League of American Orchestras
76th National Conference: Embracing a Changed World
Your Values, Your Impact, Your Story
Wednesday, June 16, 2021

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>> MICHELLE BURNS: Good morning and good afternoon depending upon where you are dialling in from today. Welcome, conference attendees! Thank you for joining us today for our sessions on your values, your impact, your stories. I'm your MC for today, Michelle Burns, president and CEO of the Minnesota Orchestra.

It's my pleasure to lead you through today's content. I hope that you are ready to lean into your creativity and your curiosity today. Before we get started with the session, on behalf of the League, I want to acknowledge our generous sponsor for today's session, Kierkegaard. They are a world renounced acoustics and integrated systems technology design firm that specializes in the performing arts, and is a leader in facilities for performing arts education.

Thank you so much to Kierkegaard for their support. And we urge you to go and visit them and all of our other sponsors for

this conference and exhibitors who have set up shop in the virtual exhibit hall.

As we think about how the events of the past year have changed the world, our organizations and ourselves, it's more important than ever that we are able to express our evolving thinking in a compelling way. And this afternoon, we will explore how we can conceptualize and articulate a new narrative.

Up first will be a keynote talk about storytelling followed by a panel presentation in which we will explore how we rethink our case for support in these changing times. And then a facilitated chat in which we will gather in small groups to share what we've learned and to think about how we convert our learnings from today and from our other sessions into actions for each of our organizations.

And then after a break for happy hour or dinner, depending on your time zone, we will have an opportunity to enjoy a concert by the inter-school orchestras of New York.

Our keynote talk today will explore the role of storytelling as a tool to transform what you do every day into stories that will help strengthen, inspire, and advance your organization's mission and role in building community. To guide us in this exploration, we are delighted to have as our keynote speaker Kiran Singh Sirah, president of the International Storytelling Center. So a few words about Kiran, first. Kiran describes himself as a speaker consultant and peace builder. He

speaks about storytelling as a universal form of cultural expression that leads to respect and justice, and ultimately to peace.

He has developed workshops for groups, healing from traumatic events, and provided trainings for humanities and arts commissions across the United States. He was awarded the rotary champion of peace award at the United Nations Geneva Convention in 2019.

At the international storytelling center, he used storytelling to promote positive change for healthier communities and more effective work places. Today Kiran will offer insight into using storytelling as a vital tool to develop our own narrative to carry ourselves and our work in the orchestra field forward during this pivotal time.

First I want to share with you that when I sent Kiran an e-mail on Monday evening, I received his out of office reply message which read in part, I hope you are having an excellent day. I'm currently out of the office as I'm taking a day off. I am going to Dolly wood splash country because I love water and I love Dolly. Also, it's always good to take a break for self-care when you can.

Please make sure you are doing this as well. Resting and cultivating self-care is also important to become the story you wish to see in this world. If I don't get sidetracked or dye my hair blonde, I will be back on Tuesday. And that right there is why I want to get to know Kiran better and hear what he has to say.

So now, please join me in welcoming Kiran Singh Sirah.

>> KIRAN SINGH SIRAH: Michelle, thank you so much. As you can tell, I didn't dye my hair blonde. I wish I had hair. It is really wonderful to be here and it's my first time attending this conference as well. So I really appreciate the opportunity to do that. I've really enjoyed the conferences. I've enjoyed the sessions, the keynotes, the break out, the small Zoom breakout rooms. But I have really enjoyed the symphonies and the music in the evenings. And that's been really, really special for me to be able to sit and watch that.

So I want to just express my appreciation to Heather, to Michelle, and all the team for putting that on and all the orchestras across the country for doing that. Thank you so much for that. Which is really something I want to build upon as I kind of introduce myself here. And something that I have been reflecting as I watched those concerts. A long time ago, at a literary festival in Scotland, I met an attorney who was once the attorney for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and he was a speechwriter.

And he told me about how he was classically trained in playing the clarinet. And he would often use musical theory in his work drafting his speeches. He described imagining Dr. King as the instrument and considering composition and cadence of the words as he worked and as he wrote.

I love that little detail because it's from a mind of how all of us across the arts are so closely interconnected. There

is music in the spoken word. I worked at the International Storytelling Center, so I tend to see everything as a story, a dance, a painting, or a symphony. Those are all stories to me. I'm not a musician, although I do beat box from time to time.

But I strongly feel that we are all doing different versions of the same work. And so I feel very honored as a nonmusician to be here talking to you today. I want to start by acknowledging that we've all been through a lot over these past two years as individuals, as workers who care about the arts.

The pandemic has amplified so many problems that we are already dealing with, climate change, the nasty political divisions, bigotry and inequality. And on top of all that, it's given us a whole new raft of problems, big and basic organizational puzzles like how can we have a meeting now? Or how can we present a performance virtually or even how can we stay alive as an organization?

We were dealing with all these existential threats on top of personal stress like loneliness, stress and boredom and anxiety. The pandemic took away a lot of those things. But it also gave us new perspective and that is very valuable.

I'm here to talk to you today about how we can use that perspective as a gift. I do think it's a gift that can help us build a better world. I always feel like people are rolling their eyes though a little bit when I say things like build a better world. And I get it, it's a very lofty phrase, a lofty idea. And

to some people, it would sound a little oily, perhaps a little daunting. But I think it's important to know that hope isn't necessarily a feeling. It's a practice. It's a project we can chip away at building a better world, a better future.

It's something we can do together one story at a time. And we can do that a little bit each day. A story just like a symphony or a painting or a sculpture never stands alone. It exists within a context, whatever story you hear or read, there are always other stories underneath it O off to the side. For every account you read in a history book, there are many more that are in the margins or not on the page at all.

In folklore studies, we often talk about digging where you stand to understand the places where we live. When we talk about stories in this way, we can better grasp the people and the place, we understand their accomplishments, their dreams and their mistakes. But often these are the stories that lie beneath the surface, making a place what it is, even when those stories haven't yet been unearthed.

At the International Storytelling Center where I work, we are always looking for ways to dig where we stand. And reframe old stories in new ways. Over the past few years, we worked very hard on an initiative called Freedom Stories which centered the stories of Black Appalachians in history. These are tales and perspectives that throughout history have been hidden or buried or pushed to the side. We have to keep our eyes wide open for

stories like this, because they are never in the spotlight.

Let me give you an example from my own life. When I first came to the United States as a graduate student ten years ago, I visited the historic plantation near Durham, North Carolina. The guided tour started at the big house where the white overseers once lived. We worked through these carefully preserved spaces, attending to the detail of the architecture and the dining room sets that had been made from wood imported from England.

We spent most of our time on our tour in the big house. As we moved across the property, we heard fewer stories and examined fewer details. We made our way to a big barn where tobacco to once been stored. Adjacent to it was a small structure that was probably a slave dwelling. As I examined the cement and the brickwork, I can see a thumbprint. And I wondered who it belonged to.

Was it someone who had lived there and what was their story? I think the tour would have been much more interesting if we had started with that anonymous thumbprint instead of putting so much focus on the big house. It's part of our job as Americans and world citizens to examine those thumb prints, so to speak and put them at the center of our narratives instead of in the margins. And that's not always easy or self-flattering work because it involves acknowledging that way too many stories are dark with unhappy endings.

At my organization we have been thinking hard about which stories need the spotlight right now. We know that narratives have a lot of power. In Tennessee where we are based we have seen firsthand the power of storytelling to transform our own community and revitalize our little town. As an arts organization for fifty years stories not just for entertainment but also as a force for social change.

Preserving and honoring the past. But the other side of that is that storytelling doesn't necessarily just preserve culture. It invigorates it. A good story will stir things up. It brings up memories and inspires us to connect with people who we may have felt perhaps isolated from before.

I have had a lot of opportunities to witness the power of stories to do all this firsthand. I think a lot of times when people think of storytelling, they think of performance on a stage or perhaps librarians sharing stories with a group of kids. And certainly storytelling is all those things.

My organization produces The National Storytelling Festival which is the big live storytelling event every year and there are thousands of people in that audience. It's a wonderful long weekend with incredible performances who are masters of their craft. We all have a terrific time. But events like that are only part of the work that we do as an organization because storytelling isn't just a performance art. It's also a means of exploration and self-expression.

And a practical strategy for building peace, just, and better community relations. A story doesn't have to be a finished work of art that an entertainer performs on stage. We can think of stories as tours that can do really important work in our everyday lives.

Stories help us understand who we are as a people and how we relate to other people and the world around us. You can use a story to tell someone something as simple as what happened at work that day or to share something more sweeping and profound about your life. Articulating our experiences to the world in this way, having the space and the tours of self-expression is a form of empowerment, that understanding of our own identity becomes the basis for how we understand the people around us and the people who are further away and even people who lived a long time before we were born.

As DJQueslow suggests, music has the power to stop time, but music also keeps and holds time, too. I think the same applies to storytelling, it becomes the basis of empathy. Part of what we are talking about is having a room with lots of different kinds of people in it, all of whom feel empowered to say who they are. That's the real meaning of diversity. Many years ago, when I was an educational officer at the Big Museum in Glasgow in Scotland, the director said something that has really stuck with me.

He said that when you work in a cultural institution

at any level, then you are a cultural diversity officer. Thinking about diversity isn't just for the workers who are hired to that specific end. It's not just something we should do during Pride Month or Black History Month. It's something that just needs to be part of our thinking all the time, culture belongs to everyone.

But it doesn't always feel that way, does it? Sometimes that's because of practical reasons like someone who can't afford a ticket to a concert or it may be more emotional like when someone doesn't feel welcome into a space or just feels like they don't belong.

As cultural diversity officers, and remember, we are all cultural diversity officers, I think a good habit is to always think about who is not in the room and why. We have to really work to cultivate this awareness. At the museum in Glasgow, I often worked with young interns. What id like to do during their first week on the job was to give them a bus ticket and I ask them to go visit the sites of Glasgow, not just the touristy parts. I wanted them to pay attention to the different kinds of places, building names, graffiti signs, markets, everything.

And at the end of the week, I asked the intern to come back to the museum and notice what parts of the city were missing from the museum. Who and what wasn't represented? That became the brief for the internship at the museum to address that, to find a way to bring them into the room.

Just for a moment, let's pretend that you are my

imaginary intern. I want you just to know close your eyes and visualize your organizational space. And then imagine taking a bus ride or a walk or an Uber around your community. Who and what isn't well represented in your institution? What and who do you see on your stroll around town that you need to bring into the room? Thank you.

Are in a way, what we are talking about is representation, right. Our communities need to be able to see themselves in our organizations to feel welcome there. Let me give you an example of representation gone wrong. At the British Museum, all the European stuff is front and center. And all the artifacts from Africa are in the basement.

Whether or not the people who design the layout intended it to be that way, it sends a certain signal about whose stories and whose culture is important. And inevitably, it's going to make some of the people who go to that museum feel second rate or even second class. At the museum in Glasgow, we are always looking for ways to help people feel more connected with our exhibits, especially kids. For one project, I approached a local police officers about working with teenagers who are first-time offenders. Usually police make these kids do community service chores like picking up trash or repainting a train station wall.

But I suggested that they assigned the kids to me instead. We developed a program where the kids could use their graffiti tagging skills with a textile artist. This was elevated

and totally legal version of something these kids have been doing on the streets for many years, marking a space to let the world know that they exist.

The difference was the contexts of the museum where we invited the kids to be part of our community instead of existing in opposition to it. The stroke of genius with that program was where we displayed the final works. Usually community exhibits get displayed no the corridors or the museum cafe set apart from the real art. And that position sends a kind of signal about which art was most important.

In our museum, we place the kid's work next to the most famous painting in Scotland. A Dali. Suddenly, these so-called dangerous teens were artists. And they began to see themselves as artists. They had been validated and told their art mattered. The program was a success.

As cultural diversity officers, it's important we meet people where they are. Sometimes it starts with a single act of listening. I was studying folklore in Chapel Hill North Carolina. I spend time at a homeless shelter doing immersive research. I was studying home, the aesthetics of home, the idea of home, the search for home and what that meant to someone who didn't have one.

I had my theories. And I talked about them frequently about with one of the men that I met at the shelter. His name was Johnny. He was an older white man with a scraggley beard. In our

initial conversations, I made a lot of assumptions about what home would mean to a person like Johnny. I didn't mean to do this, I just did it.

But because it can be hard to let go of your assumptions and just listen. When we talked about the shelter, Johnny focused mostly on his struggles, his dislikes and the challenges that he faced every day. He had to reach for the words as he explained these difficult and complex emotions.

And there was a distance in those words. What he was describing was not who he was, not part of his core identity. He wanted to find who he was as a person. What I didn't realize was that we were talking about my notion of home which I assumed was the shelter. After all, that's where he was living at the time. But as we talked more, I found that Johnny would answer my questions in ways that often prize surprised me. For him, home was rooted in the past and it wasn't a physical place such as where he shared with people.

As it turned out, Johnny had been a baker. After we finished an official interview, I turned off the microphone and he talked about the things he used to bake. The content became more different, vivid and poetic. When he talked about baking, everything changed. The conversation became more fluid and eloquent. This was something he could talk about with presence and authority.

It helped Johnny tell me about who he is in a way that

his circumstances at the time were unable to convey. At the same time, I was learning something new. I always found something for me. I always saw myself in Johnny's stories because like him, I was constantly using cooking as a way to connect with friends and the broader community now where I live here in East Tennessee in these mountains.

We are all in some ways products of our environment, constantly receiving new input. We can change our communities and our communities can change us in return. Our identities are flexible, always changing depending on context. In England where I was born, I was called Indian. In Scotland where I lived, I was English. And here in the United States, I'm British. Or sometimes European. And all of these identities reflect the truth in a different way.

What I have realized is that none of us is just a citizen of one place. We are all citizens of the world. But the stories we hear about that world often come through broken filters. Every day we are inundated with negative news stories and messages written by people who want to sell us something or otherwise they may have an agenda.

I believe it's our duty as citizens of the world to seek out the truth for ourselves. Sometimes we can find this truth by looking within. But other times we find it by looking around us and looking for opportunities for fellowship so we could open doors and even break down walls. In 2016, I happened to be in Baton

Rouge, Louisiana where Alton Sterling was shot and killed by police.

The shooting occurred just one mile from where I was staying, but I didn't hear about it the next morning. I learned about the tragedy on one of those big TV screens mounted on the cafe wall. It was one of those 24-hour news channels. There was a lot of activity around town and newscasters were framing it as a riot.

The thing was I was right there in downtown Baton Rouge. I could look around and see with my own eyes that there was no evidence of rioting. People gathered. But it was to pay their respects, not an act of unrest. What I was seeing was a vigil, not a riot.

Later that same afternoon, I saw a young Black woman with a sign that said we are all Alton Sterling. I stopped to talk to her. Her name was Tam Williams. She was a 24-hour documentary filmmaker who had grown up in the area. I got her permission to take a photo which I posted to Facebook that evening. I thought it was so brave of her to be standing there alone.

I learned a lot from our short conversation. A lot more than I could have learned from just watching that TV back at my hotel. To serve a community, you need to interact with people. You need to listen. You need to dig where you stand. I am always trying to keep this principle in mind of when I'm helping people grow as we develop and refine our own community-building programs

at the International Storytelling Center. In one youth empowerment program we developed called Shiros, we use a day camp format to help young girls express themselves.

We use dance and theater to help 10 to 13-year-old girls better understand themselves and also dream about the future they see in the world. The Shiros program combines elements of folk tails and fairytales and fables to help the girls understand their identities, the family histories and the problems they see around them.

At the end of the two-week intensive camp, the girls stage a live recital with the fictional characters they have imagined and developed. It's really something to see. With their creativity, they learned to deal with the disappointments and anxiety of everyday life. For several participants, anxiety about climate change was palpable. Another participant dealt with a scary episode in her family's life.

We helped the girls connect with their families and the wider community and even process trauma by writing their own scripts, these kids felt empowered to share and grow from experiences that can be difficult to talk about.

We don't teach them how to perform someone else's story. We try to nurture what's already there so they can tell their own. Our cultural institutions have a big job right now. As we help our communities try to better understand themselves and the world, to return to where we started, we've all been through

a trauma with the effects of the pandemic. And beyond that, we live in a country and a world where political divisions have grown more and more heated and difficult.

I want to suggest to you today that crisis can be a launchpad for better things. Our collective task is to come together to envision a world in which hope, progress and positive change are back on the table. The arts are hugely important part of this process because they help us understand the past, even as we envision and shape the future.

As Mark Joseph talked about at the start of this conference, we should look to the artists for transformation. But I would like to build on that. Not only do we look at the artists, we always look at the artistry and the creativity that exists in our communities. And perhaps also by people that don't even consider themselves or call themselves artists.

Working towards this goal is what gives our lives meaning. And it will become a legacy that we can pass onto our children and our children's children and on and onto generations way past our lifetimes. Our stories aren't static. Our stories are part of living moments, stories and progress that are still being written as part of the collective history.

Throughout time, stories have been essential for our survivor. We have used them to meet the challenges of war, famine, pandemics and other conflicts. We have used them to pass on wisdom. We have developed systems of resilience, preserving

systems that others have tried to erase or suppress.

I was leading a workshop in Australia. This was the summer of 2020. In the height of the political protests in the U.S. that followed the murder of George Floyd. We were talking about the Black Lives Matter movement. And I learned that there had been a candlelit vigil in Australia spelling out "I can't breathe" with 433 candles.

On that call, we talked about how the 432 of those candles from for the indigenous Australians who had died in police custody. The 433 candle was for George Floyd.

Soon after that, when we took a break, I happened to look out my window and see a Black Lives Matter vigil taking place across the street. By candlelight, maybe a hundred or so members of my community were reading out the names, the victims of violence and police brutality. Black, white, Brown people lined the streets spaced out six feet apart. It was truly a sight to see.

It was a total coincidence, but it was almost as if the discussion from my computer screen had spilled out onto the street and into the light. The part of the story that spanned continents and it was still unfolding right in front of me. Often we think of stories as linear with a beginning, middle and an end. But I believe it's more useful to think about story as a tapestry or a map. Our personal story is just one thread that comes together into the bigger picture and it's best understood as part of the whole.

The personal experience shapes the collective experience and vice versa. They can't be separated. And the story is always expanding just like the universe itself. We have a lot of work to do. And that work starts with the act of harnessing your own story, sharing it with others and listening to what they have to say in return.

It requires the patience and the willingness to hear and share stories that make us uncomfortable or upset. It requires the wisdom to cultivate the good that's already there instead of imposing our will and our beliefs on what's good onto the people around us.

The causes, issues, ideas, and people we care about are worth fighting for. The world needs your story and it needs all our stories, the good, the bad, and the ugly. Multiculturalism has always been an American value and immigration has been very important to this country's history. But human nature and the people who write history books have a tendency to gloss over the parts that are difficult.

From the displacement of Native Americans to the horrors of slavery, the story of the United States is in many ways a series of traumas. Different people have experienced those traumas in different ways. Our experience of trauma in the pandemic have been a brutal reminder of the glaring inequities that have never really gone away. We need tours of storytelling and the arts in general now more than ever to harvest and grapple with

these experiences.

We need a better understanding of all the stories that inform our present in order to move toward a better future together. I want to end on a personal note. When I was a little kid growing up in England, I used to get a lot of grief on the playground. I was one of the only Brown kids in our little seaside town and there were many times kids would call me smelly in grant or curry boy or worse. My parents fled to England to take refuge from a genocidal dictator, used stories to tell me about where I had come from.

When I was a kid, the country of Uganda where they had lived was not a place, but a story. India where my mother's family was from, was a story. There were tales my mother would tell me as we prepared meals together in the kitchen and she would tell me what it was like growing up in east Africa watching her father build a well with his own hands so people could drink fresh water in the sun.

She told me the little hut that served as a school in a town between Kenya and Uganda and the road she would walk.

And Punjab where her parents came from, they were farmers and carpenters who took on the world's largest empire and won. These were the stories of places I wouldn't see in person until I was much older. But it taught me about resilience, resistance, strength, courage, love. Hearing these stories over and over again, I would peace together what these places I had never

seen looked like, like an imaginary map.

Knowing the trouble I faced on the playground, my mother would tell me these stories and then she would say, go back into that playground and to go tell them who you really are. It helped. I think that's all we really need to start building a better world. As cultural caretakers, cultural diversity officers because remember, that's what we really are. We need to always pay attention to who is in the room and who isn't there. Where we can find them, how can we welcome them into the room? And how can we make sure they have the opportunity to tell us about who they are? Thank you all for listening.

>> MICHELLE BURNS: Kiran, thank you so much for taking us on this storytelling journey. As we move into the Q&A portion of this session, I will note that we welcome and encourage questions from session participants. And to pose a question, please type it into the Q&A feature on your screen. So here are some of the things that I heard you talk about, Kiran, that a story exists within a context, and stories are not just entertainment. They are about effecting change, that storytelling becomes the basis for empathy and maybe a headline here is around that culture belongs to everyone, but it doesn't always feel that way.

So we should be thinking about who is not in the room and why. So the issue of representation is important to consider. So as session participants are kind of thinking about all of those concepts, what I would like to do is just kind of jump in and ask

you a starter question which is, how can we take this great information that you have shared with us, these kind of concepts around storytelling, the philosophy behind storytelling, and how do we translate that into some tangible next steps in developing our own stories and the stories of our organizations? How do we get started in that process? What might be a good first step for us?

>> KIRAN SINGH SIRAH: My father always said to me, if you don't know where to begin, start by washing the dishes. Start small. We also know that with any art form, to create a masterpiece, you have to work through the broken to get there. It takes practice. And it's the same with storytelling. There's no quick fix.

When Michelangelo went to paint the Sistine Chapel, he didn't learn to paint in a one-hour workshops. He learned the rules and learned to break the rules to apply his soul to create the masterpiece. And I think when we think about our story, this is the hardest thing that you can do in your lifetime because it's essentially unpacking your emotions, your pain, your suffering.

What I would always suggest beginning with is take some time out, close your eyes and go back to your story of value. Which story speaks to the value of why you do what you do? Spend some time really cultivating that and thinking through it, journal, close your eyes, meditate, pray, whatever you need to do and go deep into yourself and find what were the moments or experiences

or places or the people that made you, led you to what you do today? And I think that's a good starting point. And don't worry about it being a personal story. I need to tell someone else's story. Because your personal story is about your helping to inspire others, your helping to create a movement, a cause, what matters to you.

So the personal story is your value, but then the next phase I would suggest and this comes from a lot of Marshal Ganz's work, moving yourself story to the story of well. What's going right now, what organization, how does it connect to the mission to your movement, to your church or mosque or your community or hometown to where you are right now? What is that story?

And the third and I think that's kind of really importantly. It takes a lot of thinking, is how does it work with the story of purpose? So the story of self moves into the story of us and then it moves into the story of now. You imagine Greta Thunberg, it's climate change. Someone who witnessed her friend being killed by gun violence, it's gun reform. Using personal narrative for a change.

So thinking about that wider, those three interconnected, story of self, story of us, story of now. And allow yourself to go through that process and understand what was the people, the person, the event, the experience that maybe led, I'm not selling cars, I'm not working on Wall Street, I'm in an art form. It's about enriching people's lives. Why? And I

think that's a really good place just to start the process.

And remember, it's hard work. You will cry, believe me, which is good.

>> MICHELLE BURNS: Kiran, thank you. Thank you for that for walking through that idea of starting with the story of self and some self-reflection, moving to the story of us and then to the story of now. We have a question from a conference participant. Kiran, you spoke of broken filters for stories. If cultural organizations are also a filter of a kind, what are some basic principles and commitment for not being a broken one?

>> KIRAN SINGH SIRAH: Whoa, that's a good question. That's a brilliant question. And I need to think through that because you are right, it is a broken filter of a kind. You can somewhat suggest political government is a broken filter of a kind. You know, I understood America from what I heard from TV and from the president and what's on a little magazine that suggests that we go to a Statue of Liberty as our first point when I was 12 years old.

Or maybe what I should have done is start at the memorial to lynching in Montgomery, Alabama because we know not everyone came through Ellis Island. And I believe what we have to do in the art form of storytelling, it's sacred, where can you find that out for yourself? Where can you hear the personal testimonies that are not coming through those filters and where can you discover and be curious?

That's not to say cultural institutions aren't important, because remember we go to Holocaust museums because we are trying to understand this huge story how it can be so destructive. We, after 9/11 when all the attractions declined in New York City, apart from the galleries of the Metropolitan Museum, people were curious. They turned off Fox and CNN and wanted to find out for themselves.

I think it's important to create a safe space where people can meet and connect on a human level. So the broken filter potentially could be, but I think it's also, remember that it's a tapestry, too and multiple stories represent, there's no one single story coming out of this country, and there shouldn't be. There's no one single story that speaks to your organization, and there shouldn't be. It's multiple. It's a tapestry. There's a map and they all matter.

>> MICHELLE BURNS: Kiran, we have another question from the group.

>> KIRAN SINGH SIRAH: I feel like kind of a sermon here. I want to imagine why my hair is not blonde.

>> MICHELLE BURNS: Kiran, you spoke of interaction with people as an essential ingredient in serving a community. So there a storytelling strategy that is keen for engaging with an audience that might initially be reluctant or mistrustful of engagement?

>> KIRAN SINGH SIRAH: Hmm. Is there a key or a strategy?

I think an Irish storyteller said the closest distance between two people is a story. And that's, we have to think of our intentions. If our intention is to convince another, then that may not necessarily be the intention. But if our intention is to listen to that other, then that might be to find empathy and understanding. We know that a flag can be controversial. It can be difficult. It can be contested.

But the story behind that flag is going to be multiple and diverse. There's no one meaning. There's multiple. And I think when the intention is to try and find out what that meaning is attached to it, then there's truth that lies in it. I think also there's a concept called a storytelling knows me. And essentially, if you can create the story that can tap into something that the audience can relate to, whatever that is, an emotion, a connection, the desire to be loved, the desire to love, the desire to feel a sense of belonging, connection to a community, to feel included, then what you are creating are these universal human feelings, emotions, traits that connect the audience and the performer together essentially.

That's about allowing the storyteller knows me concept, that you are allowing the audience to understand yourself. But always remember that the final interpreter of any story will always lie in the mind of the listener. I can say so much about how I believe or what I believe what you should believe. But essentially, the listener is going to be interpreter of that.

So it's about crafting that story in a way that can relate to a value.

If you understand your value, then most likely that speaks to your heart it's most likely going to speak to someone else's heart, too. And I think that's about building empathy, building trust and in that space, we have the sacred space of listening, teller, and listener, the exchange.

>> MICHELLE BURNS: Thank you, Kiran. Another question has come in, and that is, what devices or tools can we use to create stories that encourage unity and common good, as opposed to division and polarity?

>> KIRAN SINGH SIRAH: Um, I think, I mean I think, I mean, I think the documentation process is always really valid and it's a very good thing to do because there might come a time in our history when we can reflect back. And I think about the work we did during in the islands during the 20-year war. They were collecting the items, the steering wheels that had got a bullet through it, that women used to signal to the men. Poetry, they collected these objects during the height of the troubles. But they weighted and they preserved them and when the trouble, the conflict ended, even though the tension was there, they invited the people that had been affected to curate the exhibit.

And I did a similar kind of roundtable after the massacre that took place in Charleston South Carolina in Mother Emanuel Church. And it was six months after, but one of those

conversations was collective stories around the confederate flag that's coming down right now, collective stories is what's happening. And that's an important process, preserving these stories. So when in ten years from now we can look back at that particular moment and curate that space, what you are doing is something that's much longer-term.

And I think don't also be afraid of what another person can grapple with and the complexities of the issues or the stories. We are clever. Human beings are smart and we have to remember we want more than a sound byte and it's okay to have different viewpoints. Don't be afraid to go into it. Don't be afraid of DEI. It's part of our all of our stories.

But I also think that the distrusting part, you have to want to also make sure that you are understanding where the audience comes from, what their needs are, what's important to them. And then make it relate. Just in terms of advocacy, one of my colleagues who is a folk and traditional arts colleague, she was trying to meet with a senator, an official. It was a differently political party. But she found out that at his church, they had these stained glass windows.

And so the first thing she talked about when she went in to talk about artist advocacy was talk about, I know you are a part of this community that collected these stained glass windows and his eyes lit up. She basically is helping him realize that it was all connected to the arts and folk and traditional arts.

So in that way, they built the relationship from there, that starting point. Connecting to what's already important to that community.

You might want to talk about it as heritage or whatever. Remember where I live in -- you have to talk about it in a way that people can understand. And I talk about storytelling as resilience. In Appalachia, I say it's a value that people understand in Appalachia. And people get that. So thinking through that process I think is very important to find out, but also making sure because you are creating a safe space. They have to feel comfortable, too. Not just for telling stories, but for listening to receive.

>> MICHELLE BURNS: Kiran, you spoke about the fact that stories are not static. So I would love to hear you just say a little bit more about how do you keep a story alive and evolving? Kind of once you have created that story, how do you make sure that you are able to adapt that to changing circumstances, changing times and changing context?

>> KIRAN SINGH SIRAH: I mean, I think a big part is changing anyway, whether the story is being told today that I might tell, it's already going to change because where I'm living or the time I'm living in is going to be different. And I think I quoted DJ who talked about music has the power to stop time and hold time but also believe is what stories can do, too. But context and place and how we interpret that is going to be different based on

what's around us, the moment.

When Johnny was in the shelter, he was living a struggled life at that particular time. So it's difficult to see, his story, his context was that he was living through a traumatic experience. So that's the lens to which the time and context he was in. How one has to kind of, you know, I think it's going to be very, very different through different types of stories or different types of stories you want to tell. And I think it really, a story you tell now is going to be different pre-pandemic, because you are talking about it in a different context, something that people can relate to.

You might tap into talking about helping people emerge from a particular type of experience. When I talk about trauma, I say, well, every kid's come through a traumatic experience right now. Not just the kid at risk. Everyone's at risk. So, you know, that context is important. A story is never necessarily static because it's changing based on place and time, but also our story as a nation is changing, too. You could argue I would suggest that we are in a bit of an identity crisis which is we are a story in the making. And when we work through that identity crisis, because whose stories are trying to get told and get to front and center?

That's kind of why I believe Black Lives Matter is a storytelling movement, right. So that, but I think it's also about working, being mindful that crisis, being mindful of the

changing circumstances and context, and then as my girlfriend would say, she's a painter, you work through the broken to get to the masterpiece. And I think that's also very, very important.

I would also try to think people maybe not think of storytelling as marketing or branding. It's a very different kind of place. Think of it as an art, as a tour that you work at for many, many years to create. And it it's not just to get something. It's to communicate your values and your purpose. And that's going to constantly change as well.

And so thinking about your story that you are telling at that particular time is going to be very different and you have to try to make it relate to the moment.

>> MICHELLE BURNS: I'm thinking a lot about what you've just shared, and really thinking about the authenticity of a story. And as people involved in orchestras, a lot of our storytelling over the years has not been about who is not in the room. And so as we think about our values as individuals, our values as organizations, how do we ensure that our story and our narrative moving forward is authentic and comes across in an authentic way as it relates to as you described it, very eloquently, our role as cultural diversity officers?

>> KIRAN SINGH SIRAH: Mm-hmm.

>> MICHELLE BURNS: It seems like our story now as orchestras might sound quite different than our story from five years ago, ten years ago. What thoughts do you have about that

and how to address that authenticity piece?

>> KIRAN SINGH SIRAH: I mean, authenticity is a really big subject and it's a difficult one often to talk about. How do you create that authentic -- I think it really comes back down to what's authentic to you. What is true to you? If it speaks to you and it's your purpose, then it's likely going to be the better story to tell than the organizational mission, starting with that.

And I think if there's a hundred people that work in your organization, then go for a storytelling collecting process, allow time to think through that process. And if a hundred people could work out why they do what they do, what brought them to that place, what were the people that inspired them, you have got an incredible tapestry to build upon. And there's no one story that you would tell necessarily to convince others.

Because that type of thing is going to really speak power, truth, connection. Values speak to values, essentially, if you really want to build a movement. And I think some of that might also be thinking about how do we relinquish control and power ourselves? Who has historically had the microphone and who needs the microphone now? As a man, historically, I have had the microphone. So part of that, I have to see different places where I can step back. If I'm white or Black or Brown, who has had that microphone and who needs that microphone?

How can we create space for other people's stories to come to the surface? But also think of our cultural institutions

are not separate from the places where they live. They are embedded in those places. And the collective story, the expanded narrative is one that's not just a story of the institution. It's the story of place, Appalachia, the Delta, wherever that might be, the broad lands. It's connected to that place.

And so thinking very broadly about finding those stories, collecting those stories, making those stories circles happen even in spaces, open up those spaces to have free flow, nonlinear uncontrolled open dialogue as a place for storytelling to come to the surface where people can feel content and happy and safe to share. I think it's a hard one to tap into because authenticity as anthropologists, we think about that a lot. But it really comes from a place of within. I think.

>> MICHELLE BURNS: I appreciate your addressing that, Kiran. And it sounds like you are suggesting that the stories we tell are not so much about our organizations, but about the people we engage with and a sense of place. So is this sort of anti-elevator speech?

>> KIRAN SINGH SIRAH: Oh, yeah, elevator went out in the '80s! Totally went out in the '80s. Because remember we are smarter. We are more inundated with stories every day than we were before, especially young people. They can see through the BS and say, hmmm, no. They are inundated with stories every day. They can see right through the elevator pitch.

But what I would suggest, make that elevator 20

minutes, two hours, an epic. And allow yourself, the elevator to break down in the darkness and you have having an intimate sharing in that elevator with someone about why you exist? What's your purpose? What matters to you? Who matters to you? What do you want your legacy to be? What's the imprint you want to leave in people's lives? And what do you want to be remembered for, for making a contribution to the greater story of our humanity? That's the elevator.

You may allow that elevator to slow down and do justice to the story that needs to be told if that makes sense.

>> MICHELLE BURNS: It does. Kiran, thank you so much and thank you for reminding us that listening is a critical part of storytelling. We are coming to the end of our time for this session, just about one minute left. So I am going to take this opportunity to say thank you to participants in this session. And a big thank you to you, Kiran, for inspiring new ways of thinking about our narrative and thinking about our role as cultural diversity officers. I will end by saying that when I met Kiran to prepare for this session, he commented to me that storytelling is going to change the world.

And I think that from the chat that I have seen during the session, that Kiran, you have given all of us a new found appreciation for how that will be true and the tools that we can use to start to tell our stories, the story of self, the story of us, the story of now. And I would encourage participants to go

to the International Storytelling Center website and utilize the great resources that are available there.

So a very big thank you, Kiran, for sharing your thoughts, your insights with us and for being such an inspiration to kick off today's sessions. And I hope that everyone will tune in again at 2:15 Eastern in just about 15 minutes for our panel discussion and then spoiler alert, Kiran will be back with us for the facilitated chat later today. So you will not want to miss.

>> KIRAN SINGH SIRAH: Maybe I will bring Johnny with me, you never know. Michelle, thank you very much for your questions and your patience and your wonderful connection. And also Heather and the whole, this is my first time in the League conference. And I may just come back every year. I have really enjoyed this and being part of this community. And so and do come to East Tennessee if not to see me, to see Ms. Parton, very short distance away. But I loved being here. Thank you so much.

>> MICHELLE BURNS: Thank you, Kiran. Thank you all. We will see you again soon. Bye, bye.