

Closing Luncheon and Plenary: Byron Stripling

June 16, 2023

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BYRON STRIPLING: “[SINGING] A bird with feathers of blue is waiting there for you. Right in your own backyard You’ll find your castles in Spain right on your windowpane, right in your own backyard. Oh, you can go to the east and go to the west, but some day you’ll come wearily back, back where you started from. You’ll find your happiness lies right under your eyes, right in your own backyard. Right in your own backyard.” Welcome ladies and gentlemen, now listen here.

[APPLAUSE]

BYRON: Wait. I don’t have a lot of time, don’t clap too much. No, thank you so much, and thank you Simon. Look, I’m fully aware that each of you has the greatness of an American symphony orchestra right in your own backyard. And that’s why I sang that song. Each of your orchestras contain virtuosos that are second to none, and a maestro that weekly leads the musicians down a pathway of artistic excellence.

When you see your orchestras smiling, that’s good. But remind them as you see them smiling and as they leave that they have that gift right in their own backyard. That’s another reason I did that. They don’t have to go to New York, and New York is cool, they don’t have to go to Los Angeles, and Los Angeles is cool, but it’s right in your own backyard, and you need to teach them right there there is the beauty, there is the majesty, there is the glory.

Each of you also in that backyard have diamonds. That backyard is full of diamonds, they’re called musicians. But diamonds don’t look like diamonds in their rough form. They have to be shaped, they have to be molded, they have to be sculpted. Then they reveal their beauty. And that creation of that artist, that beauty is facilitated by each of you. And it speaks to the daily arduous work that you do every single day. You keep the music playing. You make the songs last. You keep the songs from fading too fast. You are the guardians of this legacy.

And what is legacy? Well, in *Hamilton*, Lin Manuel Miranda says that legacy is like planting seeds in a

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garden that you never get to see. So with legacy comes great responsibility, ladies and gentlemen. And we know that that can be a challenge. Those nights when you lay awake trying to solve the problems of your orchestra, even after a whole bottle of wine, you still can't sleep. And then you keep thinking, maybe I should top this off with some more melatonin.

[LAUGHTER]

BYRON: And you still can't sleep. Nothing can keep you asleep on those nights, ladies and gentlemen, because you too care about the legacy. The legacy of the musicians and the staff and also the audience. In fact, that's where you get your joy. Listening and watching that audience as the orchestra begins to play. And you've seen folks walk into the theater with their fists all balled up. Seemingly ready for a fight, ticked off and angry. Ready to rumble. And then all of a sudden they hear [HUMMING], and Mozart, Beethoven and Brahms and all of those people come in, and all of a sudden people feel better.

See, you think we are in competition with Netflix and Hulu. You think we're in competition with Google and Facebook and all of those things. But the thing is all those things leave you empty, and they leave that audience empty. So we don't have to compete with those people. Because we've got something they don't have. And that's heart. See, when you come to a symphony performance, you're sitting in that audience and you're going to — your leg is going to naturally — especially if you're as big as me, going to naturally rub against the next leg, and this one here, especially in New York with them small seats.

You been to a Broadway show recently? Goodness gracious and a quarter, I'll be like this the whole time. But that's good, because if you feel that emptiness, it means that you have done — or you have not done one thing. And that is have contact with a human. And the humanity of this stuff lives on the stage with live performances. So we need to blow that up. So you can't sleep at night because you spent all your time keeping the music playing.

In fact, the only way this music could ever stop is if we took the gift that we've been given, that gift of those great American symphony orchestras. If we refuse to honor the gift that we've been given. If our arrogance kept us from listening and understanding. If we became consumed with complacency and refused to act. If we took the bypass lane and avoided the crucial, critical and uncomfortable conversations, if we became riddled with psychosclerosis, which is a hardening of the attitudes. If we refuse to do what Jim Collins calls confronting the brutal facts, literally ignoring the truth.

I've been thinking about the truth recently, ladies and gentlemen, in our country as we actively ban books with true historical facts, while creating outlandish conspiracy theories that encourage willful

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ignorance. As it happens with so many of our leaders, political and otherwise, after they finish literally prevaricating all over themselves, when questioned about their lives, they start peeping and hiding and slipping and sliding and dipping and dodging.

Creating what the Motown group, the Temptations called a balled of confusion. Yes, there will always be those that would dissuade us from looking at past history and its truths, but the reality of history if we let it be our guiding force is that we can inform and deliver us a better future by embracing the truth. Henry James said no theory is kind to us that shields us from seeing the truth. Richard Feynman said that one of the signs of intelligence is to be able to access facts without being offended.

See, most people will forgive you for telling a lie. But will hate you for telling the truth. The worst thing we can do is to lie to ourselves. Facing the truth means taking an honest look in the mirror. “[SINGING] And I’m talking about the man in the mirror. I’m asking him to change his ways. And no message could have been any clearer, if you want to make the world a better place, take a look at yourself.” I’m a say that again. Take a look at yourself. I’m a say that again. “[SINGING] Take a look at yourself and make a change.”

See, most of us look in the mirror, and we be mad at the mirror. We be like, oh, I’m not looking that good, I may need to get me another mirror. [LAUGHING] By the way, that’s why my wife demands that I not only do that front view on the mirror, but she said turn over to the side view so you can really see that stomach up in there. [LAUGHING] See, ladies and gentlemen, the truth demands our attention. And when we ignore it, it comes back to haunt us.

And that’s why Barbra Streisand said what’s too painful to remember we simply seem to forget. We distract ourselves from truth, we play hide and seek with it, hoping it will go away. Well, unfortunately on this day, June 16th, 2023, it appears that the greatest country in the world is letting the truth hang by a thread. Instead we have chosen the art of prestidigitation to magically hide problems and the truth and sweep them under the rug.

Living in this untruthful way brings about what’s been called a moral apathy. A death of the heart. Oh, but the truth is still here waiting for us. Dripping with anticipation that we will act and soon. Again, I’m going to go back to Jim Collins and remind us to confront the brutal facts. And so what are a few of the common yet brutal facts that silently echo in this very room? Let’s create a backdrop for that.

What will our country look like in 2030, about seven years from now? The Brookings Institute says that by 2030, one in five Americans is projected to be 65 years of age or older. White Americans will have dropped to 55.8% of the population, Hispanics will have grown by 21.1%, and the percentage of

Black and Asian Americans will also have grown significantly. Ask yourself honestly and truthfully, confront the brutal facts, does my orchestra look like America?

See, more than 50 years ago Martin Luther King said eleven o'clock on Sunday morning is one of the most segregated hours in Christian America. Is that us? What does your church look like, or your preferred religious institution? Are they accepting all? It gets funny when somebody comes in your tribe church. Do the companies and individuals that so generously support us want us to serve a broader base?

What decade does your orchestra look like it's in? What does it feel like? Does it feel like the 1960's, '70s, '80s, '90s? Does it feel like 2000's? Does it feel like 2010? Or the current 2020 decade? Or does it look like the 1940's? Does it feel like the 1940's? If you are shackled to a different decade, can you break through the often immovable concrete that imprisons your organization?

Businessman Jack Welch once remarked if the rate of change on the outside of the organization exceeds the rate of change on the inside, then the end is near. He continues, so accept change before the change is thrust upon you. If people don't perform, they perish. If companies don't innovate, they become obsolete. Is Paul Lambert here? Lambert from Springfield Symphony? Is Paul here? I think he's in jail.

[LAUGHTER]

BYRON: I'm only serious when I say that. I wanted to acknowledge him this morning. Paul Lambert. Yes, is from Springfield Symphony. I want to let you know about him. Friday, February 24th of this year, I was playing with his orchestra where's the CEO of Springfield, Massachusetts. He calls me up and says, "Hey man, would you like to come to a little reception this afternoon before rehearsal?" I said, "No problem, I'll be there." He said, "Great, I'll pick you up at eleven thirty."

When I walked in there, there were about 50 people there. Paul knew their faces and names, introduced me to all of them. The local state representative was there, several church ladies were there, retired mailman was there, local barber. And then the big whigs were there too. Interesting for me though, Paul, the CEO of this organization, Springfield Symphony, couldn't pass by anyone without receiving a handshake or a hug. Church ladies would come up and kiss him with that red lipstick they wear in church. He had a mark on there the whole time, you know?

How do you explain that to your wife, you know? Oh, by the way, did I happen to mention that everybody in that place we walked into was Black? Now, you don't know Paul, but Paul is not Black.

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That didn't stop those — that wasn't a barrier for Paul. All those people in that reception, about 50 people or so, knew and loved Paul as the head CEO of Springfield Symphony Orchestra. Everyone there appeared to be his friend. Why? Because Paul was his authentic self to them.

He didn't say like, "Hey brother, slap me five." [LAUGHING] Thanks for the laughter. Paul walked in there with love in his heart, knowing and realized what Maya Angelou says, and that is that we are more alike than we are unlike. He didn't wait for those folks to come to the concert hall, he came to them. He showed up. And then what happened? No surprise, the audience I played for that night in Springfield, Massachusetts, was one of the most diverse audiences I've ever played for.

After the show, me and Paul and his staff spent over an hour greeting people at a reception afterwards, thanking the folks that attended. And what did those people say after that concert? From then on they said, "That's my orchestra. I'm part of that. I'm part of that community." Melia Tourangeau is here. I love you, Melia, and I appreciate your work. Melia calls me up about a year ago and says, "You want to go to an eight thirty breakfast meeting with me?" Ladies and gentlemen, I blatantly lied to her. I said yes.

[LAUGHTER]

BYRON: She said, "Great, I'll pick you up next morning eight a.m." I walked in a room, about 20 people there. I'm a talk about Tony Bucci now. Tony Bucci is the board chair of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra. When I walked into this event, Tony was already there. Everyone at the breakfast knew Tony, most everyone knew Melia. Before the head of the organization introduced me, she introduced Tony and talked about him for about five to ten minutes, which really ticked me off.

[LAUGHTER]

BYRON: The breakfast meeting was I think for an organization founded to help emerging businesses, mostly women were there. The head of the organization said that Tony had helped her brand the organization, and that he had been a constant invaluable resource in starting that organization. Did I happen to mention, it might have slipped my mind, it was an all Black organization.

Days later I conducted a three day run of Dancing in the StreetSIMON: The Music of Motown, with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra. We had receptions after those concerts. I spent hours, you know, shaking hands and all that. Very successful concert, especially we were right after COVID. I'm going to sound like a broken record for a second. The Pittsburgh audiences we played for for those nights were some of the most diverse audiences I've ever played for.

Melia and Tony showed up, and everyone received them as friends. Why? Because Melia and Tony showed up as their authentic selves. Neither of them spoke that morning, they walked in there with love in their hearts, and them being there, them being present, said to that group of people, “I see you.” See, people don’t want to be perceived as being invisible. You’ve got to let them know that you see them. Through their actions they were saying, I see you and I love you.

They didn’t tell folks, “Hey, come to Heinz Hall, come to Symphony Hall, come see us.” That day, Symphony Hall came to them. They didn’t need to do a lot of talking because their actions did all the talking. And what did people say after that concert? This is our orchestra. I’m part of this orchestra. This is our community. They said it because of our actions. We showed up for them and then they showed up for us.

James Baldwin said, “I can’t believe what you say because I see what you do.” Emerson said it even better. “Who you are speaks so loudly, I can’t hear what you’re saying.” We reveal our authenticity through our actions, because people don’t judge you by what you say, obviously they judge you by what you do. We have a new person about a year or so working at Pittsburgh, Marty Bates, new COO. He’s not here, right? He’s new COO of Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra. He loves his music and that’s why he’s here.

The next idea came from Marty’s desk as he — and he refined the concept of this idea along with Shelly Fortier [?], who is here, and Suzanne Perino [?]. They made it happen. In just a few days, I will conduct a concert with the Pittsburgh Symphony acknowledging Juneteenth. I don’t know any other orchestra in the world that’s going to do that. It will be outdoors, it will be on stage in the streets of Pittsburgh. We will bring the music to them. And we will set that audience on fire.

Can I be a broken record again? As always, when we finish, that audience is going to say, “This is our orchestra.” They will feel like they are part — have part ownership because of the way — and what they will feel, and what we will do with the music. They will brag about it. They will own a piece of the rock. So what if we treated our audiences like community, and we welcomed all? Capital A, capital L, capital L. All.

That’s one reason when I walk out on stage, every time I walk out I try to do my arms like this. It’s my virtual hug that communicates welcome, openness, and love for all. Love for all of our brothers and sisters, our white brothers and sisters, love for our Hispanic, our Asian, our Native Americans, our friends of all ethnicity. All age groups. The wealthy, the poor, the disabled, the gay, the straight, the LGBTQ+. All. That’s who we need to be serving.

And if we look at our next concert and if we don't see a lot of all, we've got to go get some. Because when all are at the table, and that oboe sounds the A, and that upbeat happens, that's when the magic happens. That's when we can change lives. But we've got to get them off the phones and into the concert hall. If we do that, it'll be like me. The music will be their drug of choice. With no side effects.

See, I'm addicted. You know how I got addicted? First time was when my parents took me to see Leonard Slotkin conduct the Minnesota Orchestra back in the '70s in a series of concerts he called carpet concerts. We were encouraged to wear our blue jeans to the concert. They cleared all the chairs and there was just carpet on the floor, and we sat on the carpet and listened to great classical music. Mr. Slotkin's insightful comments pointed my ears in the right directions, and I was swept up by the live music that lifted my spirits.

See, my parents love live music, so we continue going to the symphony. And I saw in the symphony — I saw Maurice Andre play, because I'm a trumpet player. I got to hear him live with the Minnesota Orchestra, and then they took me back and I heard Beverly Sills, and I heard Marilyn Horne, and I heard Pavarotti, and so many others. And then, ladies and gentlemen, my parents took me to see the Minnesota Orchestra with Leontyne Price.

And when that queen walked up on the stage, slowly and deliberately, with delicious chocolate brown skin, imbued with royal grandeur, she must have been Nephritides. Then she opened her mouth to sing, and I got goosebumps. She blew the roof off that building. And then my dad said to me, "If she can be a queen, then you can be a king." I want you to know, ladies and gentlemen, I am who I am because somebody loved me.

My mother, Myrtle [?] Stripling, and my father, Luther Stripling, my brother, Cedric Ravelle [?] Stripling, Ravelle because my father loved Ravelle. And although all of those people are no longer with me, these three people showed me an unwavering love and devotion. Born in poverty, they took nothing and turned it into something. They made a way out of no way. They proved that success is not determined by your zip code. They told me to be an outlier, told me to be exceptional.

They told me to make the exception the rule for me. They told me that the only promise I could bank on was my own indomitable will. They told me to hold my head high. Told me to act like I've got some sense. Took me to see Hank Aaron. Saw him hit a home run. My father said, "If he can do it, you can do it." I couldn't do that.

[LAUGHTER]

BYRON: So they gave me a trumpet. They gave me a trumpet, because my parents thought that if I could — being a young Black kid, if I could have a trumpet in my hand, that'd be better than having a gun. How many opportunities have we missed to expose students and children all over this country to the beauty, the glory, and the majesty of classical music or all of the music that's played in this world? Because maybe the next Beverly Sills, maybe the next Marilyn Horne, maybe the next Pavarotti, maybe the next Isaac Stern, maybe the next Leontyne Price is right here in the heart of Pittsburgh or Springfield, Mass, or South Dakota, or Montana, or Idaho, or Iowa.

Or maybe those people who will be the next great classical musicians are on the streets of Detroit and Chicago right now. That's why you need a great education department. This past March here in Pittsburgh we performed for about a thousand people in Heinz Hall. I walked out on that stage and I said, "[SINGING] Sometimes I feel like a motherless child. Sometimes I feel like a motherless child. Sometimes I feel like a motherless child. A long ways from home. A long ways from home."

You see, essentially sometimes I feel like a motherless child represents the beginning of protest art. The words of that song instantly evoke the heartbreak of child separation, the haunting minor key instantly conjures the image of a mother and a father rocking back and forth trying to sing the pain away of child separation. And of course, during slavery there was little hope of ever seeing that beloved child again.

Through "Motherless Child" I could gently teach with the Pittsburgh Symphony behind me, I could gently teach all about slavery through a song. Because then after that we did Gershwin's "Summertime," and then we played Irvin Berlin's "Blue Skies." For that I was able to mention that both Gershwin and Irvin Berlin were Russian Jewish immigrants. Each of those families came to America with nothing and they ended up giving America one of its — some of its greatest gifts.

So whether it's immigrants or slaves, this is the uniquely American story, and adding the music to that story we can teach young people about the discipline and hard work necessary to compose a life. Right now, ladies and gentlemen, I know in our very own country, land of the free, home of the brave, that there are states that would ban the singing of, sometimes I feel like a motherless child, or the discussion of anything about immigrants. And that's why your education department is so important.

It's the major piece of the legacy that we forget, but it actually represents the future. You need an excellent education department because it's about planting seeds in that garden we were talking about. That's why we need to send tons of love to our high school orchestras and band directors. Those rooms save lives as music saves lives. And if you're like me, I was lost in the math room, I was

lost in the science room, I was lost in the social studies room. I was really like a — well, I was a very consistent D student.

[LAUGHTER]

BYRON: But when I walked in the band room, when I walked in the band room, a light came on and changed me forever. You'd know me if you saw me back then. I was the overweight kid they called fatso, but I didn't care because I had my trumpet. They said my hair was nappy, they told me my lips were too big, they called me liver lips. They asked me why my nose was so flat, and they called me the n-word. My dad bought me a record by James Brown, which is the first time his name has been uttered at an American Symphony Orchestra League event.

[LAUGHTER]

BYRON: I just thought of that. [LAUGHING] The record was "Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud." That song was my weapon of choice. That and then my education became my superpower. So when kids would bother me I'd just stop them and say, say it loud, I'm Black and I'm proud. The education wing of your orchestra is so important because they know that you can become welcome in the band room, you can become welcome in the art room, in the dance studio, and front and center on the theater stage.

And so when you talk to these young people, don't forget to remember to tell them that you are loved as you're working with them. Better than that, tell them like Billy Joel. Say, I love you just the way you are. Tell them like the Beatles would say, they say all you need is love. Then sing to them. They'll feel it more than when you just talk to them. Sing. That's why William James of Harvard said, "I sing not because I'm happy but I'm happy because I sing."

I've got to leave you now. It's time for me to go. But let your audiences know that music can take your suffering and turn it into joy. Can take your sorrow and turn it into laughter. Take your misery and turn it into peace. Take your bad and turn it into good. Take your struggle and turn it into a strut. So believe me when I say that there is power in music. The power to make you run when there ain't nothing behind you. The power to make you laugh when there ain't nothing funny. The power to make you cry when there ain't nothing sad.

I'm going to my seat in a second. Don't get nervous, Simon. I'm almost done. As we navigate our future, the cities are only too happy to remind us of the difficulties that we will encounter. That's why upon awakening there should be a quickening in your body. Upon wakening you should feel the fierce

urgency of now. Because our time is now. It's now or never. It's time to sound forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat.

Tell them you can knock me down but you can't keep me down, because what we know is that those who strive with all their might, we are allowed to save. Because the heights of great men reach and kept were not achieved by sudden flight, but they, while their companions slept, were toiling upwards in the night. See, most people quit before they get started. Then they go to their graves with their music still in them. So let us be up and doing, with a heart for any fate, still achieving, still pursuing. Learn to labor and to wait.

It's time to sing your song, ladies and gentlemen. It's time to sing your song. You might not even know what key you sing in, but it's time to sing your song. You might be sharp or you might be flat, it doesn't matter. It's time for you to sing your song. You might be a soprano, or maybe you don't know, maybe you're an alto, maybe you're a tenor. Well, I don't know, maybe I'm a bass. I don't know, but it's time to sing your song.

It's time to sing your song, ladies and gentlemen. And my song for you today, "[SINGING] Nothing's impossible I have found, for when my chin is on the ground, I pick myself up, brush myself off, and start all over again. Don't lose your confidence if you slip. Be grateful for a pleasant trip, and pick yourself up, brush yourself off, and start all over again. You better work like a soul inspired til the battle of the day is won. You may be sick and tired, but you'll be a man, my son. Will you remember the famous men who had to fall to rise again? So take a deep breath, pick yourself up, start all over again."

Ladies and gentleman, it's time for you to sing your song, and the only thing that will stop you is if you quit. So when things go wrong, as they sometimes will, when the road you're trudging seems all uphill, when the funds are low, and the debts are high, when you want to smile but you have to sigh, when care is pressing you down a bit, rest if you must, but don't you quit. For life is queer with its twists and turns as every one of us sometimes learns, and many a failure turns about when he might have won had he stuck it out.

So don't give up though the pace seems slow. You will succeed with another blow. Success is failure turned inside out. The silver tint in the clouds of doubt. And you can never tell how close you are, it may be near, though it seems so far. So stick to the fight when you're hardest hit. It's when things seem worst than you must not quit. Ladies and gentlemen, it's time to sing your song. It's time to let your little light shine.

Join me, “[SINGING] This little light of mine, come on now. I’m going to let it shine. Oh fever, this little line of mine. Come on, Simon. I’m going to let it shine. You’re flat. [LAUGHING] This little light of mine, I’m going to let it shine. Let it shine. Let it shine. Let it shine. Oh yeah.” Thank you, ladies and gentlemen.

[APPLAUSE]

END OF TRANSCRIPT