must recognize we are not alone: we as a society are in the midst of a realignment of cultural expression and communication—a realignment that is shaking the newspaper and television industries, the publishing and book industries, and (in an indication of what may be yet to come) has left the recorded music and music distribution industries—an industry once dominated by megachains like the now defunct Tower Records -- in disarray.

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...”

And aren’t you glad you invited me here to brighten your day?

In looking to the future, I find inspiration in the words of two different thinkers: our 19<sup>th</sup> 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 begin to skate to where the puck will be?

As an occasional student of history, I believe that the past can often illuminate the future. I was deeply inspired at the ISCAA conference several years ago, when an audience member asked, “What if the moment we in the arts are facing is the equivalent of the Religious Reformation? What if we are in the Arts Reformation?”

This image has been a rich one for me to ponder.

The religious reformation was spurred in large part by technology--the invention of the printing press made possible the widespread direct public access not only to scripture but to religious tract—and we too now are caught in a technological revolution prompting mass redistribution of knowledge.

The religious reformations obliterated old business structures—as National Arts Strategies CEO Russell Willis Taylor has wryly noted, “The reformation was a great time to be a land buyer and a bad time to be a monastery”—and at some level we might ask whether the traditional orchestral model is the monastery of today.

But perhaps most profoundly, the reformation at its very heart challenged the notion of the necessity of intermediation in a spiritual relationship—a reconception of the role of the priest paralleled by today’s fundamental challenge of the necessity of the professional artist as intermediary in a creative spiritual experience. Just as the religious Reformation reconceived and broadened the universe of how religion would operate, when and where it would operate, who would be empowered to act, giving rise to new denominations, new religious rituals, new opportunities both for clergy to practice in radically new ways and for the common lay person to assume responsibility for her own spiritual experience, we are witnessing an explosion of new practices and challenges to old assumptions. We are seeing the blurring of the formerly rigid professional/amateur divide—the emergence of the “Pro Ams”—avocational artists doing

work at a professional level, flooding YouTube and dance competitions and film festivals and more at one end—and the rise in “hybrid artists”—professional, vocational artists like Liz Lerman and Cornerstone Theatre and Mark Bamuthi Joseph and more who work outside of the traditionally hermetic arts environment, not from economic necessity but because they believe the work they are called to do cannot be accomplished in the concert hall, the dance studio or the theatre-- at the other. We are indeed witnessing the birth of a new generation of pioneer artists and managers who are creating yet new paths and new ways of behavior, where none have existed before. These artist and organizations 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.

Now lest you hear me crying for the end of traditional arts institutions and/or the work of artists who work for arts sake, let me remind you, the Reformation did not make the Catholic Church extinct—a church which continues to be deeply meaningful to millions worldwide. Similarly, the best of our current institutions will continue to be worthy of our investment as they too continue to offer deeply rewarding spiritual experiences to audiences who hunger for them. Whatever we do, we need to continue to nurture and support the best of these artists and these institutions as we move forward, offering as they do the best chance for lives of economic dignity for our artists and homes where artists working on a certain scale can practice.

But these artists and organizations are less likely to dominate the arts landscape—and its philanthropic support systems—as they have done in the past. How do we think about interacting with the growing tsunami of creative energy that typically exists beyond the purview of our classrooms, our buildings and our performing arts centers? How do we expand our vision to see the role of the arts in social orchestration—orchestration in which the performance is a piece but only a piece of what we are called to do? What if the role of the arts is no longer only to present products to be consumed, but to provide experiences that will serve as springboards to our communities’ own creativity? Can we think of our organizations, not as self-contained institutions, but as platforms designed to aggregate creative energies? Can we in short increasingly embrace a vision of the arts that are firmly rooted in the world, rather than insulated from that world; that speaks with the world in dialogue, rather than to the world; that mirrors in business practice the same principles of nimbleness and openness, of innovation and curiosity that the aesthetics may seek to impart?

Tackling these questions is the bulk of your time together—exploring innovation, new modes of entrepreneurialism, and more, even while we all must admit that many of the answers to these challenges are unknown and that the foreseeable future may well be about resilience, adaptability, experimentation at a scale that can be survived.

But we cannot use our uncertainty as an excuse to avoid embracing change and to shirk from the hard questions—for indeed there is one thing we DO know: however important the arts have been to date, they will be even more important as we move into the future.

While the arts have long been important to economies—leveraging more than \$5 for every dollar spent on a performing arts ticket for local businesses—the arts will be increasingly important to economic vitality and business success, especially as creative industries explode: witness the recent explosive growth of iPods, the emergence of the computer gaming industry—which now outsells music and film recordings combines—neither of which any of us foresaw a decade ago. Leaders of these and other new and emerging industries will benefit from arts exposure as well: as author Daniel Goldman, in his book *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, notes, the primary indicators of success in leading include empathy, the ability to listen to others and motivate, commitment, integrity; the ability to communicate and influence, to initiate and accept change--- the very principles that lie at the heart of creating art, the very abilities instilled by arts instruction. Not surprisingly, both the Harvard and Yale Business schools have recently restructured their curricula to promote critical and creative thinking.

While we have long known of the impact of arts on young people—the studies that show that inner city high risk students who work with the arts are more than 4 times more likely to run for class office, 4 times more likely to participate in math and science fairs, perform more than 100 points higher on college entrance exams, are 8 times more likely to graduate from high school, and show greater tolerance for ambiguity, greater interpretive skills, greater verbal acuity, greater self-awareness and greater self-esteem than their non-arts peers—the arts be more important —if we let them—in educational and cognitive reform. Traditional emphasis on science and math, while critical, falls short of the advanced integrated thinking of left and right brain demanded by the future--a shift articulated by, of all people, American conservative Mike Huckabee who compared science and math-only education to creation of a data base without a server. Already, we see a dramatic move within colleges and universities to embrace and seize the power of the arts to promote deeper reflection and awareness—an entire Creative Campus movement typified by Dartmouth University's two-year campus-wide examination of class and privilege, involving the political science, psychology, economic, humanities, sciences and business departments—with artists like director Peter Sellars and Anne Galjour, who interviewed local citizens and recreate their experiences in a play squarely at the center—a success that now has placed the arts at the table in Dartmouth's strategic long-term planning.

The arts will be increasingly critical as we move to a democratic pluralistic society. As Francois Materasso observes, the arts enable people with non-majority values, ideas or lifestyles to represent themselves to the majority, to become subjects of their own characterization rather than the object of characterizations by others. How has our understanding of the injustices of the criminal system been expanded by *The Exonerated*, the play about prisoners on death row performed across the country and at state capitols; of Iraqi war refugees reshaped by *Aftermath*, currently touring the nation, or of the experience of women through *The Vagina Monologues*? How did the film *Philadelphia* and productions of *The Normal Heart* and *The Laramie Project* humanize the HIV positive and gay community for an indifferent nation?

Ever since Charles Dickens novels produced changes to child labor law, and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* galvanized the abolition movement, the arts have been critical to social change. Those of us who remember the Vietnam war protests—protests that always began with singing *Blowing in*

the Wind—or the civil rights movement—where we always sang We Shall Overcome—cannot be surprised by the power of the music to form instant community posed to move together. Arts can be a massive force for social change.

Indeed, I've been reading Peter Coleman's *The Five Percent: Funding Solutions to Seemingly Intractable Problems*--a book examining those situations like the Middle East of the abortions rights divide or the antagonism between fundamentalists and secular society. He argues such situations are fed by over-simplification of issues, by a competitive win/lose dynamic, and by a dependence on self-reinforcing feedback loops that entrench beliefs and disqualify alternative perspectives--as apt a description of the 112th Congress as any I have read.

I believe that we exist to dismantle the intractable--to offer nuance in the face of simplification, cooperation in the face of competition, and in the face of reinforcing disqualifying loops, to cultivate deep listening in the presence of others whose beliefs and lives may be different than our own.

I for one am optimistic about the future of the arts. As a Luddite who still regards his computer as a typewriter with a screen, I decided three years ago 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 or survival, but about 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 folly of youth—and indeed, many of the participants are young.

You may call it hubris.

But what became clear to me is that within this world of infinite possibilities, there is infinite value to be found in the arts.

Artists are embraced at every level at PopTech—they speak on the same panels as scientists and social activists, and virtually every session is followed by performances by live artists—artists like young African American Vanessa German who blew the roof off with her powerful spoken word evocation of passions and feeling; like a physically challenged hip hop dancer who danced on his crutches, shattering our sense of what the human body could and could not do; like the gospel choir of HIV+ Africans from the African continent, whose singing said more about the complex intersection of faith and disease than any report could ever suggest.

I was encouraged that this group of high tech leaders 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 even through conferences like the one we all attend today, communities

insist on coming together because of the unique value of live, face to face, collective experience, of conspiring—meaning to breathe together, to breathing the same air. And throughout PopTech, a minor chord, a palpable hunger throbbed in the background—a hunger that the arts meet, not in the extrinsic or instrumental values they offer, but in the intrinsic—in the realm of emotions and spirit. This group was desperate to slow down, to led less frenetic lives, to find experiences that promote contemplation, captivation, focus and extended surrender, that resonate emotionally, delight, provoke curiosity, enhance spiritual value—the very intrinsic domain that the arts always occupy.

Especially now, in a moment when we all must confront the fallacy of a market orientation uninformed by social conscience, we must embrace the role of the arts in the formation of our collective and individual characters, particularly the character of the young, who are increasingly subjected to “bombardment” of sensation through violent film and video. And in an age of demonization and fear of difference, of intolerant social policies and politicians who encourages us to view our fellow human beings with fear and hostility and suspicion—we must nurture the arts--the arts which gather audiences to look at our fellow human beings with curiosity and generosity. God knows, if we have ever needed that capacity in human history, we need it now.

We are here today, joined by common cause. We work together to promote a healthier, more vibrant world, to ameliorate human suffering and nurture a more thoughtful, empathic and substantive and yes economically prosperous society.

I invite you to embrace arts in your efforts and to be animated by new possibilities. I promise you that a hand of friendship is extended not only from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation but from Grantmakers in the Arts to help you think through this work, both now and for years to come; and I thank you for your kindness and patience in listening to me this morning. Thank you and God speed.