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Keynote Address

Do Stories Still Matter?

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It's the first week of December my junior year at Baylor. I'm standing outside the greenroom in the theater building, across the hall from Cassandra Neckar. Cassandra is a brassy character actress from Texas, with a voice like a foghorn. Mrs. Ballew, our movement teacher, walks up and says, "Cassandra, I haven't seen your final piece yet." Each senior performance major is required to devise a movement piece for their final, that is then shared with the entire department. Cassandra replies: "Oh, I'm not doin' it." Mrs. Ballew, taken aback, says: "But you can't perform it, if I haven't seen it yet." Cassandra: "Yeah, yeah, I know." Mrs. Ballew persists: "But Cassandra, you can't pass the class without completing this project." Undeterred, Cassandra interrupts, using the foghorn to full effect: "Mrs. Ballew, every caring bone has left my body, I'm NOT doin' it."

I want to spend most of our time together in the realm of poetry, so I offer this story to make clear that I understand the prose in which most theater training takes place. I suspect you spend more time getting the Cassandras of this world to locate the bones in their body that DO care, than you'd like to admit.

A reporter for a magazine in Denver recently asked me to describe the moment I knew I wanted to spend my life in the theater. I thought for a bit, and realized that it wasn't a moment performing onstage, it wasn't directing my first full-length play, it was actually my first production assignment at Baylor: set crew for *A Streetcar Named Desire*. I'd come to Texas uncertain what my major should be, and said to myself: "if the theater department is good, I'll major in drama." I was terrible at set construction: I vividly remember an episode in which the tech director stood beneath me chuckling, while near the top of a ladder I tried to nail a 2" x 4" into a passing beam. I bent about 8 nails before I figured out how to drive one in. But, there was something so exciting about working with that group of people. They were so focused, so skillful, so determined to create something of quality, and to do it on time. I loved that at preppy, Baptist, conformist Baylor, this happy band of misfits, the pot-smoking, long-haired, foul-mouthed, gender-fluid rebels had magically gathered in one place. And I loved seeing *Streetcar* in performance, and knowing that I had had a role in making that experience possible for the audience. By the end of that first semester, all questions about my major and my future had evaporated: I was obsessed with the theater.

I think about the journeys ahead for the young people who work their way through your programs each year. I read recently that the Daily Beast ranked a Theater Major as the 12th Most Useless Degree available on campus today. Twelfth!? That was far better than I expected us to rank, but we actually landed behind horticulture, journalism, advertising and mechanical engineering. And with 89,000 young people graduating with a theater degree in the U.S. last year, you might wonder, “how many of my students will actually make a living in their chosen field.” And if that number is as small as you imagine, then it’s not insane to occasionally ask: “What are we doing here? Should we all just disband our programs and retire?”

I am in my 32nd year working in the professional theater, and when I look back on my time in each of the training programs I had the privilege to study in, I see that as much as I learned about given circumstances, dramatic arcs, consonant articulation, ball peen hammers, electrical circuits and Duvateen, what I was really learning about was **narrative**: how a story fits together, the intricacy of its structure, the variety of its styles, the way visual design can amplify or dissipate the power of its central journey, and how bringing a story to life can have an affect on a group of humans. And I would argue that developing an intimate understanding of narrative is a formidable skill, and perhaps the most formidable skill your students walk toward life with.

Shortly after we completed renovation of the historic Portland Armory, which has served as home to Portland Center Stage for the past eleven years, Mark Edlen—one of the real estate developers who had helped us realize our vision for the project—took me to lunch. At the end of our meal, he jokingly said, “If you ever get tired of running the theater, I’d hire you in a minute.” I laughed, and said, “Me? I’m not that good at math, I’d be a terrible developer.” He said: “It’s not about math. At a certain point, leadership in any field—technology, government, human services, real estate—is about telling a story: helping someone else visualize what you are trying to bring about. And you understand how to tell stories.” That thought stuck with me.

And as leaders involved in helping young people develop their skills as master story tellers, the question presents itself: do stories still matter? Mark Edlen suggested that it matters to be able to make your case clearly. But does the artform we invest our lives in—bringing stories to life for a group of live humans—still mean anything? Let’s start down the road of that inquiry, with a story.

May 2, 2000, my second day of working at Portland Center Stage, I was walking to work. I had a lovely apartment downtown, facing west, so I awoke in the morning to a view of Mt. Hood on the horizon. Stepping into my new role as Artistic Director at PCS was the realization of a lifelong dream: getting to run the flagship theater company in a city that I found fascinating and where I could walk to work. And just as I crossed the crosswalk, my phone rang, and my partner at the time answered: “Chris, I need you to sit down.” (Never a good way to start the morning.) I said, “What’s going on?” He repeated: “I need you to sit down.” I said: “I’m walking to work, I’m standing on the street: just tell me what’s going on.” There was a pause. “Cathy died.” My sister Cathy was two years

older than me. She had apparently been admitted to the hospital to release a blood clot on her lungs. Believing they had the problem resolved, the doctors signed off on her release. A half-hour later the clot burst and stopped her heart. She was 40 years old.

And as that first year at my dream job suddenly became an emotional minefield, I wrestled with the questions that humans have faced from the beginning of time: Why? Was there some purpose in the event? Was it completely random, like the belt wearing out on your vacuum cleaner? Or if, as Hamlet insists, “there is providence in the fall of a sparrow,” if there is a divine plan to every whisper of the cosmos, what could possibly be the purpose of leaving my nieces, 7 and 16 at the time, without their mother? It was not an easy year.

But what I ultimately walked away with was this: we know not the hour or the day when our journey will end, and the universe calls each of us to carve meaning out of the time we have on this planet.

I suspect that stories grew out of mankind’s earliest efforts to grapple with questions like those I faced that first year in Portland. Look back with me: the planet is about 4.6 billion years old; dinosaurs show up about 247 million years ago; the first man-made stone implement about 1.2 million years ago; first evidence of artistic activity about 500,000 years ago; first intentional burial sites about 130,000 years ago. Then about 70,000 years ago a very interesting thing happens: ritualized burial sites begin to show up with paintings alongside them. Joseph Campbell, the eminent mythologist, theorized that this convergence occurred because both the burial ritual and their paintings were trying to answer the same question: “Where does it go, this spirit that animates the physical body?” Campbell believed that this recognition of the split between matter and spirit marked an evolution in the consciousness of mankind: what had seemed purely animal, began to be recognized as having an animating spirit that must live beyond death.

Agriculture begins to emerge as a way of providing consistent food about 9,000 years ago, leading humans to begin building permanent communities; about 5,000 years ago the first alphabet emerges. And just over 2,500 years ago, Thespis steps out of the chorus in Athens and ‘embodies’ the first character that we know of in a formalized play. Where did that come from? We know that the stories that emerge in Greek plays, were inspired by tales that had been passed down orally for thousands of years, and I imagine that for eons before we have actual records, stories had been one of the primary ways our ancestors tried to make sense of the seemingly random and brutal series of events that comprised a human life.

But actors, theaters, the ritualized communal stories we call ‘plays’? That’s a pretty bold leap in this journey. Where does that come from? I’m remembering something about dithyrambs in theater history: those ritualized dance events that grew out of our efforts to bargain with the gods for their favor. But . . . ritualized burial . . . dithyrambs . . . Thespis?!? Hmmm.

In my imagination, I try to step into the world of ancient Greece and catch hold of the impulse that led to the construction of those first theaters: the homes for these ritualized stories. It's no small feat to carve a theater into a hillside that seats 17,000 people. Nor to discern that sound waves travel at a 45-degree angle, so the theater's configuration will allow those in the final row to actually hear the unamplified voice clearly. The financial investment, engineering and sophistication required to construct those spaces announces how important the events they housed must have been to that community. And it's easy to assume that the ancient Greeks were just geniuses, they just invented what we know as Western culture out of their sheer brilliance. But the leap of their efforts feels even more extraordinary when you remember that the ancient world surrounding them was in many ways still a great sea of barbarism, superstition and primitive thinking, out of which this tiny outpost of intellectual rigor and cultural ambition emerges. But the Athenians, like all of us, were trying to make sense of the 'heartache and thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to'; the violence, the lust, the greed, the madness, the vagaries of political fortunes, the meaning of it all. Those theaters were built so the community had a place to contend with the meaning of it all.

For the past six years, I've had the honor of having my friend, Barbara—who is a Jungian psychotherapist—sit through each rehearsal process with me. She provides insight for the acting company, and as inspired, will write an essay or two exploring psychological aspects of the piece. And I loved learning from one of her essays that outside many of the Greek Theaters stood a temple to the Goddess Hygeia, the Goddess of Health. Which makes a beautiful kind of sense, doesn't it? In a society that had no psychotherapists, no systematic way to heal a psyche, no self-help books, no anti-psychotic medications, they recognized that sitting near 'embodied truth' held the capacity to promote healing. And by 'embodied truth,' I mean not theoretical, not cerebral, but truth lived fully in the emotional body. They understood that the act of sitting near an enacted event that, were it actually happening might overwhelm and destroy us, had the capacity to heal parts of an individual soul.

So the Greeks somehow had the flash of insight that the tradition of sharing stories in community, a tradition that had been passed from mouth to ear from the earliest time we sat around campfires, could be formalized, ritualized, lifted into an event of celebration, ritual, and spiritual cohesion for an entire community.

But that was 2,500 years ago. Do any of those same impulses carry meaning today? Do stories still matter?

At Northwestern University's Foley Center for Life Stories, Professor Dan P. McAdams has developed a life-story model of adult identity. According to the model, (and I'm quoting) "people living in modern societies begin to organize their lives in narrative terms in late adolescence and young adulthood. **People create** internalized and evolving **life stories that** serve to **reconstruct the past and anticipate the future in ways that provide their lives** with some degree of **unity and purpose.**"

One fascinating piece of Dr. McAdams research showed that individuals we tend to think of as healthy or successful had the ability to share their life story in clear, coherent narrative terms, and exhibited a sense that they were helping write the chapters of their journey. While those we might describe as struggling, or mentally ill, had much greater difficulty expressing a coherent narrative.

Carl Jung, one of the fathers of psychology, famously wrote, “psyche shatters on the rocks of trauma,” and the traumatized psyche is ever trying to glue itself back together. Jung found that one of the primary ways an individual goes about that journey of reconstruction is by telling and retelling the story of that original trauma: a compulsive returning to the scene of the crime, if you will.

I’m reminded of the first words we hear from Blanche DuBois, when she is left alone in her sister’s New Orleans apartment, “I’ve got to keep hold of myself.” By the time we meet her, Blanche has lived through the suicide of her one true love, the death of both her parents and her aunt, the financial demise of her family’s estate, the loss of her job, and public shaming at having seduced a teenage boy. Any one of these traumas would be enough to unsettle most of us. To suggest that her psyche threatens to ‘come apart at the seams’ is no longer metaphor at this moment. She feels the threat in real terms, and speaks truth: “I’ve got to keep hold of myself.”

And while Williams has crafted brilliant monologues for Blanche, he has also (like most great playwrights) stepped into the psychological truth of her journey. The reliving, retelling of the traumatic events she has endured is not happening in the past, it’s a return to the scene of the psychological crime, in an effort to glue her SELF back together in the present.

Dr. McAdams believes that constructing, understanding, telling our life story is a fundamental way we carve meaning out of our lives. But does the **communal** sharing of stories still matter?

At my brother’s home in Atlanta a few weeks ago, I was introduced to *Alexa*. My 19-year-old nephew showed me how to have Alexa change the music we were hearing, adjust the volume, find the phone number for the nearest Chinese Restaurant, lower the temperature on the thermostat, and turn on the security system. It was my first date with Alexa. I suspect we’ll go out again.

When I was a freshman at Baylor, we used a two-scene preset for the lighting board, I used a rotary phone to call home, listened to cast albums on my phonograph, wrote my essays on an electric typewriter (with ample doses of whiteout at the ready), and kept my calendar in a dayplanner.

Today I drive an electric vehicle that allows me to text, or place a phone call by pressing one small button on the steering wheel; I can check emails, send text messages, or gather complex research from my phone, iPad or laptop; I can access thousands of television programs from hundreds of networks on my smart tv; and on social media I

can see what my friends from high school ate for lunch whether they live in Georgia, Morocco, London or Hong Kong. This is where the culture is taking us: greater and greater convenience, endless opportunities for digital connection.

I watched Chris Rock's new special on Netflix a week ago, *Tamborine*. It's pretty great, and I'd recommend it, if you're not easily offended. About two-thirds of the way through he confesses that his marriage of 16 years broke up because he was addicted to internet porn. Not the most savory thing to share in that forum, but I was struck by what he came to understand by working through the wreckage with his therapist. He learned that if you overstimulate the pleasure centers in the brain, after awhile they stop responding; they fry out. The process begins as stimulus-response; stimulus-response; then after awhile the same stimuli don't create as vivid a response, so you have to change out the stimuli, or intensify them. Until eventually you just get stimulus-zzzzzzzz; stimulus-zzzzzz. Not a great way to build erotic intimacy.

It occurred to me that this is a metaphor for where the culture wants to take us. Technology is creating an experience of our lives that is more convenient, more connected, more instant, more stimulated than we've ever had in history. It also requires fewer and fewer corporeal interactions with live humans. Our constant interaction with smart screens develops greater visual acuity in the brain, and the ability to respond with greater speed, to more stimuli. It also keeps us closer to the surface, and cultivates an addiction to the instant, to that little dopamine hit we get when someone likes our Facebook post or shares our tweet.

Theater is not particularly good at moving quickly. It doesn't like staying close to the surface. It's an old fashioned artform in a lot of ways. What it is good at is asking you to slow down a bit. Giving you the opportunity to settle in, to let the story unfolding before you, to take you more deeply into an embodied sense of your humanity. To step into someone else's shoes. To open your heart a bit. To feel. And it is impossible to experience live theater without interacting with a live human.

There was a fascinating article in the Washington Post a few months back called, "This is your Brain on Art." It shared some key findings in the relatively new field called neuroaesthetics: the effect of cultural experiences on brain activity. They speak about how an audience offers a "rich social and sensory environment that engages several parts of the brain. The social brain network is involved in decoding facial expressions. It's also used in social perceptions, like sensing that the person next to us is getting restless."

"The mirror neuron system is activated when we detect the movements and emotions of other people. This system allows us to coordinate our behavior with those around us, to settle as the lights dim and applaud when others do."

But most interestingly, "an audience actually helps us perceive strong emotions and spread them. When we feel that others around us are emotionally moved, when they're

saddened, startled or delighted, our own emotions can become amplified, and sensed by the people next to us.”

So all those years when you were performing and you’d come backstage and say, “Wow, this house is on fire tonight!” Or “Call 9-1-1, this group is dead on arrival.” When you understood intuitively that somehow an audience takes on a collective personality, you weren’t IMAGINING the phenomenon, it was actually occurring!

A recent study at the University of Lancaster found that the heartbeats of audience members actually synchronize during performances.

The culture is bringing us into more persistent relationship with our screens. Sharing stories in a theater, it seems, has the capacity to bring us into deeper relationship with each other, and with our most authentic selves.

Life has taken the ambitious drama geeks I trained with down many divergent paths: a couple run new play development programs; some design costumes; one runs a non-profit that helps veterans returning from war; one is a pediatric nurse; several are attorneys; one is chief-of-staff to the mayor of a major city; one runs an environmental foundation; a few are psychotherapists; one is an acupuncturist; another a successful restaurateur; several are working actors; many are working directors, designers and playwrights; one runs her own production company; a few write for television; one created their own tv show; one has a Tony award; several run theater companies; many teach theater to the next generation of artists. I suspect that no matter the path they’ve followed, their connection to story telling, to the power of narrative has not dimmed.

Back in the fall, we opened our season here at Portland Center Stage with a production of *Fun Home*. Most of you know that the central journey is about a 42-year-old woman trying to figure out why her father committed suicide when she was a freshman in college. About two weeks into the run, I got an email from a patron. She shared that her husband’s father had committed suicide three years before, but that her husband had never been able to access his own grief. In the cloud of confusion and anger over his father’s final chapter, he found himself emotionally stranded: until the curtain came down on *Fun Home*, when the floodgates opened, and deep, wracking sobs emerged. Sobs that continued all the way home. This woman offered her thanks for our part in the healing of her husband’s profound loss.

What the Greeks understood about witnessing stories in community is very much alive today. And for every kid who tells you that ‘every caring bone has left my body,’ I suspect there are a few more, who begin to sense the curve of their own story more authentically because of what you are inviting them to explore.

My directing teacher at Baylor, Pat Cook, turns 89 next fall. She was the first person who I felt saw all of me: my insecurities, my hunger, my ambition, and my love affair with stories. In gratitude for that gift, I honor the work that each of you do every day.

Thank you.