

Surviving the Culture Change

Diane E. Ragsdale

This address was delivered at an October 30, 2008 convening hosted by A.R.T./New York and the Department of Cultural Affairs at Roundabout Theatre Company / American Airlines Theatre, NYC.

Copyright © 2008 Diane E. Ragsdale. For permission please email der@mellon.org.

I want to express my sincere thanks to Commissioner Kate Levin of the Department of Cultural Affairs and Ginny Louloudes of A.R.T./New York for the invitation and opportunity to speak today. It's an honor and a privilege to be here. I must also give sincere thanks to Jamie Bennett at DCA and my colleague at the Foundation, Susan Feder.

Before starting, I need to preface my remarks by saying that my views are personal and should not be taken, necessarily, to be the views of The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Prior to coming to the Foundation, I worked for 20 years in arts organizations. I have extraordinary respect for the work you are doing and I know how difficult it can be at times. I thank you for your time and look forward to a discussion afterwards.

The title of this address is "Surviving the Culture Change." Some of you may be wondering what I mean by "culture change," and I'd like to start with an anecdote to wind into this topic.

About 3 years ago, I attended a retreat with leaders of a dozen orchestras, at which one lamented, likely reflecting the sentiments of more than a few in the room, "I feel like I'm the Captain of the Titanic, and there's an iceberg ahead, but rather than being on top steering the ship I'm in the bowels shoving coal in the furnace. I'm afraid if I stop shoveling coal we'll run out of steam, but I know that if I don't start steering the ship soon we're going to hit an iceberg."

We'll come back to the coal shoveling later, but first I want to ask: What's this iceberg?

About 14 years ago I was teaching a general survey course, Intro to Theater, at a small public university and on the first day of class each term I would ask the 120 or so students to raise their hands if they had ever seen a professional theater production. About 10 hands would go up. I would then say, "Raise your hand if you would like to see one." 15-20 hands would go up.

Remember, this was *before* podcasting, blogging, YouTube, MySpace, iPhones, and P2P file sharing revolutionized communication and social networking.

So, I would ask of the remaining students, "Why wouldn't you want to go to the theater?" The answer was generally something along the lines of, "I've gone this long without seeing a play, and I don't feel like I'm missing anything."

These students did not have direct personal experience with "The Theater" or, for that matter, "The Opera" "The Symphony" or "The Ballet."

I won't be telling you anything that you have not observed first hand when I say that the fine arts in the US are facing a society that is markedly different, and a consumer that is markedly different, from those faced 40 years ago, due to cuts in funding for the arts in K-12 education, generational shifts and economic divides, increasing diversity in cities and towns across America, a trend towards anti-intellectualism, the culture wars, increased competition for people's leisure time (as a result of both many more direct and substitute competitors), urban sprawl, and the decline in the quality and quantity of arts coverage in the mainstream media.

And yes, on top of all of these forces and others, over the past decade plus, and at an ever-increasing clip, new media technologies have begun to shift the relationships between people, space and time and change the ways that people create, consume, commune, and communicate. This is the culture change to which I am referring.

And what are the implications for the arts?

In the August 2006 issue of *Inside Arts*, Dana Gioia, outgoing Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, was quoted saying,

“...the primary issues facing the American arts at present are not financial. They are cultural and social. We have a society in which the arts have become marginal.

We are not producing another generation of people who attend theater, opera, symphony, dance, jazz and other art forms. Most of these audiences have declined in the last decade, some of them precipitously.”¹

For many organizations, this is the iceberg. So how do we survive it?

Last summer, on the recommendation of Ruby Lerner at Creative Capital, I read the book *Deep Survival* by Laurence Gonzales. Gonzales spent years trying to understand why some people survive harrowing circumstances—like an avalanche—and others do not and trying to determine whether there are common characteristics of survivors.

I was particularly interested in a chapter in which he examines how people get lost.²

Gonzales explains that the way we navigate in life is by forming and following mental maps: literally pictures in our minds of particular areas or routes. Gonzales says you get lost when you “fail to update your mental map and then persist in following it even when the landscape,” (the real world), “tries to tell you it’s wrong.”³

Edward Cornell, one of the scientists Gonzales showcases in the book, gives an example of this. He says, “Whenever you start looking at your map and saying something like, ‘Well, that lake could have dried up,’ or ‘That boulder could have moved,’ a red light should go off. You’re trying to make reality conform to your expectations rather than seeing what’s there. In the sport of orienteering, they call this ‘bending the map.’”⁴

Gonzales describes five stages that a person goes through when lost, which correlate with Elizabeth Kubler-Ross’s stages of dying: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Gonzales says that the final stage—acceptance—is the one that separates those that survive from those that don’t.

Here’s how he describes it, “... as you run out of options and energy, you must become resigned to your plight. Like it or not, you must make a new mental map of where you are.” Not where you wish you were. “To survive,” he says, “you must find yourself. Then it won’t matter where you are.”⁵

A couple years ago I interviewed a Stanford University professor named Jim Phills about his great book, *Integrating Mission and Strategy for Nonprofit Organizations*,⁶ and one of my questions was, “What advice would you give to a world-class orchestra whose audiences were declining and whose deficit was growing?”

¹ Alicia Anstead with Dana Gioia, “The Gioia of it All,” *Inside Arts*, (Association of Performing Arts Presenters, August/September 2006): 30-32. Quote on 31.

² Laurence Gonzalez, *Deep Survival* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2004).

³ Laurence Gonzales, *Deep Survival*, 151-171. Quote on 163.

⁴ Laurence Gonzales, *Deep Survival*, 163-164.

⁵ Laurence Gonzales, *Deep Survival*, 166-169. Quotes on 166 and 167.

⁶ James A. Phills, Jr., *Integrating Mission and Strategy for Nonprofit Organizations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

He said, "If you are an orthodox orchestra, the reason you are losing audience members (from your viewpoint) could be that the world is not good enough for you. [*Bending the map!*] But art really exists only in relation to audiences and their experience, particularly the performing arts. So if a symphony is seeing declining audiences, then the questions are: Would you sooner close your doors than change what you do? What is it that's important to you and why? You cannot, however, answer these questions without considering your need for audiences and/or enough people willing to subsidize you. And the fact is the number of people willing to subsidize something that is narrowly enjoyed may diminish over time. At which point, you will need to be prepared to go out of business."

He hastened to add, however, there is another option "there are organizations that are redefining their missions in relation to people."⁷

In other words, they are rethinking who they are and why they exist.

The late, great thinker Susan Sontag once wrote, "Existence is no more than the precarious attainment of relevance in an intensely mobile flux of past, present, and future."

I take particular note of the words, "precarious attainment of relevance." No organization can be granted relevance in perpetuity based on its laurels or the size of its endowment. To exist, to thrive, to be artistically vibrant in the 21st century, arts organizations may need to adapt to this culture change in order to attain, maintain, or regain, their relevancy.

So, I'd like to humbly offer ten thoughts on adapting to the culture change. Some of you may hear these thoughts and think, "we're already doing this" or "that would never work for us" or "we don't need to do any of these things; we're doing just fine." And I'm sure you're correct in each case.

#1—Try Not To Conflate Growth with Impact

In his book *Convergence Culture*⁸ Henry Jenkins talks about a relatively new configuration of marketing theory that he calls "affective economics," which seeks to understand the emotional underpinnings of consumer decision-making. He says that commercial entertainment companies are beginning to realize what their fan communities have been saying for a long time: that what is more important than the number of people who buy your product or watch your television show is the depth of their loyalty and the quality of their engagement.⁹

There is a real danger if we conflate growth of the budget, economic impact, or box office success with having intellectual relevance and creating meaningful impact on individuals and on society.

In her article in the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, "Let's Put the Word 'Nonprofit' Out of Business"¹⁰ Claire Gaudiani has proposed that we replace the word 'nonprofit' with 'social profit.' I like this idea because it encourages us to remember that we are nonprofits because we exist to create value for society, rather than profits for shareholders. It reminds us that, we exist within a social and cultural context—and if that context changes, then we must change.

⁷ Diane E. Ragsdale, "Mission and Strategy Revisited," *Grantmakers in the Arts Reader* (Vol. 17, No. 1, Spring 2006): 25-27. Quote on 27.

⁸ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2006)

⁹ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 61-64

¹⁰ Claire Gaudiani, "Let's Put the Word 'Nonprofit' Out of Business," *Chronicle of Philanthropy* (July 26, 2007): 35.

The arts can't declare mission accomplished just because they get people in the door. It is not sufficient to create artistic experiences and sell or give them away without regard for the capacity of people to receive them and find meaning in them.

#2—Go Cellular

In 2005, I read an article in *The New Yorker*, by Malcolm Gladwell called "The Cellular Church" about Rick Warren, head of one of the most successful mega-churches in the US. The way these churches maintain a "sense of community" as they grow very large, says Gladwell, is by creating "a network of lots of little church cells – exclusive, tightly knit groups of six or seven who meet in one another's homes during the week to worship and pray."

The church has thousands of volunteers who are charged with getting to know each member that walks in the door and getting that new member plugged into a small group.

These cells effectively function as social networks, fueling deep friendships between church members. Without the small group, Warren explains in the article, going to Church with 5,000 people could feel pretty impersonal. Perhaps not unlike going to a concert hall with 1,800 people?

What's clear from the article is that people who are in small groups are more likely to show up at church on Sunday, stay a member of the Church longer, and give more money.

Perhaps, like these churches, arts organizations could use volunteers to foster small-group, socially-driven arts activities?

I recently heard about a theater company that began calling its lapsed subscribers to determine why they had left and discovered that quite a few were widows whose husbands had died and who had stopped attending because they had no one with whom to attend. They decided to connect all these ladies together and organized a bus to pick them up and bring them to theater for performances and time for socializing over cake and tea. It's been incredibly successful.

#3 – Frequency and Focus Matter

I believe the same principal that applies to exercise and other "habits" applies to the arts. Frequency matters. The experience of going to a live performance can be unfamiliar and even difficult for the uninitiated. But my experience has been that the more artistic experiences I have, the more I want to have because the experiences are more satisfying and enjoyable as they accumulate one upon the other. And I think the opposite is also true. At certain periods in my life I have fallen out of the habit of going to performances and museums. At those times I have found that (like exercise) it's been a downward spiral, and before long, I had "no time" for art—just like I had "no time" for the gym.

I think we kid ourselves when we believe that the primary reason people are not patronizing the arts is because they have no time, even if they tell us they have no time. Saying "no time" reminds me of the oft-used, let-me-down-easy breakup line: "It's not you, it's me."

If you've heard this line, or used it, you probably know that it really means just the opposite.

Is the barrier really time?

I've spent a good bit of time thinking about the Slow Food Movement, ever since a conversation I had a few years ago on the topic with Dana Whitco at the Center for Creative Research. As many of you probably know, the Slow Food Movement grew up in opposition to the Fast Food Industry. It encourages people to *focus*, to attend to, the experience of eating—it reminds people of the pleasure and satisfaction that comes with savoring well-made locally-grown food, appreciating the place it came from and the farmers and artisans that grew and prepared it, and enjoying the company of the people with whom you're dining. In other words, the Slow Food Movement has given people a reason to *make* time for eating.

And this movement, along with cooking shows, has had a powerful influence on our culture. Plenty of Boomers who have no time for the ballet are spending hours shopping at their local farmers market and chopping in their well-equipped kitchens, so they can enjoy gourmet feasts with their friends and families.

I wonder: What would a major Slow Arts Movement look like?

#4—Let the Art Dictate the Space (Not the Other Way Around)

Choreographer Elizabeth Streb, who describes her work as wrestling-meets-ballet, gymnastics, and circus, has been asking questions that challenge accepted assumptions about dance for more than 20 years. About ten years ago, she says she observed that the only “public” thing she did was invite strangers into a theater for a ticket priced \$25.00 - \$85.00. She says she decided to re-make the where and how of making her work and in 2003 she opened a garage in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

In four years she's turned that warehouse into a true community cultural center. How did she do it?

For one, she opened the doors and let people come by anytime – to watch rehearsal or just to use the restroom. She added popcorn and cotton candy machines and let people walk around and eat food during the performances.

I've heard Streb say that rather than being a “church”—a place you visit once a week for a sacred experience, she wanted her space to be more like a 7/11.

The venues that currently exist may not be able to accommodate the way artists currently want to make work, or the way that audiences want to experience it. We may need to modify existing venues or create new spaces that support the needs and visions of artists and that allow for a more dynamic relationship with the audience. 3Legged Dog is a great example of this.

#5—Fuel a Fan Base/Sample & Share

I find it fascinating that a growing number of musicians, most notably the musician Prince, are giving their music away as a way of generating awareness, building a fan base, and developing an audience for their live performances. In order to significantly increase audiences, arts organizations may need to create opportunities for people to sample their artistic experiences and share those experiences with others.

I tend to seek out concerts at which new music is being played – often premiere performances. I'm amazed and disappointed at how frequently there is no recording available for me to download from the organization's site the next day, no clip for me to send to friends. There's rarely even an invitation or opportunity for me to check a box saying I would be interested to be notified if a

recording is released so that I can download it at some point in the future. The easier an organization makes it for me to deepen my experience and share my interest and enthusiasm with others, the better. And if I encourage my friends to purchase a piece of music or go to a performance, it's going to have much greater impact than if the organization does.

#6—Let People In On The Action

Once Elizabeth Streb opened her warehouse she started noticing that her patrons literally wanted to get in on the action, so she put in a trapeze and started to teach people how to fly. In four years, her school has grown exponentially. Education is now core to the mission of Streb, whose organizational materials state that the company's approach seeks to demystify the process of making art by bringing the once private creative activity into the traffic of everyday existence.

Steppenwolf Theater in Chicago has an exemplary program called First Look 101 in which they invite patrons to join them at key steps along the rehearsal process. They attend, for instance, the first read-through, blocking rehearsals, and technical rehearsals.

When the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis presented the group GobSquad last year, they discovered that one of their young patrons went home that night and made a video response to the piece and posted it on YouTube. They began asking, "How do we generate more of this?" And since then, they have.

This year, in anticipation of the Republican National Convention coming to town in October, The Walker developed several projects, in partnership with other organizations in the Twin Cities region as part of a community-wide initiative called "the UnConvention."

Among other activities, the Walker created a project called "*I Approve This Message*" in which people created videos addressing the scripted nature of political party conventions. The Walker hosted the videos on its YouTube channel.

In another project, called *My Yard Our Message*, artists and citizens were invited to design their own yard signs as a counter from the traditional political endorsement signs currently staked into lawns.

What about patron as critic? If the consumer has achieved taste-making status anyway, then why not elevate seasoned patrons to the role of reviewers and encourage them to write formal reviews, posted as blogs on your Web sites? I was the managing director of On the Boards in Seattle prior to coming to the Foundation. The artistic director, Lane Czaplinski, and I (with the help of Doug McLennan of ArtsJournal.com) started a patron review blog in late 2003. It's been incredibly successful. We found that patron reviews not only give your organization critical information about what patrons are thinking, but help patrons build community, and improve their capacities to process, discuss and understand what they have experienced—in other words, develop cultural literacy. A blog welcomes and promotes alternate viewpoints from those espoused by the local art critic and people may trust your patron reviews more than they trust the local critic, anyway.

These are all examples of letting people in on the action. Given the "culture of participation," arts organizations, may want to explore new ways of inviting patrons more deeply into the artistic process, allowing them to "re-purpose" the experience, or in other ways sharing the limelight with patrons and amateur arts enthusiasts.

But why did that young Walker patron go to GobSquad in the first place? And why was she sufficiently enthused to go home and make a short video response and post it on online?

I would wager that it's in large part because The Walker's contemporary programming is relevant and appealing to younger audiences.

#7—You Can't Fix It in Post

When artistic director, Irene Lewis, arrived at Center Stage in the early 90s the theater was producing works primarily by white playwrights, performed by white actors, for white audiences. Center Stage is based in Baltimore, Maryland. Baltimore is one of the most diverse cities in the U.S. 80 percent of the population is African American.

Irene Lewis astutely determined that Center Stage was not actually serving the larger community of Baltimore, and the theater made the commitment to change that by programming 2-3 out of 6 plays each season by African American playwrights or about the African American experience. It may or may not surprise you to hear that the new direction of the theater was not immediately embraced by its longtime patrons. Many of them were angry; and some canceled their subscriptions. Center Stage took a financial hit.

Despite the challenges and risks, Lewis persevered, and eventually the theater replaced all of the subscribers it initially lost and then some. Today, the African American plays in the season generate the highest attendance and revenues. It took 15 years to get there.

No podcast, YouTube video, or other new media strategy is going to make 25-year-olds want to go to a performance that doesn't seem relevant to their lives in a venue in which they do not see other people their age.

Whether you're trying to reach younger or more diverse audiences, like Center Stage, you need to do it consistently and authentically and you may need to be prepared to lose some current patrons in order to gain new ones.

#8—Be a Concierge: Filter and Make Recommendations

One of the greatest challenges for consumers created by the Internet is having too many choices—people are bombarded with information. Consumers increasingly expect customization, and for retailers to understand their preferences and market to them accordingly. Recommender-sites understand this. Arts organizations, on the other hand, are generally terrible at helping patrons make smart, satisfying purchase decisions.

Arts organizations tend to tell the public “We've got 8 or 18 shows this season, and they are all fantastic (!!)" Well, they may all be pretty good, but they are not all the same, and by not helping patrons find the play that they are most likely to enjoy seeing, there is a greater likelihood that they will either choose none of the above; or not have an enjoyable experience.

Perhaps arts organizations could become arts concierges: responsive, reliable, and trusted friends who help patrons make decisions about what to see, who to invite, and where to go for dinner before hand. We live in a time when most people don't have a culturally sophisticated friend or relative to indoctrinate them to the fine arts so arts organizations could create value by taking on this role. Perhaps using volunteers?

Or much of this could probably be completely automated. If you buy a book on Amazon, it often encourages you to buy another book by the same author and get both at a discounted price. If I were to buy a ticket to *Three Sisters* on one theater's Web site, what if the site encouraged me to buy something else? "Diane, you bought a ticket to Chekhov's *Three Sisters*; here are other cultural activities (at our theater or others in town) that might interest you. Bundle any of these other items with your ticket purchase and receive a discount on all the items." If every cultural organization did this in partnership with other peer cultural organizations I have to imagine something good could come of it.

But being arts concierges, filtering, and building partnerships organization by organization may be just the beginning.

#9—Aggregate Supply and Demand

Imagine this idea scaled for an entire city. What if all the products from all the arts organizations in New York City were aggregated by a site called "NYCCultureClub.org" and you could get a periodic email in your in box making personal culture recommendations to you from everything that's happening in your city.

In much the same way as the online dating service Eharmony uses surveys to gather information and match people a community-wide Web site could collect data on patron preferences and develop a sophisticated recommender system.

Coupled with a social networking site and patron reviews these tools could help patrons make more informed decisions, make recommendations to each other, and perhaps even entice patrons to try performances they might not otherwise have sought out.

And what if this aggregation of products and customer data meant that people could create customized subscriptions or vacation packages with the click of a button? To create basically horizontal subscriptions bundling artistic experiences across the product lines of the various organizations? For those that don't feel comfortable creating their own package, the site could suggest some thematic packages: "A Masterworks package" an "An Avant-Garde package" "A Wholesome Family Entertainment package".

Whether pre-packaged or customized, by bundling horizontally, one play on your season, or one exhibit in your museum, could appear on hundreds of niche packages.

And what if these packages weren't limited to nonprofit fine arts organizations? What if they included nightclubs, commercial theater, films, gallery exhibits, books, music, and other entertainment?

In fact, why not tie a site like this to Amazon, NetFlix, Public Radio, TV, or Cable? What if because you bought a ticket to a play through a site like this, you could automatically get an alert when the play was being discussed on your local public radio station? What if the interview was automatically downloaded as a podcast, or emailed to you? Andrew Taylor and I started brainstorming a concept a few years ago called Amazon-Live. (by the way, you can read Andrew's blog on *The Artful Manager* on ArtsJournal.com.) What if you because you bought a particular Shostakovich Symphony, Amazon told you when that piece was going to be performed by your local orchestra? What if you were one click away from buying a ticket?

Apple has something like this already. It has created a new iTunes plugin called iConcertCal that monitors your music library and generates a personalized concert and album release calendar so that you know when your favorite bands are coming to your city and when they plan to release new albums.

In 1992 sociologist Richard Peterson coined the term Cultural Omnivore to describe the tendency of many people to develop tastes for everything: high art and pop culture and everything in between.¹¹

We may have a generation of cultural omnivores out there, but we've made it really difficult for them to feast because we've created silos between high art and low art, and between the disciplines of music, theater, dance, opera, the visual arts, film, and literature.

Why not help these omnivores find their ways from the film *In Bruges* to the *Lieutenant of Inishmore* and other plays by Martin McDonagh? In the minds of the consumer, it's all culture. By maintaining our "separate and better than others" status the arts could be losing their spot at the banquet.

Rather than competing against one another to sell subscriptions and single tickets, perhaps arts organizations could work together to increase cultural participation by creating "Cultural Omnivore Subscriptions."

#10 – Focus on Seeing Better Rather Than Selling Better

Should we get rid of subscriptions? Stream podcasts? Produce videos for YouTube? Hire DJs and VJs to play in the lobby after the show? Have a MySpace page? Text our patrons on their cell phones? Remake the season brochure-again? Re-do the Web site-again? Host some sort of amateur art competition? Radically lower ticket prices? Maybe; but before answering these questions we may need to answer some more fundamental questions. To adapt to the culture change organizations may need to focus less on selling better and more on seeing better.

Earlier this year, I saw the ENO/Met production of Philip Glass's *Satyagraha*, directed by Phelim McDermott, co-founder of the theater company, Improbable. My colleague at the Foundation, Susan Feder, pointed out a line by Mr. McDermott in the program notes that I think has pertinence to this topic. "Improvisation as we practice it is less about being quick-witted and wacky and more about embracing paradoxical skills. These include the ability to be courageous and decisive while at the same time open and vulnerable to whatever happens around you. We work on developing the ability to be humble, not armored, in the face of unexpected events ..."¹²

The organizations I've cited today have a few things in common.

One thing I observe is that their artistic leaders were involved in and deeply committed to the changes they made; I'm a big believer that vibrancy and relevancy start with programming decisions—intellectual relevance can't be relegated to the PR department.

¹¹ Peterson, Richard A., and Albert Simkus, "How Musical Tastes Mark Occupational Status Groups," *Cultivating Differences; Symbolic Boundaries and the Making of Inequality*, edited by Michele Lamont and Marcel Fournier (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

¹² Philem McDermott, "Note from the Director," The Metropolitan Opera Playbill for the 2007-2008 season production of the Philip Glass opera, *Satyagraha* (April 2008): 49.

Another is that these organizations do not behave as if achieving artistic virtuosity and being relevant to the community are competing or mutually exclusive goals. They are pursuing both excellence and equity.

And they are not alone. There are many more organizations like this—in this room and across the US, and across the world.

From a biological standpoint, adaptation is fostered by allowing diversity into a system.

At the organizational level diversity comes from having a staff and board that reflect the communities you exist to serve and allowing them to influence the organization. It comes from working with new artists, new thinkers, and new partners.

At the sector level, diversity comes from allowing young leaders to be at the table and allowing new organizations to become leaders. Younger organizations and artists have bold new ideas about how to produce and present art and many are succeeding, where others are not, in reaching younger patrons. They are terrifically vibrant. We need to pay attention to them, and be open-minded and supportive of their practices, which may be very different from the practices of organizations that were founded in the mid-20th-century, or even earlier. Rather than privileging one generation or type of organization over another (young over old, large over small), we need to encourage diversity in the system and then learn from each other. We cannot allow the big to get bigger at the expense of the small.

Before ending today, I want to go back to the shoveling coal metaphor, which is one that seems to strike a chord with many arts leaders:

There is a comment that we heard last year that from a leader of one of the theaters in our New York Theater Program, that I think about quite often. She said “We feel tremendous pressure from our funders and from our boards to grow. Why can’t it be OK for us not to grow? We want to stay small and still be considered successful.” Her sentiment was echoed by others at the meeting.

It appears that over the past few decades, the US nonprofit arts and culture sector dutifully responded to the charge “to grow.” We tripled the number of organizations and built bigger and better facilities. Arts organizations created hierarchical corporate structures, professionalized their staffs, and increased the size of their operating budgets, the number of programs, exhibits and performances they offer, and the number of seats in their halls. And today many arts leaders and their staffs are spending their days competing mightily for resources, talent, and audiences and struggling to secure sufficient earned and unearned revenues to keep their organizations afloat. Many of you, I’m guessing, feel trapped shoveling coal. While coal shoveling may simply be part and parcel with working in an arts organization, there is no doubt in my mind that the shoveling is intensified if an organization is operating at a level that is unsustainable.

Furthermore, growth that is difficult to sustain can cause an organization to shift or compromise its mission, as the more desperate it is for resources, the more likely it is to pursue opportunities that are outside the scope of its core competencies. Jim Phills talks persuasively about this concept, which he calls *mission creep*, in his book.

Taking artistic risks, increasing attendance, fostering access, improving artistic quality, deepening engagement, balancing the budget, and hitting earned and unearned income targets, do not necessarily go hand in hand.

We can kid ourselves into thinking that we can pursue these goals simultaneously and without compromise by separating into different departments the functions of making the art, selling admissions, raising money, balancing the budget, educating patrons, and understanding the community. But the compartmentalization of mission is only a short-term alleviation of the genuine philosophical struggle to balance these competing goals. And prioritizing and balancing these goals is only likely to get more difficult given the economic climate.

When I was at On the Boards in Seattle we were in the midst of the post-dot-com-bust post-9/11 recession and a funder advised us, "Focus on your core and let go of the rest." It was good advice for us at the time.

Now may not be the time to push for growth. Now may be a time to focus on the core, think deeply about why your organization exists, and integrate and realign your organization firmly behind common goals, values and *meaningful* measures of success. And if need be, examine whether your current organizational structure continues to be an effective and efficient way to deliver on your mission.

I'm also convinced that you do not need the resources of the Metropolitan Opera to adapt to the culture change. Don't worry about birthing a radical new innovation; there's a reason why most of the R&D labs in the world (Bell Labs, for instance) were started by monopolies. It takes a lot of money to fund the failures that are part of innovation. If you have a funder willing to subsidize your risks, that's terrific, but if not, do not let this stop you from moving forward. With the resources you have, consider making some modest reallocations and many small, but *meaningful*, changes.

In closing, two final quotes:

Laurence Gonzales, the author of *Deep Survival*, writes, "Those who avoid accidents are those who see the world clearly, see it changing, and change their behavior accordingly."¹³

And the American writer, philosopher and publisher Elbert Hubbard once said, "Art is not a thing; it is a way."

We must forge the way with art.

Audience development is not about *butts in seats*, but rather about brokering a relationship between people and art, and between people and people. And in order to do that job well we need to be open to the ways that art and artists are changing, and the ways that society is changing, and be willing to change accordingly.

Thank you.

¹³ Laurence Gonzales, *Deep Survival*, 281.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Books

- *Deep Survival* by Laurence Gonzales (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2004).
- *Integrating Mission and Strategy for Nonprofit Organizations* by James A. Phills, Jr. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).
- *The World is Flat* by Thomas Friedman (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2005)
- *Convergence Culture* by Henry Jenkins (New York: New York University Press, 2006)
- *The Long Tail* by Chris Anderson (New York: Hyperion, 2006).
- *Entering Cultural Communities*, edited by Morris Fred and Betty Farrell. (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2008)
- *Engaging Art*, edited by Steven J. Tepper and Bill Ivey. (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2008)

Articles

- "Let's Put the Word 'Nonprofit' Out of Business," by Claire Gaudiana. *Chronicle of Philanthropy* (July 26, 2007)
- "The Cellular Church," by Malcolm Gladwell. *The New Yorker* (September 12, 2005)
- "The Pro-Am Revolution," by Charles Leadbeater and Paul Miller. *Demos* (November 24, 2004) Available at <http://www.demos.co.uk/publications/proameconomy>.
- "Creating High Impact Nonprofits," Heather McLeod Grant and Leslie R. Crutchfield. *The Stanford Social Innovation Review* (Fall 2007). (Leslie R. Crutchfield has recently written a book *Creating High Impact Nonprofits*).

Reports

- "Cultural Organizations and Changing Leisure Trends, A National Convening, Online Discussion and White Paper" by Andrew Taylor from the National Arts Strategies and the Getty Leadership Institute, June 2007 http://www.getty.edu/leisure_trends/tags/leisuretrends/.
- *New Zealand and the Arts, Attitudes, Attendance and Participation in 2005*, available at www.creativenz.govt.nz: 35.
- "How Musical Tastes Mark Occupational Status Groups," by Richard A. Peterson and Albert Simkus. *Cultivating Differences; Symbolic Boundaries and the Making of Inequality*, edited by Michele Lamont and Marcel Fournier (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). (Also available online as a separate article).