

The Lighthouse and the Ecosystem

Lanxing Fu responds to the Rolling Speaker Series prompt
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Lanxing Fu delivered her response in Minneapolis. She grounds her remarks in a concrete example of shared leadership from her own organization, then closes by inviting the room into a live mapping exercise about what we are willing to lose and what we most dream of.



The Prompt

Throughout history, artists and cultural experiences have been our lighthouses — cutting through deep darkness, revealing truth, illuminating futures we couldn't yet name.

That light has never belonged to one person. A lighthouse is an ecosystem. It takes builders and visionaries to design it. Fuel to keep it alive. People willing to tend it in the harshest conditions. Smaller lights — lanterns, flashlights — to reach what the largest beams can't. And a culture of navigators who know how to recognize light, trust it, and move by it.

So what happens when we look at our cultural landscape this way? Who are the builders, the keepers, the fuel, the travelers? What are we actually sustaining, and what are we letting go dark? And what would it take for each of us to think differently about our roles, act differently within them, and together illuminate a future that is alive, responsive, and always becoming?

The Response



Lanxing Fu - Rolling Speaker Series - Speaker #5

We hold a lot of fear and avoidance around loss and death. We are drunk on the myth of perpetual growth, after all, so I understand. But I've been thinking about this, and a big part of grieving, to me, seems to be acknowledging the loss and really feeling the pain of it — while also holding the sweetness of the growth that the loss enables, what newly has space and resource to come into being. And grieving is never over. It is letting those two cycles keep moving at the rhythm they will, without end. So I want us to look each other in the eye and really think about what we are scared to lose if we change, and why — and to feel that pain. And I want us to think about what our losses could make space for, because being clear-eyed about both of these things will help us move past the fear.

To share a small and specific example from my own work — an attempt to shift one piece of the machine and see what's possible — I want to talk about shared leadership. I work for a nonprofit performing arts organization that operates in a shared-leadership model: three executive leaders, three co-directors. I know shared leadership is both all the rage and garners all the skepticism in the world, and I know that specifics and specific stories help, so I'll do my best to share what we do. Transparently, I wrote some of this language for this moment and then borrowed some of it for an essay my team wrote for HowlRound a while ago — so if you want to learn more, you can go read that too.

As executive leaders, the three of us share all of the artistic and managerial functions of the organization. No one or two people wear the “artistic director” hat while others wear the “executive director” or “managing director” hat. One main reason is that decisions typically

categorized as artistic or administrative require the same kind of creative thinking, and more effective solutions emerge when we approach them as necessarily intertwined. Curating a new project for our space, for example, requires us to think through how the artistic inquiry engages our internal creative compasses and our programming goals, and to discuss the implications for our resources — space, equipment, labor, staff capacity. We don't want a new project to grow from a competition between departments over resources, but from a discussion about how the elements of our theater can work in symbiosis. Another benefit is that we share responsibility broadly, and information never lives in one person's head.

Practically speaking, day to day, we each directly manage different staff members, we each drive different projects as lead producers in pairs, and we're each accountable to different programs and initiatives. We've divided the budget into different areas of responsibility by line, and each of us is responsible for both income and expense lines. Responsibility, in our case, means keeping track of progress throughout the year and driving activity toward income or expense goals — it does not mean that the responsible person does all the work to make it happen. Even with these separate areas, we take the time to arrive on the same page about our goals and the values that underpin them. We've built conflict into our process: it's a regular practice for any of us to be clear with someone else when something doesn't feel right or lands in a harmful way, and for the others to hear it, hold it, and stay in conversation. Diving into both conflict and care in tandem has let us build a high degree of trust in a short time.

Now, it is easier to have loving, generative conflict when you share values, so that is a foundation. One crucial practice has been to embrace our collective identity as a leadership team. From the very beginning, we negotiated our offers and contracts as a unit, with full visibility and transparency of communication. Even though we did not apply for this job together, we made sure we received the same terms and worked to arrive at consensus around what we advocated for and what we compromised on. We are each multifaceted artists and people who bring wildly different experiences and perspectives to the collective, but we have been resolute in maintaining a unified voice around decisions, big and small. As a team of all people of color — two women and two queer artists — this commitment has made us both stronger and safer, because when we share accountability, it becomes difficult for us to be exploited as individuals.

And it is true: shared leadership is really inefficient. It takes more time, more buy-in, more patience, and more trust, and each of us has a little less individual control over a given decision — what projects we invest in, who we hire. We make mistakes, and we upset people who wait too long for a response from us on a decision. We fall out of communication because someone thinks the other person has got it, and then we all miss it. We get out of alignment on something and have to work harder to get back. All of that is true — and even with all of that, I kind of love that it's inefficient. I love that we don't do the most just to do the most, but we do a lot of things expansively and very well. Our staff unanimously love coming to work — that's not a lie; they tell us so. The share of audience members who are entirely new to us has grown over the past two years. We've executed balanced operating budgets with tiny surpluses in each of our two years of

leadership, even with significant losses of funding in the field. We've built new partnerships, and we're taking step after step toward reestablishing ourselves as a cultural and civic hub after years of the organization acting like simply a venue.

All of that is just one small change the nonprofit I work for has made over the last several years. But I really want more. I want a lot more. I want us to keep building together. I loved that yesterday, in the last group conversation I was part of, we landed on the idea that we need to think beyond boards entirely, beyond nonprofits — which are simply an arm of the larger system of wealth capture that benefits a few at the expense of the many, running, as Joseph so eloquently put it, on the fumes of capitalism. So what else, if not a nonprofit? What lessons can we learn from the many cultures and groups and systems that practice organization in different ways? As many have pointed out before me, the way we organize is not the only way to organize. There are learnings from our own histories, and from the many lands across this earth — in collectives, in worker co-ops, in artist ensembles, in land trusts and mutual aid, in susus and other kinds of cooperative financing, in all kinds of solidarity economies that have powered societies while prioritizing human well-being and ecological care over profit and wealth accumulation. (As a side note, for anyone who wants to do deeper digging into solidarity economies, I'd suggest checking out the New Economy Coalition's bank of resources and learning tools; they've gathered a lot of really great stuff.)

So what if we entertain, for a moment, letting the nonprofit industrial complex die? What do we lose? I imagine the idea is scary to many of us, myself included, because many of us have our survival implicated in the survival of that system. I imagine many of us, including myself, would say, "Wait, no, that sounds really drastic. I can't lose my job, because I need to pay for my apartment and feed my kids, and I can't lose my health benefits." Neither can my staff, or the artists I engage. I can't lose the space where I make art, and so on. So what if we try to get really real and really specific about what it is we actually can't lose? Can we lose our titles but know that we each still need food on the table? Can we lose six-figure scenic budgets for our productions but know that artists still need ways to create expansively and beautifully? Can we lose our offices but know that we need a way to gather with each other to work? If we know what is non-negotiable and hold those things close, can we find models that bring us those non-negotiable things and let the other stuff fall away?

In the panel yesterday, I heard Anne speak to the idea that trust and community are created by building something together — by working through messy processes where individuality meets collective need, and where conflict is cherished as an opportunity for deeper connection. So what if we all leaned in just ten percent more than we already are, into the discomfort of trying and the vulnerability of failure? What if the messiness and imperfection of these alternative systems, and the inevitable failed experiments, is not a sign that we need to hurry back to what is familiar, but a sign that we're on the right track — that we're doing the work to build the trust we need in each other to survive the times ahead?

I believe so deeply that imagination is our most powerful political tool. We can only build what we can imagine, and as artists and creatives, we are imagination experts. Our greatest value in civic society does not lie in the quality of the beautiful things that we make, but in the way that we foster imagination — the way we gather people together, and the way we fabricate structures for those people to feel, to think, to talk, and to learn. We are architects of possibility. We can see inside, outside, and around a question like no one else.

So I want to invite everyone to take a moment to ask that question together and do some mapping together, if you're willing. I'm going to ask you to do a slightly vulnerable thing — but it's really not that vulnerable, because it's mostly anonymous, so don't worry — and please participate only if you want to. I have post-its and a bunch of markers, and two questions; let's split the table. On this side, with the premise that you trust the people you collaborate with: what power or resource would you be willing to let go of or share, and what would you need to hold on to? And on this side: what is the biggest, baddest, most delusional dream you have that you think could be fulfilled with a change in the work that you do? Let's map it together.

The next entry in the Rolling Speaker Series will be in Tampa Bay on August 26th, from Dr. Shayla Cannady. All recordings and transcripts will be available on MomentumRevolutions.com.