

Democratic Heritage: A Gift in Time

Mark Kingwell (University of Toronto)

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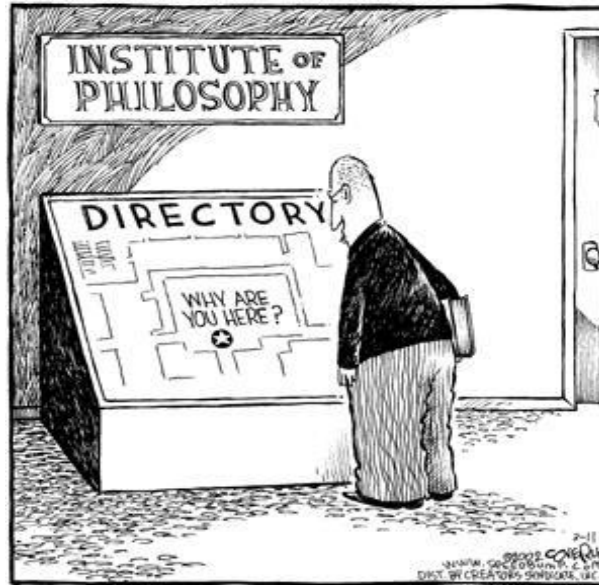
Thank you so much for inviting me to be here. My hope is that my philosophical way of thinking can contribute to the discussions you are having at this Summit. I already get the sense from the work that's been on view this morning that we are synched intellectually, which doesn't come as a surprise. I don't want to preach to the choir, though, because my intention this morning is to go back to first principles about the idea of heritage. You'll see from the title that I want to place this in a political frame. You'll see from the subtitle – a play on words – that I'm going to talk about the nature of time, why it matters, and how we experience it. Also the gift time, and what that means. Heritage is a gift that happens in time, but it is also a gift that has to happen *in time* for it not to be destroyed.

As prologue, a few basic ideas. Democracy's gift is the larger theme of most of my work in recent years. The idea is simple, powerful, and very threatened. Democracy is not a transaction or contract, but a gift economy. History shows us that gift economies function beneath or beside transaction economies; they are the economies of exchange without expectation, delivery without return. We see this notion of a gift economy lost in how Christmas has been reduced to a series of transactions. My worry here is that democracy, as we now conceive it – as it is practiced and discussed – is no longer a gift, if it ever was, but only a series of transactions: that is, trading taxation for services by a mechanism that we call government. I think this trend has been growing in significance and has come to dominate political life to such a degree that it's almost impossible to conceive democracy any other way. *Almost* impossible. Part of our task as citizens is to reclaim this idea of gift, to reverse the trend to transactional reduction, and to return the idea of politics, of the political sphere, to one of citizen engagement and not exchange.



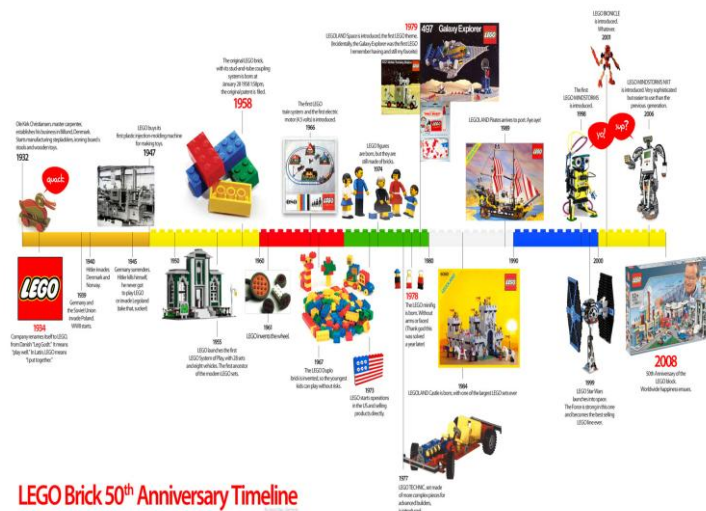
In part, one of the easiest ways to leverage this idea is to think about the idea of justice to future generations. Far too often political discourse is carried on in a narrow time slice of what G. K. Chesterton called “the small and arrogant minority who merely happen to be walking about” – and that’s us. That is a great phrase, because “merely happen to” captures the contingency of the fact that we’re here right now; we know we won’t be here at a certain point, but we keep that knowledge at bay. I hate to tell you on a Saturday morning that you are all going to die... but you are, and me too. While we’re here now, we can’t mistake our interests for being more important than they are. We talk about minorities and majorities within the time slice, and that seems to matter to us; you have to get a majority to have power. But we are the tiniest imaginable minority when we think about generations to come. Likewise, we are a tiny minority when we think about what’s been entrusted to us from generations past.

The first thing that makes for a more vibrant idea of democracy is to temporalize it, then, to make sure that our notion of political discourse is not a slice, but a temporal range. We can do this by mechanisms that are very familiar. We use memories to create narratives, and while many would say we live in an age where narrative expectation is breaking down, and the traditional narrative of modernism has been overturned, we still require narratives to have a sense of ourselves as individuals over time. We’re each constructing a recursive story about ourselves through our memories. As we woke up and recollected our identities this morning, we reconstructed ourselves by carrying forward a story. And each of our stories is unique to us, but others are built up out of shared moments like this one. That’s how we create identity. And I’m going to come back to the idea of identity later...



The main question of heritage is the main question of philosophy: namely, why are we here? I don't just mean as people interested in heritage, but as Canadians, as human beings. What are we doing? What are we up to? That question is always the right question, and maybe we'll find our way. I'm going to introduce two concepts of time, and later two concepts of authority to unpack this question for our purposes this morning.

It's very important to think about time in the way I'm going to suggest. We can first say there is secular time: secular means "of the age." This is the time we experience every day or for the most part: it's homogeneous, it's linear, and it's horizontal.



That way of conceiving time as a line belongs to this secular time; it's profane in the sense of not being sacred. It's also chronological. The ancient Greeks had two words for time: one was *chronos*, which give us the idea of time as measurable, time that is either kept, saved or wasted. All of these metaphors derive from the economic measurement of time indicate chronological time. As you can see from this poor clock-watcher; he has to watch the clock before he can go into some other mode of life.



Secular time is egalitarian: it is the same for all of us. Secular time treats us all the same way. But it's also egalitarian in the sense that this is the time that people say is money. It is open to conversion by a contract. This is the time that can be bought.



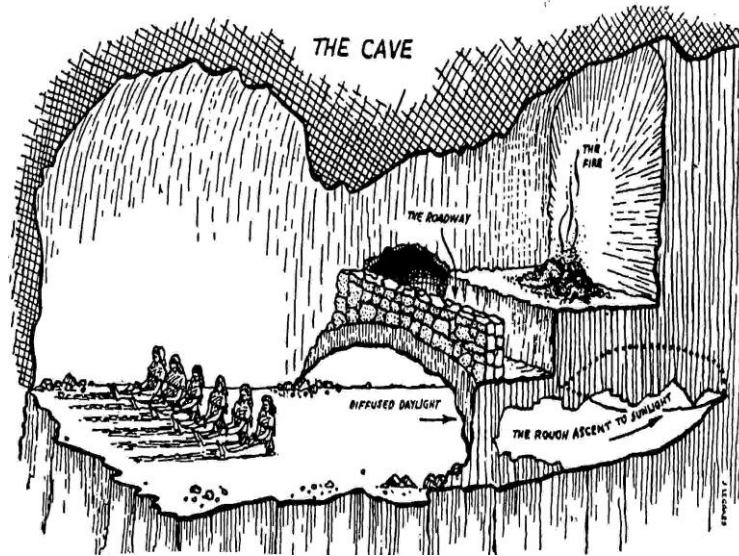
By contrast, transcendent time's origins are shrouded in mystery. It is divine time, the time of the infinite. It corresponds to three additional qualities. First, it's

vertical instead of horizontal. The verticality achieved with this architectural form, one which offers us and experience of the transcendent.



Second, this is kairotic time. That is the second word the Greeks had for time – *kairos* – which means a kind of breach or tear; the breach or intervention you might associate with carnival, where the secular or normal order of things is suspended and we enter into a different kind of experience. Sometimes, as in carnival, we allow this as a cathartic release to blow off steam. My suggestion is that we can find the kairotic breach or tear at any moment. And indeed that part of our duty as citizens of heritage and democracy's gift is to find this opportunity of breach.

And, third, transcendent time is hierarchical rather than egalitarian. This is a rather crude illustration of Plato's cave analogy, from *The Republic*. You will remember that the prisoners are tied and forced to watch shadows on the wall which are being projected from behind by the fire. And when one of the prisoners decides to turn around, he is blinded by the fire; but he perseveres and finds his way outside and then he is blinded again by the sun. This is Plato's way of thinking about the ascent to the Forms, or true knowledge. It's that kind of hierarchy; each level of reality is greater as you go up.



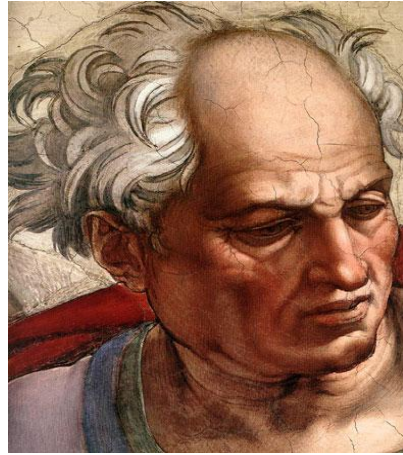
Now I want to fold these two notions of time over my other distinction, that of two concepts of authority. By authority here I don't mean political authority, but rather the authority of the past. I take some of these ideas from Northrop Frye's reading of the Bible. We can approach the Bible, and I would like to say the idea of heritage – anything that comes to us in trust from the past, moving into the future – in two ways. The first is via a wisdom tradition. (This is the Wise Woman from the new hit movie, *Brave*.)



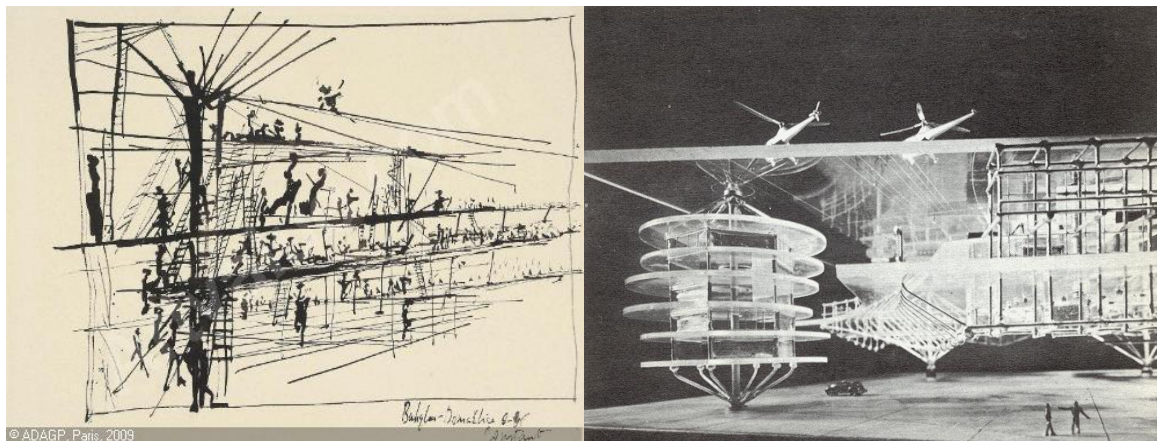
The wisdom tradition has these qualities: it is conservative, continuous, and linked to the past. It offers a sense of bringing forward something in a preserving or conserving way.

By contrast, there is always a prophetic intervention possibility. And here is Michelangelo's rendering of the prophet, Joel. The prophet is distinct from the wise person, as one who has a kind of radical vision which he or she brings,

sometimes in a violent way, into the conversation or discourse. So it's discontinuous and linked to the future, usually in some kind of vision of revelation, perhaps apocalyptic, of what is to come.



For the architects here, this is my favour image of that prophetic intervention, the Situationist architect Constant Nieuwenhuijs's and his idea for the city called "New Babylon." Nieuwenhuijs wanted to design a city that matched the principles of Situationism as outlined by Guy Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle*. He imagined a city full of ludic possibilities, where games or play would be ever present. This is in contrast to our cities, fundamentally organized around the idea of commerce and transaction. New Babylon was to be organized around spontaneous interchange with each other, spontaneous encounters. This is the only model ever built of it, complete with gyrocopters. This New Babylon idea represents something in the architectural tradition, that prophetic intervention, that tear.



These two concepts of time, and the two concepts of authority, fold over each other and give us a sense of our constant immersion in a discursive space. By

discursive, I mean not just a particular way of going on about something, but the fact that what links us to each other is our shared possibility of communication. This possibility links us to each other here and now, but it also links us to the past, and the future. The most compact way to communicate this is this famous phrase from Heidegger – “language speaks us.” The claim is deliberately counterintuitive, since we tend to think that we speak language, that we have purposes and ideas which we communicate to others. Heidegger’s reversal brings to our attention to the presupposition of the very idea of communicating, namely that we are already enmeshed and immersed in a linguistic possibility. We already must be discursively submerged together. This is what makes what we call communication possible.



My tweak on Heidegger is thus *heritage speaks us*. We are here to speak for things, to protect things, to advance certain agendas. But those things that are important to us are actually motive; they are what move us forward. In order to keep that happening, we have to recognize this immersion. Language is everywhere in our world, but it’s changing. The 140-character universe which seems to characterize a great deal of what’s still called public discourse is just a symptom of those changes. My suggestion is that we need to think of this in the form of an enmeshment and immersion analogous to what we experience in language as such. My idea that *heritage speaks us* can be conceived on the ground as the idea of a living tradition.

It may sound paradoxical to speak of living traditions, but I don’t think it is. The idea is that we have on the one hand *conservation*, the things we want to preserve, and we want to link that with *innovation*. We want both poles to be active, and ideally in a truly living tradition, these ideas of conservation and innovation would co-determine – be dynamic between themselves. There might

be shifts to one pole at a given moment, but they would continue to energize each other. For example, you may know the famous example of the “invented tradition” of the ancient Scottish clan tartans, which were really codified only in the 19th century. While you might view these invented traditions as bogus, I think you actually see a glimpse of something radical. I mean the possibility that we could simply start talking about who we are and how we are as a kind of intervention, and that this would innovate and conserve at the same time.



A better example is what literary critic Harold Bloom once called the “anxiety of influence,” which we can associate with a literary lineage. Every book is written in the shadow of all the other books that have been written, and moreover when you write you are casting a shadow over those books yet to be written. Any writer who denies this is, well, in denial. It’s not just about borrowing themes or genres, but the fact that writing itself is all about other writing. So this is a good example of a living tradition. And then there are also dangerous examples. Here I think of a tradition like ideology in the form of nationalism. French nationalism, for instance, is hinged to certain historical events and becomes jingoistic or violent or imperialistic as a result of that refusal to let go historical events.

I think there are two perfect examples of living tradition. The first is academic scholarship. Here is image from Raphael’s *School of Athens* which shows Plato and Aristotle. Plato points to the Forms and Aristotle is signalling that all meaning is rooted in materiality – the vertical and the horizontal graphically demonstrated. Aristotle’s famous patricide of his teacher’s ideas is what dynamises that tradition. Academic scholarship is ongoingly taking up the past. We still do this. I had an article in the *Globe and Mail* today, and in it I argue that we still study Plato not because he’s old, but because he is valuable. Everything in *The Republic*

is still relevant to us today, and that is why I still teach it, not because we revere age as such. His writing has lasted 2,500 years because it has continuously remained relevant to us.



Scholarship is absolutely rooted in the past even as it is committed to innovation and invention. It is, in a weird way, cutting-edge conservation. That's what excites people like me about being part of it. You have all of this weight behind you, but every future possibility is open. There is always a moment for a radical intervention. We are dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants, but that's okay, because the giants don't mind, and they keep on contributing.



The second perfect example of a living tradition is the eternal question of Canadian identity. We keep having a conversation about this, and people often complain about it. But why? It's awesome that we keep asking ourselves what it means to be Canadian. Canada is an experiment, and it keeps on being tried. I think this is quite amazing and not something to be deplored or disdained, but something to be celebrated.

With these two sets of distinctions in mind, then, some thoughts that I hope may be part of your conversation at this Summit. How do we go forward? It's implicitly

the question of why are we here. Our predicament going forward is how to find direction. It's difficult. I want to give you insights from two really smart people who thought about this problem.



One insight concerns the angel of history, represented by Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*, here rendered as a tattoo. Philosopher Walter Benjamin wrote about Klee's image, a work of art that was very important to him, so much so that he had copy of it in his suitcase when he died on the Spanish border trying to escape the Nazis in France. In his "Theses on the Philosophy of History" he says this:

"This is how one pictures the angel of history. Its face is turned towards the past. Where we see a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. A storm irresistibly propels him into the future, to which his back is turned while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress." I wanted to think of the most provocative image of progress I could imagine, and it is this military weapon.



The idea of progress is, then, one way of being trapped in the project of going forward; in fact it's no longer a project but an imprisonment. To the extent that we allow this notion of progress to dominate our thinking, the more we are

dominated by technological anxiety, upgrade imperatives, the need always to have the next model, planned obsolescence, markets that have to renew themselves every season with new phones or televisions. Insofar as this kind of idea dominates our thinking, we are looking backward and being projected or pushed forward. We're not seeing where we are going. It feels like we might be able to see, if only we could buy the latest gadget. But in fact we are being driven forward by this pile of wreckage.

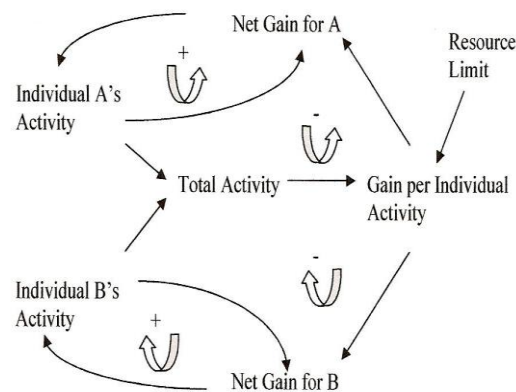


A different image, this one from Northrop Frye again. Frye said “the only crystal ball is the rearview mirror.” What he meant was that the only way to think about the future is to contemplate the past. I think that this image may be almost as passive or defeatist as Benjamin’s angel of history. But what I want to argue in conclusion is that, while these two views are powerful, we can transcend them. But to do this we first need to diagnose our disease: presentism. Presentism is not the New Age idea of “be here now” or “live in the moment.” It is, rather, the ideology that presumes that the moment we now live in is not transcendent. Presentism means a kind of restless and anxious present, which cannot control its own experience of going forward.



Indeed, presentism may be viewed as a kind of zombie virus of consumption, always locked in a moment that never transcends itself. This is a trap in secular

time, which can never find the prophetic or radical moment. Zombies used to be slow, they would shuffle along like people at a museum, but the innovation and upgrade of zombies means that their new technological model is to be fast. All the pathos of the zombies is gone, replaced instead by this relentless hunger for brains. The old zombies were kind of pitiable and slow, while the current zombies attack in packs and quickly. What I want to suggest is that most of us *are the zombies*. We're not being attacked by the zombies, we already are the zombies! We're relentlessly consuming stuff; and, under the sign of stuff, consuming ourselves also. We are self-cannibalizing zombies, and we don't even know why we are doing it. We can never step back far enough to take a moment out to transcend the secular in order to think about why we are doing what we're doing. Zombies can't reflect anymore, they are just pure drive, pure appetite. I fear that part of the transactional reduction of democracy which I mentioned earlier, is precisely that we've allowed ourselves to shift from being citizens to being these zombie-consumers. Almost nothing is against that. But we have to struggle to avoid this fate.



What does this mean? One key site of struggle is the neglect of public trusts. I say trusts because there is not only one. The idea of a public trust is something owned by nobody, but which belongs to everybody, of which we are all trustees. This is a graphic representation of what has been called the tragedy of the commons. The tragedy of the commons is a species of collective action problem, an idea which originated with the economist Garret Hardin. When things are held in common, but are used and consumed according to private interests, then everybody loses. If you have common grazing land, everyone has the personal incentive to graze more animals, and as they do this they destroy the common grazing land. So not only do others lose out, but so do they. In a weird way, we almost can't help ourselves; if we are thinking in terms of our private interests,

we have obvious incentives to add to our consumption. Only when we reach the level of self-defeat and tip over that brink, only then might we have regret. The point is to see that these collective action problems are going to happen and stop them before that threshold of self-defeat is crossed.

You can see this kind of problem in the urge to buy a bigger car in order to feel safe, thus giving my neighbour the push to get an even bigger car, until no one is gaining any safety and we are certainly over-consuming the resources that made driving possible. Collective action problems of this kind are everywhere around us: races to the bottom, they're sometimes called. The only way to stop them – other than reaching the point of self-defeat and starting again – is to renew the idea of a public trust. Some things are public goods; they belong to everybody, no one can be excluded from them, and there is no place for private interest in them. We talk a lot about public space in our cities, but most of what passes for public space is not; it is widely used private space, which can be taken back at any moment. Even certain public spaces which we think are controlled by municipalities are subject to democratic processes which themselves are transaction-oriented and reductive. Those, too, can become non-public spaces.

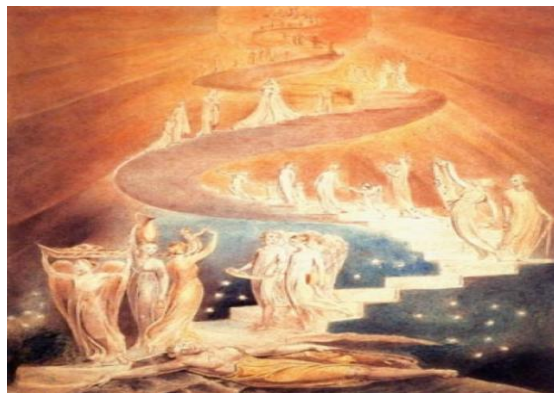
There are lots of public trusts in political life. The idea that *heritage speaks us* is one way of reminding of a public trust. Our heritage is owned by nobody and belongs to everybody. We all have a duty to contribute to it and make sure it doesn't reduce to transaction.

A couple of abstract, but I hope helpful thoughts by way of conclusion. One way that I make the idea of a mindful future operative in my life is to think about thresholds. The word actually comes from the thresh or straw that was held in a receptacle at the doorway of a house; the idea was you wiped your feet on the straw as you entered the house. The interior becomes a kind of sacred space for which one must be cleansed. The exterior is a space of commerce and interaction; the interior is a space for intimate and maybe spiritual experiences. This room that we are in at the moment is a sacred space; we are talking about ideas that matter. This is sacred, and we all take part in this by being here in this room.

Thresholds of this kind are everywhere in ordinary experience. You may recall an episode of the television show "Seinfeld," where George picked up an éclair from the garbage can at a party, and ate it. Then he suffers the shame and humiliation of eating out of the garbage. The point for him was that the food was sitting on something else and uneaten, so why did it matter that he had taken it from the

garbage? But this is a conceptual difference that makes a difference. Once in the can, even uneaten, the éclair is now garbage, and we have taboos against eating garbage. That is the line, and the threshold.

I was reading some interesting research that said that when we cross thresholds in our homes there is a cognitive deficit that occurs – which explains why you sometimes forget what you were getting when you go upstairs! It's because, as you move through the house, your consciousness changes. As we cross thresholds, we are different here and there. What's the difference between a private space and a public space? The difference between a profane and a sacred place? What's the difference between something appropriately done with transactions (contracts, etc.) and those things that should never have a hint of contract or transaction about them? These questions open up new spaces for possibility, new critical insights about what matters to us. And those insights are needed in order to frame action, to orient ourselves to the responsibility of *trust*.



As a final gift, the idea of thresholds gives us the chance to achieve for ourselves, and others, the only form of immortality that is available to us. I am an unbeliever myself, and I don't think there is life after this one. But I don't consider immortality to be impossible. In fact, it is all too possible if we take the right opportunities. What I mean by that is to take the opportunity to make a radical intervention. To offer the possibility or the place or experience where transcendent time operates. To go vertical, to leave the restlessness of linear, horizontal time and consumption and to open up a tear; a *kairos*.

This conference is a *kairos*. I was thinking this as I was listening to you reflect on your work at this Summit this morning. We are here to take time out, to reflect in this time – to take time for paradise, as the late Bart Giamatti said about baseball, a game which takes place outside of time, in outs and innings. This is therefore sacred. Finding time to reflect in this way is almost impossible as we are pushed

relentlessly along the horizontal. But when we achieve this transcendent tear, that *is* an experience of immortality. This is as close as we get to the divine order and still remain on this earth. Plato and Aristotle said this 2,500 years ago. This piece of philosophical wisdom is still true, and still relevant.

Moreover, it is necessary. It is necessary for us to preserve the things that we treasure, to achieve the vision we desire. And it is necessary for us, finally, to be good citizens. I always think about this when I read William Blake's famous words; 'To see the world in a grain of sand, or to experience eternity in an hour.' This is the transcendent that lives among us, that is at our feet, in fact. And that ever-present possibility of immortality is what I mean, finally, by democratic heritage, a gift in time.

Q&A

[Q]: How do we break out of this presentism? Today we're talking about how to connect with new constituencies, and your exploration of those kinds of levels of time and breaking through them is exciting and interesting. The idea of social change and new ideas entering the world, and how we connect with where people are at already in terms of their thinking.

[A]: To some degree the answer is up to the people in your sector. The general answer is, it's a question of creating opportunities. I'm teaching a first year class with 20 people in it; in that group, what do we do? Some people come in and want to game the system, they are already thinking of their education as a form of consumption. I try to provide opportunities for them to have sudden experiences where they might question why they think that. You need to insinuate a kind of germ of difference in somebody's consciousness. It might be a little irritating, but it's exciting and challenging. I think it's very hard to say until you talk about real projects how to be seductive in that way, but that's what you need to do. Draw people in almost despite themselves. If you go at them directly, and say you're still thinking consumeristically, they won't take it very well. There's a paradox sometimes called the paradox of wisdom, which is that you can only come to value the things that wisdom teaches after you've come to value them. You have to hang around or be forced to hang around the right kinds of experiences and places. That's really the only general answer that one can give.