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Oral Report of the Executive Director

Karen P. Moynahan

Each year, we have the good fortune to travel to venues that, for a brief period of time allow us to escape from our routines, free our minds to tackle complex issues, and join a community of extraordinary individuals who come together to advance our work and our fields, and lay the groundwork for our collective future.

It could be said that our days together here are no different from all other days. We awake, face what lies ahead, adhere to the schedule, discuss the issues, search for the answers, attempt to solve the problems, connect/reconnect/disconnect, and at the end of the day, hope to find a moment and a place to rest, to renew. Our long day isn't actually a long day at all. It is a moment in an already long week, which is merely an instant in an already long year.

Yes, this could be said. This could be said if we lack the imagination to contemplate the power of the force created by the coalescence of artistry and intelligence which can be unharnessed in a venue that respects tradition and accomplishment, embraces creativity and innovation, and promotes dialogue which remains focused on the education and training of our students. Yes, this could be said. This could be said if we lack the desire and will to participate fully in the conversation.

But here, as we come together for these few “tomorrows”, we seem to have the ability to transcend the daily grind. We awake and face the day with renewed interest; we devour the schedule and seek out further opportunities for connection and conversation; we create answers, and we problem-solve. And now, at the end of the day, we drop, weary from the intellectual challenges the day has presented, not alone, but with others who collectively contemplate our now unbridled capacities.

The powerfulness is awe-inspiring. Realizing that possibilities are within reach, we are uplifted; we are energized; and we are invincible. We approach the hard work we face, and that which we know waits ahead, with buoyed optimism and confident anticipation. The powerfulness has a striking impact on our mindset.

But in just days, we shall head home - our recollections will remind us to carry forward the mindset. Eventually though, we will return to our desks, to the patterns which are indelibly etched in our memories, and to our challenges. The mindset will fade as it collides with our daily routine. We will lament its departure. If we do so though, it is because we have reverted to the known, to the place where lack of imagination, will,

and desire lurk. The decision to revert, and reside in such a place, rests solely with each of us. The consequence of the decision will impact all of us.

We spoke earlier of our good fortune. Truth be told, our true good fortune is that we have the opportunity to work in fields that are “breathtaking”. We define breathtaking as “astonishing or awe-inspiring in quality” and “so as to take one’s breath away.” For us, that which is breathtaking is ubiquitous in our daily lives, in our work, in our art form, and in our art making. How fortunate we are to be surrounded by this veil of comfort. How fortunate we are to possess the vision, abilities, and opportunities that enable us to create that which is astonishing, awe-inspiring—that which is breathtaking.

So let us take stock. We’ve come together, we’ve ignited our passions, we’ve been reminded of our powerfulness, and we’ve taken delight in our work. We might end the conversation here and enjoy a state of peaceful complacency. But alas, we cannot, for that which is breathtaking, that to which we devote our efforts and attention, is a double-edged sword. Our success, in part, stems from an understanding of this metaphor. Its realities are pervasive. On one edge we experience the exhilaration of the inhale, on the other, the desperation of the exhale. That which is breathtaking, therefore, can be vastly different. Neither the inhale nor the exhale can exist independently from the other.

We possess infinite abilities to create works of beauty, depth, and importance. The historical body of work in existence today is our testament. Our accomplishments speak with assurance. We wield our expertise to find the perfect combination of—and balance among—space, place, time, form, structure and so forth. Each work is the sum of its parts, where each part is as important as the whole itself. Each work informs the next, and becomes an integral part of the body of work. Aspects of the work can capture our thoughts, pique our curiosities, challenge our minds, and move our spirits. It can be exhilarating; it can be breathtaking.

But at the same time, there are forces at play that rob us of time, and energy, and will. These forces come in many shapes and sizes. They come at indiscriminate times - in waves or singularly. They seem unrelated, disconnected, and sometimes redundant. We do not always know where they are coming from or their intended purpose. But we do know that they lack the elegance the artistic accomplishments described above possess. Their effectiveness in informing future progress is neither known nor convincing. These forces, which at every turn can oppose our artistic pursuits, are breath taking.

Take for example, the collection of numbers for the purpose of counting, without the realization that mere numbers cannot explain everything that counts. Many times the numbers are collected with great effort and expense, then merely filed. Collection is the terminus.

There is the escalating imposition of standardized testing, devoid of confirmation that discipline-specific knowledge has been acquired or that competencies have been

developed. Greater emphasis appears to have been placed on the ability of the teacher to teach to the test, and the student to learn the mechanisms of test-taking.

There is the repeated mantra that questions the role and value of art and design in daily life, and in particular, in the education and training of our students. This creates the concomitant need to conduct ongoing promotional campaigns that provide constant justification for the daily existence of our fields, and their inherent benefits to students, institutions, and communities.

This is not to say that numbers, testing, and questioning hold no place in the higher education equation. Indeed, each can play an integral role if used appropriately to inform and strengthen the specific endeavor, and the field as a whole. But this is rarely the case in higher education. Singular lenses and one-size-fits-all approaches are far easier to envision, fund, and implement than approaches that treat each discipline on its own terms. Concerns raised about the lack of effectiveness a specific methodology may have on a specific discipline are rebutted. We are left to deflect untrue accusations which claim general disapproval of methodology altogether. This age-old tactic can quickly and masterfully derail important conversations intended to address subject-specific issues, and at the same time, deplete time reserves. Faced with the fallout from negative public relations campaigns, we circle the wagons and protect our flanks. We reiterate fundamental principles, and describe in detail our values and stewardship.

These burdens and challenges, coupled with shrinking enrollments, prospects of dwindling funding, and external pressures resulting from federal initiatives such as gainful employment, state authorization, and the development of an institutional ratings system, can extract valuable time; time sorely needed to teach subject matter content and create work. These burdens and challenges can be debilitating; they can be breath taking.

We are not strangers to these realities. Neither are we devoid of the certainty that today's challenges, once solved, will be replaced by the new challenges tomorrow will bring, and those that will come the day after. We and our predecessors have lived through hard times. We have worked the problems, and we have prevailed. Much like the great legacies of our art, we remain ever-present and stalwart in our resolve.

Plato suggests, "The measure of man is what he does with power."¹ It is at these times that it is important to remember that our powerfulness comes not from position or image or wealth or place, it comes from us. It comes from us. Our constant acquaintance with these disciplines has shaped our values, our habits of mind, our capacity for work, and our determination to protect that which we know to be primal.

The questions then become, what must be done, what are we prepared to do, and do we possess the knowledge, skills, wisdom, compassion, and fortitude that our times and

¹ Plato

our situations demand. Do we have the ability to resist what Abraham Maslow identified as “enculturation”² – to see past the images, icons, and artifacts of the prevailing culture and to make independent choices about values, issues, and preferred futures.

If history foretells the future, we should hold great faith and confidence in our abilities to tackle what lies ahead. We have witnessed and will continue to witness the beauty and power of our art form. However, witnessing is not enough. There is a task at hand; there is a job to do.

We are not here by accident. We are here by the design of our own hands, guided by our artistic passions, fueled by the fire of our accomplishments. We are here at this moment for a purpose—to accept, hold, protect, and nurture our legacy, and, at the appropriate moment, to pass it to the caretakers and visionaries we are training to take our place. Each accomplishment is part of the permanent continuity that ensures this legacy.

For now, the duty rests with us. It is our responsibility to create, to innovate, to advance; to build and to break; to question and to answer; to teach and to learn.

In assuming these responsibilities, we must devote sufficient time to activities such as planning, considering, and communicating. A calculated sufficiency of time must be spent on such endeavors. But not to the exhaustion of all time, for to realize results, the preponderance of our efforts and time must be devoted to action. Only through action, both singular and collective, will we continue to advance our art form. Appropriate action will forestall the erosion inevitable if our plans cannot be turned into accomplishments, our considerations into practices, and communications into descriptions of actualities. There is no substitute for thoughtful, wisdom-based action.

But we know all too well that the simplicity and pureness of our pursuits are in jeopardy. The world is advancing at a breakneck pace. We must sprint to catch up, and we must run to stay apace—all the while maintaining the balance between inhale and exhale that is necessary to ensure a measured stride. This balance is not easy though, because our breathing is already compromised by the breathtaking burdens placed on us by the time-robbers, the number-collectors, and the naysayers.

This brings us to a crossroads, to a place where principles and options must be considered, and choices must be made, a place where truth and wise decisions can be found if we will seek them with humility and patience. But available options and wise choices may not be readily evident, particularly if we become consumed in the vortex of daily routines, which over time, without conscious thought, slowly and systematically move us away from truth or worse, dull our memory of truth and its importance.

² Abraham Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being* (John Wiley and Sons, 1968)

It is our responsibility to keep making choices, to ensure that every choice made emanates from the truth, and that the truth remains at center.

In 2005, David Foster Wallace, offering poignant remarks in a commencement address entitled *This is Water*, suggested that “the whole trick is keeping the truth up front in daily consciousness.”³

Mr. Wallace proceeds to suggest that we “get to decide what has meaning and what doesn’t.” We “get to decide what to worship.” But he also offers cautions. “If you worship money and things... you will never have enough... If you worship power, you end up feeling weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to numb you to your own fear... If you worship your own intellect...you will end up...a fraud, always on the verge of being found out.”⁴

Mr. Wallace points out that the choices are ours to make, and they matter.

The decisions you make must take into account the uniqueness of what lies before you each and every day. They must be informed by your knowledge and wisdom, and your careful application of both. Local effort is the foundation of achievement and sustainability for each institution and for what art and design in higher education contributes nationally. Overall advancement comes from the aggregate of local planning, decision-making, and action informed in part by common values and goals.

We know all too well that there is no singular answer, or master plan that is appropriate for each circumstance. But we also know that fruitful discussions with those facing similar challenges, and thoughtful and collective consideration of ideas can prove invaluable. These annual meetings provide substantive opportunities to advance the conversation with colleagues. We hope you will take full advantage of your time here in Minneapolis to seek and to share.

As you contemplate these issues, the following suggestions, offered as food for thought, may be helpful to consider during your deliberations. First,

- Become expert and revel in your expertise.
- Know that your contributions will have lasting effect.
- Acknowledge that the work is hard, but worth every effort.
- Take stock in accomplishments, even if they aren’t yours.
- Find and develop your voice. Use it to speak and share the truth.

³ David Foster Wallace, *This is Water* (Gambier, Ohio, 2005).

⁴ Ibid

- Read, study, research, listen, learn, participate, collaborate; be a lifelong student. John W. Gardner suggests that “the need for endless learning and trying is a way of living, a way of thinking, a way of being ready and awake.”⁵
- Separate fact from chatter; know the difference.
- As a field, don’t hesitate to be of one collective voice—the strength of which should not be underestimated.
- Negotiate today’s realities, and know that tomorrow, you must wake and negotiate all over again.
- In the words of Winston Churchill, "Never give in, never give in, never; never; never; never – in nothing, great or small, large or petty – never give in except to convictions of honor and good sense".⁶
- Never worship the wrong things, never relegate the truth.
- Always keep the art, the art form, and art making as center.
- Above all, find and hold the joy of it all. We are stewards, bestowed with a gift, fortunate to have the opportunity to make a difference, and to craft what is and becomes of tomorrow.

This list is not exhaustive by any stretch, but it is a start.

There is much more to do. There is much at stake.

Thank you for what you have done. Congratulations on your many accomplishments. Best wishes as you set out on the path that takes you on your next journey.

It is a pleasure and honor to have the opportunity to serve and provide assistance to you in support of your ongoing efforts. The staff joins me in offering deepest appreciation.

As we move forward with the program this week, and as you return to shepherd your programs and students through the remaining weeks of the fall, I leave with you a parting thought, not my own. “Life is not measured by the number of breaths we take, but by the moments that take our breath away”.⁷

May you realize every success in your efforts to create that which is breathtaking.

Thank you.

⁵ John W. Gardner, *Self Renewal, The Individual and the Innovative Society* (W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., New York, New York, 1981), xii.

⁶ Winston Churchill (Harrow School, October 29, 1941)

⁷ Vicki Corona, *Tahitian Choreographies*, Volume 11, Book 18 (Dance Fantasy Productions, North Hollywood, California, 1989), 36.