

# Farewell Keynote to the Arts Midwest Conference

SEPTEMBER 5, 2019

*As delivered by David Fraher, President Emeritus of Arts Midwest, at the 2019 Arts Midwest Conference.*

Thank you, Mary Anne...Madame Chairman!

And thank you... each of you.

I want to begin today on a different note, by sharing something that is very special to me...a breath, if you will, from another world, from one of my favorite American poets, W.S. Merwin, who, sadly, left us this past winter. This poem is called, *Turning*.

*(Turning)*

“Going too fast for myself I missed  
more than I think I can remember

almost *everything* it seems sometimes  
and yet...there are chances that come back

that I did not notice when they stood  
where I could have reached out and touched them

this morning the black Belgian shepherd dog  
still young looking up and saying

Are you ready this time?”

I'm beginning my remarks with a poem because, in a way, poetry is what brought me to this moment.

While it certainly could have gone a different way, poetry literally saved my life when I was in high school and I couldn't find a safe pathway out of the deep and dark woods that was, then, my soul.

Poetry guided me to and through college and helped open previously unknown doorways to theater and dance and music and painting and more.

Poetry took me to graduate school, and then poetry worked very, very hard to keep me afloat in the drudgery of a soulless job in D.C.

And it was poetry that finally set me free from that box and carried me, 42 years ago, to Cheyenne, and into a job managing the Poetry in the Schools Program for the Wyoming Council on the Arts. Poetry has been the river upon which I've sailed throughout my life.

I'm beginning my remarks with poetry...with a poem...with *this* poem...because, frankly, I can imagine nowhere else to start.

Listen. Think of what this poem is reminding us:

That in the incessant busy-ness of our lives, in our distracted days, we let so much pass us by—we miss more than we realize, we lose more than we will ever be able to remember.

And yet while much is lost to time, there *are* moments—there are opportunities—which appear, like this eager, young, black Belgian shepherd dog and offer us an additional chance to stop, to reflect, to engage, and maybe, to wake into *readiness*.

Over time I know I've missed a lot. But today...today before this long, strange trip concludes... before I get too busy and miss even this...I have vowed to pause and look Merwin's proverbial black dog in the eye and answer, "Yes. I AM ready this time..."

I've come to you today prepared to seize this moment, to take you all in, to relish being with you in this space one final time, and to tell you from my heart why—for me—all of this...*all of this*...really matters.

I also hope you will leave here understanding in your hearts, just what being part of this crazy family has meant to me and to my life journey over these past four decades.

That's a lot to cover in the time allotted, and so without further hesitation, let me begin by trying to explain why, for me, all of *this* remains, even after so many years, so very important.

Step one in that process requires this: a public confession.

I am desperately in love.

In fact, for 42 years I have carried on a deep and unrelenting love affair...with poetry, for sure, but also with nearly every single iteration of human creativity.

I have wept at the end of *Death of a Salesman* more times than I can remember; I've been transported by being in the room when Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane danced a duet only months before Arnie left our world; I've sat for hours in the Rothko Chapel in Houston and watched as those amazing paintings and the silence of that sacred space merged into a single translucent moment; I've let my heart be broken by Cecilia Bartoli singing Handel, by Barry Harris playing *These Foolish Things* in a darkened room, and by The Five Blind Boys of Alabama stretching their voices to heaven in *Down by the Riverside*.

I've sat and listened and watched in rehearsal rooms, recording studios, sound stages, and sound checks; I've lingered and explored in artists' lofts and museum storage vaults. Day after day...after week...after year, and on for a lifetime...how freaking lucky have I been? Who wouldn't fall...and remain...in love?!

I was gifted the opportunity to spend the vast majority of my life encountering, on a near continual basis, that remarkable element...that capacity...which makes us so unique, so quintessentially *human*: the impulse to express ourselves, and our feelings, and our ideas creatively.

I *am* in love with that...and I suspect there are many people in this room who share this same love and this same lover with me. But as is too often the case, we sometimes get too busy...we overlook the remarkable treasure of this life and love and we become trapped in the rote, in the tasks, in the mundane.

The black dog waits, but we keep rushing by...

And if it were not already enough...to have been given this passionate and unrelenting encounter with the creative, to have the awesome privilege to swim in such a world on a daily basis...we have each also been granted this:

We...you and I...have been entrusted with the solemn responsibility...and the remarkable opportunity...to light this same fire in others, to take the music and words and images and movements that have fed our souls and pass them joyfully and carefully on!

Our love for the creative experience...that love which has sustained us throughout our lives and careers...that passion we carry for the choreographers and performers, the writers and composers, the painters and designers and carvers and the rest...that love will be passed on, and with grace, will grow in another heart, another life.

And while this may sound grandiose, in those moments when we succeed, when that connection and hand-off truly occurs, I believe that in a small way... we become linked with the eternal... *L'dor vador*...from generation to generation...person to person, the gift passes on.

Pause for a second. Think back to a moment where you've truly passed this gift on to another person or an audience or a community...what do you remember about that moment? What was the experience like for them? For you? Do you remember the feeling that you had at the moment when you realized that the fire had fully been lit? Are you ready to grant yourself the acknowledgment that you actually played a real part in making that moment happen?

Nearly 40 years ago, I sat in a high school gymnasium in Pinedale, Wyoming and watched as maybe two hundred people... ranchers and oilmen, their spouses, and their children...arrived out of a cold and storming night. They came into the gym, shook thick snow off their hats and jackets, put blankets and cushions on the bleachers, drank coffee

and hot chocolate from thermoses, chatted with their neighbors, and waited. They waited until the room darkened, and there, from a pool of light near center court, the voices began:

First Willy's

“Oh boy, oh boy!”

Then Linda's:

“What happened? Did something happen, Willy?”

And for the next two and a half hours, those two hundred souls were transported into the terrible glory that is the life of Willy Loman, his wife, and his sons. *Death of a Salesman* was performed that night by the Missoula Repertory Company, and was funded and organized by the Wyoming Council on the Arts with support from the National Endowment for the Arts.

And while I was there to gather data for a site visit report, what I realized and understood in the end was much more powerful than any data point.

Those families had driven 50, 75, even 100 miles in a hard, early spring snowstorm. They were likely worried about their cattle and their sheep, their finances and their unavoidable drive back through the valley and the night. But for those two and a half hours, they were mesmerized by a stunning performance, by amazing actors, in a school gymnasium.

And at the end of the play, they stood and hollered and clapped. Many...myself included... wept. And then they gathered their blankets and coats and said quick goodbyes to their neighbors and friends and drove home in the dark with the actors' voices still echoing in their heads.

I don't know how many of those audience members still remember that night, how many hear a phrase, or drive that road through the valley, or watch thick snow falling in early March and think back and hear Willy...hear Linda...see in their mind's eye the pool of light in the middle of the basketball court. But I believe if I went to Pinedale and, over coffee, asked them, it would all come rushing back.

I remember that moment, for sure, and, if I'm lucky, will do so until I die.

That is why we are here. That is what all of this is...or should be...about. Opening the world of the creative to as many other humans as possible; ensuring an opportunity for people to forge lasting memories of beauty and awe and wonder that they can carry through their lives.

Whatever role we each may play in this process...performer or playwright, agent or presenter, board member or patron or volunteer usher...understand the awesome gift we have been granted. Do not let such incredible moments slip past unnoticed and uncelebrated. Pause and look and see the black dog. Be ready the next time.

And then...then there's this. There's you. There's ...us!

As we move forward in our evolving world and rightly claim and appropriately profess our preferred, individual pronouns, before I leave you, for one last time I want to claim my position of semi-authority assert what I believe are the preferred pronouns of Arts Midwest and the Arts Midwest Conference. And those are *We. Us. Ours*.

For thirty-five years, we have mutually chosen to set aside an Us/Them structure. We have generally succeeded in avoiding the singular "I" or "my" when describing our work, our teams, our challenges, and our accomplishments.

What is here has been created together. What this is, is, in fact, who we are...together. Each of us is critical to our work because *all* of us are critical to this work.

When Arts Midwest has faced challenges, we've faced them together, as a community. On great days, we all celebrated; on dark days, we held each other up.

You have been, and will forever remain, my family. In introducing the conference and our work to New Colleagues each year, I liken this event to being something akin to the largest, strangest Thanksgiving gathering ever convened.

From this podium, over the years, I've looked out into a sea of faces and watched as you've miraculously transmogrified into dozens of crazy aunts and uncles, cousins and siblings. We may only come together at these tables once a year, but each of you is a critical member of the *us* that *we* have made together.

I am forever grateful, and I will hold you forever in my heart.

And now, my hope...or better yet, my blessing for you all.

It is fairly impossible to have missed the banners, the buttons, the slides that are everywhere this week...all entreating you to *Be Curious*. We like to think that Arts Midwest has succeeded over the years because we have deeply...*deeply*...embraced our curiosity. (There are some, I am certain, who might suggest that we may have been a wee bit *too* curious at times, but I'll leave that for our new CEO to rebalance!)

A few years ago, as we began initial planning for the transition which is being actualized before you this week, the question was raised, "What is sacred to Arts Midwest? What should not be lost as we move into the future?"

And at the center of our organizational response to that question was our deep sense of curiosity and exploration.

Curiosity can be nurtured in many ways. The easier points of entry might include:

- Reading a book about a subject, or a country, or a culture with which you have zero familiarity; or
- Taking a moment to introduce yourself to a new person, learn about their life, and discover where their interests might intersect with yours; or
- Trying new food, or listening to unfamiliar music, or even listening to talk radio while driving across the country, just to understand what other people's ideas and opinions might be.

Curiosity demands being open to the unexpected; it encourages making connection between disparate ideas and concepts; it is built upon a willingness to ask questions, questions like "Why" and "What if..."

My hope for you...my blessing...is that you be granted...and grant yourself...the space and freedom to lead a life of curiosity; that you have a moment each day where you see something and ask, "Why does this happen in this way?"; that you learn to examine and explore the possible interconnections between vastly disparate parts of the world around

us: for instance, does the growing prevalence of those rent-and-drop as you will bicycles have any correlation to how people might want to buy tickets to your performances in the future? (I'll be you'll find out it does!)

I wish you just such an inquisitive, insatiable, and multi-faceted life of curiosity. And I hope you will share what you discover with all of us.

And now I will leave this moment in the manner I arrived...with one final poem, this from the poet Robert Bly, who, at age 92, now lives just a few blocks away right here in Minneapolis.

This poem, in three short sections, is called, *After Working*.

I.

After many strange thoughts,  
Thoughts of distant harbors and new life,  
I came in and found the moonlight lying in the room.

II.

Outside it covers the trees like pure sound,  
The sound of tower bells, or of water moving under the ice,  
The sound of the deaf hearing through the bones of their heads.

III.

We know the road; as the moonlight  
Lifts everything, so in a night like this  
The road goes on ahead, it is all clear.

Thank you. Thank you all, so very much.