

The Lighthouse and the Ecosystem

Dr. Lee Bynum responds to the Rolling Speaker Series prompt
University of Oklahoma · 6/27/26

*The session opened with a grounding meditation; this transcript begins with Lee's prepared remarks.
Dr. Lee Bynum uses they/them pronouns.*



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.

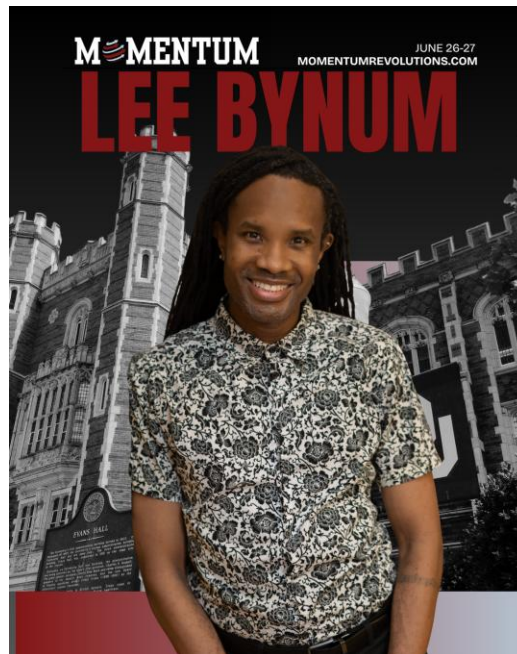
That light has never belonged to one person. A lighthouse is an ecosystem. It takes builders and visionaries to design it. Fuel to keep it alive. People willing to tend it in the harshest conditions. Smaller lights - lanterns, flashlights - to reach what the largest beams can't. And a culture of navigators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

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The Response



Dr. Lee Bynum - Rolling Speaker Series - Speaker #2

I want to say a couple of things before I start. First, I can actually memorize a speech, but I'm going to be reading today - I'd planned to say one thing, but after spending yesterday with all of you, I rewrote it last night, so please bear with me. And before I say anything else, I want to thank Calida - not only for inviting me into this conversation, but for beginning where she did, with the lighthouse prompt. I thought it was really, really provocative.

She invited us to imagine the artist as a lighthouse - and, more importantly, she reminded us that no lighthouse shines by itself. Every light depends on architects, builders, keepers, navigators, fuel, and countless hands that make illumination possible. I've been thinking about that image ever since I read it. This morning, I want to suggest that perhaps there's one more step backward we might take. Because before there is a lighthouse, there is a shoreline. Before there is a keeper, there is a community. Before anyone builds a beacon, there are already people finding their way through the dark.

That matters because I've come to believe that one of the quiet mistakes we make in the nonprofit arts industrial complex is assuming that the arts ecosystem begins with arts organizations. I don't think it does. I think it begins with culture itself - and culture has always existed long before the institutions that purport to present, produce, or preserve it.

I've spent the last twenty years moving through our sector from a number of different vantage points. I've been an artist trying to bring work into the world. I co-founded and led a small nonprofit theater company. I worked as a grantmaker, investing in museums, universities, libraries, archives, and performing arts organizations. I've served as a senior executive at Minnesota Opera, Lincoln Center, American Composers Forum, and Maestra Music. I've served on nonprofit boards for more than twenty years. And this fall, I began leading the graduate

The Lighthouse and the Ecosystem

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University of Oklahoma · 6/27/26

program in arts administration at the City University of New York, where my work is to prepare the next generation of arts leaders.

Those experiences look very different on paper. Yet over time I began to notice something surprising. Artists asked why institutions struggled to connect with communities. Administrators wrestled with how to build sustainable organizations. Funders tried to determine how to invest for lasting impact. Boards asked how to govern wisely. Faculty wondered how to prepare students for a profession that seems to reinvent itself every decade. Different questions, different perspectives - and yet underneath them all was the very same question: how do institutions remain worthy of the culture they exist to serve?

It took me a long time to realize I'd been asking that question since the very beginning of my career. As a college student, when I co-founded the Harmony Theater Company in New York, I thought our work was to create new works. It wasn't - or at least it wasn't only that. Our mission required us to work alongside grassroots organizations serving neighborhoods across the city. We'd meet with community leaders before we thought about seasons, before we talked about casting, before we imagined any programming. Those conversations taught me something that has never left me: the community was not simply our audience. It was not simply the beneficiary of our work. It was not even our collaborator. The community was the context that gave the work its name. If we wanted to produce theater responsibly, we first had to understand what the community was experiencing, celebrating, fearing, grieving, and hoping for. Only then could we begin asking what kind of art ought to be made.

I didn't yet have the language for what I was learning. The arts ecosystem did not begin when people entered our theater - it had already begun long before anyone bought a ticket. It began in kitchens, in churches, in neighborhood barber shops and beauty salons, in family stories, in block parties, in lullabies and protest songs, in the jokes elders teach children almost without realizing they're teaching timing, rhythm, and performance, in dances learned from cousins and traditions carried across generations. Long before anyone entered one of our institutions, they were already making culture. And that realization quietly reshaped every position I've held since - because once you understand that culture begins before institutions, you begin to ask very different questions of institutions.

If Harmony Theater taught me where culture begins, the next chapter taught me something equally important: culture may begin before institutions, but institutions shape what culture is able to become. When I arrived at the Mellon Foundation after leading that small, under-resourced theater company - and I do mean under-resourced - I expected to discover that the greatest differences between organizations were financial. I was wrong, as I often am. Of course resources matter; money expands possibility, creates stability, buys time, and lets organizations take risks they otherwise couldn't afford. But what surprised me was how often organizations with very different budgets struggled with remarkably similar problems. They struggled to listen. They struggled to adapt. They struggled to share authority. They struggled to align governance with mission. They struggled to distinguish preserving the institution from serving the public. Those weren't simply financial problems - they were leadership problems, governance problems, and ultimately cultural problems.

That changed how I understood institutions. I stopped thinking of organizations primarily as buildings, budgets, or strategic plans, and began thinking of them as collections of relationships - among artists, administrators, boards, funders, audiences, and communities. And once you see institutions as relationships rather than structures, something else becomes clear: relationships are not permanent. They require tending. They require trust. They require humility. And they can disappear much more quickly than we imagine.

The Lighthouse and the Ecosystem

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University of Oklahoma · 6/27/26

I experienced that firsthand at Minnesota Opera. We invested deeply in building relationships with communities that historically hadn't seen themselves reflected in opera. We created new artistic pipelines, formed new partnerships, and expanded who was invited into conversations about what opera could be. We even purchased an incredibly expensive new performance venue to place us right in the middle of the community. Many of those efforts succeeded - not because we'd discovered a perfect strategy, but because a constellation of leaders across the organization believed those relationships mattered. And then the leadership changed. I'm not speaking only about the chief executive - just enough people in decision-making capacities. Enough priorities shifted, enough conversations stopped happening, enough assumptions quietly returned. And I realized something that has stayed with me ever since: community trust is much easier to build than institutional trust. Relationships can be cultivated over years, but unless they become embedded in how an institution understands itself, they remain surprisingly fragile.

Over the years I've also had the privilege of working with cultural organizations and universities throughout Asia, Europe, Africa, and the Caribbean. One of the gifts of that experience is that it reminds you of something Americans sometimes forget: the way we organize our cultural institutions is not the only way they can be organized. The relationship among government, philanthropy, artists, audiences, higher education, and community looks different in different parts of the world - even the definitions of those terms differ. Different histories produce different assumptions, and different assumptions produce different institutions. That clarifies that many of the structures we inherit are not inevitable. They are things we elect - and if they are elections, we can choose differently. That doesn't mean every alternative is better, and it doesn't mean we can simply import another country's model into our own; every ecosystem grows within its own history. But it does mean we should stop confusing familiarity with necessity.

Too often we describe our challenges as though they are primarily problems of funding. I've come to believe they are more fundamentally problems of design. Business models are not simply financial systems - they are systems for making decisions. They determine what gets measured, what gets rewarded, what gets protected, whose voices carry authority, and, perhaps most importantly, whose needs become the starting point for our work. When institutional sustainability becomes the first question instead of the last, every other decision slowly reorganizes itself around protecting the institution rather than advancing the mission. But if the first question is "what does our community need us to become?" then sustainability is no longer the mission - it becomes one of the conditions that allows the mission to endure. That's a profoundly different way of understanding leadership: not because it rejects business, fundraising, or governance, but because it asks those disciplines to remain accountable to something larger than themselves. It asks us to remember that institutions exist because culture does, not the other way around.

This brings me to why we're here. Over the past day and a half, many of us have been imagining new models - community boards, partner boards, mutual support boards, mission guardians, focus boards, holistic organizations, all manner of models. I find this work deeply helpful - not because I believe one of these models will emerge as the answer, but because asking the question reminds us of something we too often forget: the way our organizations are structured is not a law of nature. It is a design choice, and design choices can be redesigned. But I want to offer one small provocation. I actually don't think governance is the thing we're trying to fix. After yesterday's session, I think governance is the symptom. The thing we're actually trying to redesign is the relationship between institutions and the people whose culture those institutions exist to serve. A board cannot solve that problem by itself. Neither can an executive director, nor an artist, nor a funder.

The Lighthouse and the Ecosystem

Dr. Lee Bynum responds to the Rolling Speaker Series prompt
University of Oklahoma · 6/27/26

That's because governance is only one expression of a much deeper philosophy. Every governance model is ultimately trying to answer a handful of questions: Who gets to make decisions? Whose knowledge counts? Whose voices matter? To whom is this institution ultimately accountable? And, perhaps most important of all: for whom does this institution exist? Those are not governance questions - they are philosophical questions. Every org chart is really a theory about relationships. Every board structure is a declaration about authority. Every budget is a declaration about priorities. Every strategic plan is a declaration about what future we're trying to create. Governance simply gives those beliefs organizational form. That's why reforming boards, while important, is not enough. If we redesign the structure without redesigning the philosophy, the old assumptions will simply find new ways to express themselves. The boxes on the org chart may change; the power dynamics often do not.

That realization has profoundly shaped how I think about education. This fall I have the privilege of redesigning an arts administration graduate program in New York. People sometimes assume my responsibility is to prepare students for careers in arts management - and I hope we can do that. Yet if that's all we accomplish, I think we'll have failed. The next generation deserves more than preparation for the organizations they inherit. They deserve an education that equips them to ask whether these organizations are still organized to fulfill the purposes for which they were created. They deserve to understand where our business models, governance assumptions, and fundraising practices come from - what those systems have made possible, what they've made difficult, and what responsibility we have not simply to preserve them but to improve them. That, to me, is what arts leadership education ought to be: not professional socialization, but institutional imagination. Not teaching students how to fit comfortably into inherited systems, but teaching them to understand those systems deeply enough to change them responsibly - because you cannot repair a system you do not understand.

But understanding a system is not the same as accepting it. Sometimes in conversations like these we create another false choice: we imagine that to critique institutions is to criticize management, fundraising, boards, or administration itself. I don't believe that - in fact, I believe the opposite. We need extraordinary executive directors, fundraisers, board members, financial leaders, and administrators, because institutions do matter. They matter enormously. They preserve memory. They commission artists. They convene communities. They steward resources. They protect cultural inheritance. They probably pay every person in this room. The question has never been whether institutions matter. The question is whether they remember why they matter - whether every discipline inside an organization understands itself not as an end but as a form of stewardship. Because the institution is not the destination. The institution is the bridge - and bridges should not mistake themselves for the places they connect.

This brings me back to our lighthouse. I keep returning to that image - not because it reminds me of institutions, but because it reminds me of purpose. A lighthouse never exists for itself. No one builds a lighthouse so people can admire the lighthouse. It exists for a reason entirely outside itself: for the sailor who cannot see the shore, for the family waiting for someone to come home, for the journey still unfolding. Perhaps our institutions should think of themselves the same way - not as destinations, monuments, or ends in themselves, but as acts of service, as bridges, as invitations, as promises. If that's true, then perhaps our measure of success changes too. Perhaps the question is no longer "how do we build stronger institutions," but "how do we build institutions that make stronger communities possible." Those are very different ambitions. One asks the world to come closer to us; the other asks us to move closer to them.

That distinction has become the defining question of my career, and it's why I said yes to leading an arts leadership program. Plainly put: I don't believe the next generation needs us simply to teach them how to manage organizations. They need us to help them imagine

The Lighthouse and the Ecosystem

Dr. Lee Bynum responds to the Rolling Speaker Series prompt
University of Oklahoma · 6/27/26

organizations worthy of the communities they already love - organizations capable of listening before speaking, learning before leading, partnering before prescribing; organizations humble enough to remember that they did not invent culture, they inherited it, and they have a responsibility to leave it healthier than they found it.

Several months ago, someone asked me to summarize my philosophy of arts leadership in a single sentence. After twenty years of moving among artists, foundations, universities, nonprofit boards, executive offices, classrooms, and rehearsal rooms, this was the best answer I could give: formal arts education and cultural organizations should not simply prepare people to enter existing systems; they should take responsibility for reimagining systems that no longer serve us. Our work is not only to steward culture, but to close the distance between cultural organizations and the people whose lives have been moved by it.

I believe that now more deeply than ever. Culture has never waited for permission to exist. It has always found its way - in kitchens, in churches, on stoops in the Bronx, at kitchen tables, in barber shops and beauty salons, on playgrounds, at family reunions, in lullabies, in protest, and in celebration. Culture has always known how to find us. The contemporary question is whether our institutions still know how to find culture. Perhaps that is the work before us: not simply to redesign our boards, not simply to strengthen our organizations, not simply to secure the next generation of funding, but to shorten that distance - between expertise and listening, between authority and accountability, between institutions and imagination, between ourselves and the communities that have been making culture all along. Because before there was a lighthouse, there was already a shore - and it was filled with people helping one another find their way. Thank you for listening.

Fireside Chat

Calida: *We're going to do a little bit of a fireside chat. I have some pre-written questions, but I also want to make an offering to all of you to ask questions too - this isn't about me, it's about all of us and how we collectively interrogate what's happening in our field. So this might be a heavy hitter, and I apologize in advance: how do we begin helping organizations value invisible cultural labor before exhaustion becomes the only evidence that it existed?*

Lee: I think that depends on what you mean when you say "organizations." Not to get all Mitt Romney about it, but organizations are collections of people - so it's a different question depending on who you ask. In our session this morning, one of the things we talked about was how few of those descriptions of the different models actually talked about staff. One of the really critical challenges in our sector is that staff is wildly undervalued. You hear people constantly looking for fixes that talk as if the people who work at organizations don't exist, or who operate on somebody else's understanding of reality. So one of the primary things we can do is take the people who work there very seriously. And I say this as a working artist: artists aren't the only people who do work in the arts. I say it as a community member too: community members aren't the only people who have perspectives on what organizations should be doing. So the first thing is to broaden the aperture around who gets to participate in the conversations about whether our organizations are being effective - because when you start raising "here are all the things I do as the assistant director, or as the program assistant in the education department," it really does shift how we understand the work.

Calida: *That's a good point. To your point about broadening the question out - who really holds power inside the ecosystem? Is it the decision-makers, the people allocating resources, the*

The Lighthouse and the Ecosystem

Dr. Lee Bynum responds to the Rolling Speaker Series prompt
University of Oklahoma · 6/27/26

group shaping what everyone believes is possible? If you expand that vision to include staff, what kind of sacrifice would it take to redistribute power?

Lee: It really depends on where you are in the sector. At a lot of the large arts organizations - and I've worked at a lot of the really big ones - you'd probably assume that because there are people making eight-figure gifts, they have an outsized say in what happens inside the organization. That's not necessarily true. It's really about understanding who actually sits in the locus of power in a given space, and interrogating what kind of authority they need to share. In some organizations it's the artistic sector influencing how things move. The last couple of years I've been working on Broadway, which is an incredible privilege - and at the same time, it's been shocking to understand where the power actually sits there. The power sits with the audience; people vote with their feet. The ways people bend reality to fit what they assume audiences want actually shifts where the power is. Coming to that after a long time in classical music - where a composer might have outsized authority over an entire season simply because you want to work with them three years from now - it was shocking to see how little authority composers have in the Broadway context. So you really have to get a sense of where the power sits and what we're actually asking people to sacrifice. In some places it's authority; in some places it's the authority that comes with giving money, especially in the museum context; in others it's releasing your beholdenness to supply and demand. It's not always an easy "community good, donors bad" moment, and I worry a lot of these conversations sit in that space, because those are both really open terms.

Calida: *To your point about how we're preparing future arts administrators and young people entering this next juncture - how do we cultivate better navigators, not just better leaders? I'm thinking about people who know how to recognize possibility and then actually trust it. That's essentially how MOMENTUM came to life: it started with conversations my partner had been having for a long time, in his pocket of people; it deepened, possibility started to illuminate, trust illuminated in different ways, and then came the act of changing course because of it. So what should we be doing to cultivate better navigators?*

Lee: One: decoupling "art" and "arts organizations" is a really important piece. Arts organizations have a very particular function, but they are not art in and of themselves, and that's a useful thing to name. The other thing is acclimating people much earlier to what arts organizations actually do. I ran a nonprofit arts organization for five years before I really understood it - I knew what I was doing every day, but I didn't understand the whole until I started having different kinds of conversations with peers about how this work happens and all the different ways I could be doing work like this. Bringing those conversations into people's early experiences with the arts really shifts who understands they have a place in the space. So many of us, growing up, had no concept of what happens inside these organizations, so we don't see ourselves there - and then you look at the demographics of who runs them and ask, where are the Black people? There was probably nothing I saw enough of to make me think I'd have that kind of job. We went to museums, the symphony, the opera. I knew I could be a performer, I knew I could be a creator - I had no idea I could be an executive director, because I didn't know that was a framework. If I'd had that, I'd have been thinking about my skill set very differently all along.

Calida: *When I did my response, I talked about how our field normalizes burnout and calls it commitment, normalizes scarcity and calls it resilience, normalizes fragility and calls it innovation. My question to you - having worked in large institutions and smaller nonprofits, and having built your own - is: what concerns you most about the stories our sector tells itself in order to make these unhealthy systems feel normal?*

The Lighthouse and the Ecosystem

Dr. Lee Bynum responds to the Rolling Speaker Series prompt
University of Oklahoma · 6/27/26

Lee: I love this question, because it speaks to how deeply entrenched we are in a way of working. There's something about the story of getting to be an artist as being one of sacrifice - one of constant work. I was fortunate to do multiple kinds of art growing up, but I was mostly in classical music, and what that teaches you is that you're expected to practice all the time. So it became very normalized - even after leaving classical music for a while - that I was just supposed to be working constantly. And there was nothing around me saying otherwise, because my friends came out of the same world; my husband is also a classical musician. There was literally nothing to tell me, "Y'all are crazy, you can actually take a day off." You see it in other spaces too: in dance, destroying your body is normalized; in theater, people truly believe you're supposed to be broke. There's a way we don't understand that all of these conditions are inhumane. So then we can't come into a professional space and problematize the fact that we're asking someone who just left college with a quarter-million dollars of debt to work for \$30,000 a year, sixty hours a week, using her own networks - because the whole thing is off. I think we actually have to interrogate that.

Calida: *Where do you believe our field has lost its imagination? It almost feels like we're stuck in a pipe where things are supposed to flow through but keep getting stuck - and we're not imagining what could be possible, then activating it, trying it out, and learning whether it works.*

Lee: I want to take this in two places. One: the capitalistic lens that everything in our country has to be seen through is probably not the right framework. Getting to live and work in China for a couple of years - where that isn't the starting point for anything - I saw so many things flourish because no one expected them to generate money in the same way. There was an actual appreciation of culture on its own, a sense that we as a people should support it because it's a reflection of who we are and what we value. It blew my mind, and honestly I didn't want to leave, because I knew the minute I came home I'd have to go back into fight-or-flight mode just to write a couple of little songs - because I live in New York City, and if I can't make six figures appear in my bank account every year, I'm literally going to be on the streets. I don't know that you can create in that context. I don't think we're even endorsed to imagine things outside of capitalism in this country, and that's something we should push back on.

The technology piece is also interesting to me, because I love technology - I'm a millennial, I'm an Aquarius, it's just in me. I believe in tools, and I think about technology as a fantastic tool. The reason it's so scary to artists is that we're always in a scarcity mindset, so we assume something is always coming for our job. But it's not the understudy - it's the concept that audiences no longer think ballet is supposed to exist. So it's pushing against us, but to me it's more psychological. As a composer I'm excited about AI, because it can facilitate a certain kind of research I don't want to spend all my time doing. That doesn't mean I want AI to be the only place songs are written, but if we can't adapt to technology, everything will end up where opera is - and part of why opera is dying is that it refuses to speak to right now. We can't be in that mode.

Calida: *For the room - what responsibility do you think all of us carry, regardless of our title or background, to help reshape our cultural ecosystem?*

Lee: Honesty. Being honest about how you experience the work and the sector - not pretending we don't recognize that we exist in a broken business model. I'm working with Broadway artists right now, and the great bugaboo of New York theater is real estate; everything is so expensive that it can take \$26 million to produce a three-person musical. Under those conditions, nobody wants to take chances, and people resist pushing back on "this isn't a sustainable way to produce - we need to figure something else out." I came to this work after time in academia, working with a lot of HBCUs during a period when a couple of them had closed. Some started

The Lighthouse and the Ecosystem

Dr. Lee Bynum responds to the Rolling Speaker Series prompt
University of Oklahoma · 6/27/26

looking at shared-service models - even institutions in the same city, like Jackson State and Tougaloo, asking what literal things they could share, down to lawn care, to reduce the burden so it wasn't falling on students. I think in the arts there are more things we could figure out like that, but it's very hard if we're telling ourselves a story that we're automatically in competition for every kind of resource. It's not a false story, but if we don't let up on it, we can't move.

What are we supposed to do? Have honest conversations. It surprised me, working in Minnesota, which has a different community feel than New York - you can sort of wrap your arms around the Twin Cities. It's not like there are hundreds of organizations; you could put the leaders of every one of them in a black box and have a different kind of conversation about what could be accomplished together. Some of why that doesn't happen is ego, some is time because we're all working constantly, and some is that we don't necessarily like each other. But this is part of how we solve problems that affect all of us. And I don't think we've been honest with ourselves as a field - including about who we like. Sometimes the honest thing is just, "I don't like you either - so let's keep it moving."

Calida: *I'd love to make this a little more personal, because I feel this space is safe enough. Who have been lighthouse keepers for you - the people whose names we may not see in bright lights or headlines, but without whom your light wouldn't have stayed on?*

Lee: Absolutely. The most personal one is my mother - the person who most consistently asks me "Why not?" when there's something I want to do and I'm afraid to do it. My last day at my job is on Tuesday. There are myriad reasons I decided to stop being an arts administrator after 25 years, but the main one is that after supporting the creation of other people's work for so long, I kept asking, "Who's doing this for me?" - and the answer is supposed to be me. Making that decision after so long was scary, and when I talked to my mother she just kept asking, "Why? Why?" Those conversations really shift things in my head, because I trust her implicitly and I know she won't steer me wrong - she's loving and supportive, but if I said "I'm going to go for the NFL," she'd say "no, no, don't do that." So her asking "why" in this moment was something I could really take in. I've also built a beautiful network of collaborators in New York - people of color around my age, mostly but not exclusively queer - and in the safe space of our text chain we can have the honesty we often can't at work. We support each other, hold each other accountable, call each other out, and we don't have to build context for each other about why something is confusing or why I'm afraid. And last but not least, my very honest husband, whose honesty keeps me accountable to myself, who builds me up when I need it and reminds me to be humble. Generally, the biggest thing I've learned is that nobody gets anywhere by themselves. So I try to surround myself with people who believe in what I'm doing and whose work I believe in - and everybody else is just everybody else.

Calida: *This is my last question, so get your questions ready - then we'll open it up. Imagine we're sitting here twenty years from now, looking back at this moment in arts and culture. What do you hope they'll say we chose to illuminate? And what do you hope we finally had the courage to let go dark?*

Lee: My goodness - that's a huge question. Honestly, I kind of hope nobody remembers we were here having this conversation at all. These problems are so persistent: the entire 25 years of my arts career, we've been talking about the same problem - the problem of "the work," of access - and I don't know that we're any closer to solving it. We've done some funny substitutions of it. I'm going to say something that may sound unpopular, but I'll say it anyway: I've had instances of working at organizations where the diagnosis was "the problem is we don't have enough [fill-in-the-blank] artists on the board, community members on the board" - and then they get to the board and start behaving like board members. There's something about the

The Lighthouse and the Ecosystem

Dr. Lee Bynum responds to the Rolling Speaker Series prompt
University of Oklahoma · 6/27/26

center of gravity of being on a board, of being in that kind of unaccountable position of power, where people start behaving a certain way. It makes me feel like we just substituted one wacky power dynamic for another, with more people who identify like I do - people who, outside that context, you'd take for a drink and think, "you're lovely." So my hope is that in twenty years - if I'm still alive and kicking and Mother Earth hasn't kicked us all off - we're not even remembering that we struggled to make sense of this, because we'll have found a better way to make art than what we're doing now.

Audience Q&A

Calida: *Let's open it up. How do you react or respond to the dialogue we've just been having - what's bubbling to the surface for you?*

Participant: *Everything you're saying is so deeply resonant. Since we're in a capitalist system, like it or not, my big question is: how do we educate not only our communities but our artists, our administrators, and our boards on the financial value we're all part of - not just organizational but financial - and why it matters, to get us out of scarcity?*

Lee: Thank you for that - it's really thoughtful. There's a practical answer that happens a lot in local and state government contexts, where people literally talk about: for every dollar spent on the arts, here's what goes back into the community and the economy, here's how it relates to education or to why there aren't potholes in the streets. And that can connect to how we think about who counts as an appropriate civic leader, because those questions don't come up enough. We have a lovely mayor in New York City - I won't gush - but one thing he does well is talk about why this matters, why culture matters. His mother is a gifted filmmaker, but beyond that, he conveys that culture isn't just a thing to be commodified - it's a reflection of who we are, the repository of our values. If we could bring it back into schools in a more wholesome way, and back into our homes... I don't have kids, and I have no problem with someone handing their kid an iPad - but I'd love it if it came with a conversation about what you're watching, the songs and movies people are making, why they matter or don't, and how you can participate. There's tremendous value in that, and a responsibility to bring it to the next generation. I don't know that enough of us are actively engaged in it - a lot of us are absolutely exhausted - but it's worth prioritizing.

Calida: *I'm curious what's keeping some of you up at night - and I don't mean a theoretical "we," I mean literally the dozens of us doing this work right now. Are there ways we can support each other differently?*

Participant: *For me it's connecting with like-minded, equally engaged people who have the time and space to partner and connect more - across institutions, across disciplines. That intentional outreach is what keeps me up: we'll talk briefly, maybe send an email now and then, but organizations connecting across boundaries - state, local, disciplinary - is what I find missing.*

Lee: That's a huge one. The fact that those conversations don't happen contributes to a sense that each of us is an island - that our organizations are islands - when across sectors there's much more to learn from each other than we act on. Concert dance, theater, classical music, museums - we're all in the same boat as a whole, and we're not really thinking about what we can learn from each other or how we can pool resources, including intellectual resources. I worry people are going to grasp that way too late.

The Lighthouse and the Ecosystem

Dr. Lee Bynum responds to the Rolling Speaker Series prompt
University of Oklahoma · 6/27/26

Participant: *This is the kind of work I do - when I teach digital literacy, I step back to “do you know how to identify emotions? Let’s start with good, bad, sad, mad.” I’ve started skipping my peers and going straight to the kids. But I live in Florida, and it’s difficult to discuss book banning without just saying “you don’t want your kids to learn about other people.” I coach people who go to school board meetings, but I’m not the one there. So how do I bridge the gap to people who can almost see the bridge but are looking past it - without banging my head, or throwing myself off the cliff trying to reach people who never will?*

Lee: That’s a real challenge, especially in places like Florida - I do a lot of work there and experience that exact thing. To an extent, you have to let people be where they are, and identify the spaces where the work can actually happen the way you believe it can. I grew up right outside Richmond, Virginia - a place locked in time, and that time is approximately 1863. When I was at Mellon, there was a nine-figure initiative around removing Confederate memorials, and I remember telling a senior colleague: you can do whatever you want with the statues, but your issue is what those people think, and you won’t be able to dislodge that, because the education and the cultural values keep reaffirming it. A bunch of those monuments did come down - and now they’re in a museum - but the neighborhood names didn’t change, the high school names didn’t change, and the perspectives that put them up aren’t remotely dislodged. Where we get stuck is letting our work exist in a space where it can’t actually have the effect it could have. I say this as a person with a PhD in American history: some of this is so baked into the fabric of who we are - like the fact that a president isn’t going to show up at a game and not get booed - that I don’t know the work can happen in a satisfactory way in some of these contexts. Part of our work is recognizing the context we’re in and then making choices about the best use of our time and our mental health.

Participant: *We live in a capitalist system - that’s how we have to function. We decided to build something to address some of these problems. So when will philanthropy, foundations, and people with resources invest in those of us using our own resources to make space for everyone else - to break down barriers and dismantle the systems causing disconnection - instead of continually reinvesting large sums in legacy institutions that uphold the very structures forcing us to keep having these conversations? When does the pendulum swing?*

Lee: I love this question every time I hear it, and I always have the same image: if you squeeze an orange, you get orange juice - not apple juice. If you’re thinking about the eight or ten big foundations we all picture, those organizations are comprised of people - not just at the board level, but down to the interns. When I was at Mellon, my husband would come in and say, “even the receptionist has a master’s degree.” There’s something about the orientation of the whole thing. So some of these organizations are only going to support what they understand, because they’re constituted of people from a specific background, with a specific set of interests and frame of reference. But then there are all these other kinds of funders - mutual aid groups, community-led funds, Women Moving Millions, individuals of great resources who aren’t typically tapped. Our friend Samuel Phillips talks a lot about identifying people of color with significant wealth who are now being engaged philanthropically. Where we have to shift is where we think the lever is, because the bigger foundations are not going to want to fund a conversation about dismantling the power structures that allow them to exist. So we have to shop this around to other places. This isn’t a knock on my former colleagues - it’s just a reflection: I have no expectation that they’ll do the thing that takes away what they worked so hard to build. We have to shift our own perspective about how we do this.

Participant: *What keeps me up at night is the move from “our arts ecosystem is very exclusive and tons of people are kept outside” to “no, it’s for everyone” - and the reality that the second step doesn’t work very well either. There are so many cases of organizations inviting only the*

The Lighthouse and the Ecosystem

Dr. Lee Bynum responds to the Rolling Speaker Series prompt
University of Oklahoma · 6/27/26

people already there, and ending up with fewer people when they were trying to be more expansive. I can feel the next generation of that conversation coming, and a lot of hesitation from many sides to actually take the next step - I relate it to colorblind casting versus conscious or intentional casting; that next step hasn't happened. And with the lighthouse metaphor: the travelers are going to different places. Some need the lighthouse to know "this is how I navigate here." Others say, "Great - but I'm not going there, I'm going over there."

Participant: *To what you were saying about Virginia or Florida - one of the things we discuss a lot is that we don't all share the same values. We start by assuming "other people are basically like us, we all agree because we're people," and increasingly that's just not true. I keep finding things I assumed every human believed, and discovering they don't - and we still have to function somehow. Whether we're talking about how to run an arts organization or how we do accountability and community, we're assuming we're more alike than we are.*

Lee: Having spent a lot of my career in community engagement, there's no such thing as "fill-in-the-blank for all" - I think that's almost a problematic way to approach anything. We're all individuals. A healthier way to think about it is that there needs to be a spectrum, where everyone who wants to be in the bucket can find something in the bucket for themselves. I think about this because, on paper - demographically, census-bureau speaking - my husband and I probably seem like very similar people: both Black, both over 40, both over six feet, both singer-composers. But we couldn't be more different. I have a lot of hair; he has a shaved head. I'm of Caribbean extraction; he's from Europe. He watches sportsball; I don't. We're not interested in a lot of the same things, and people are surprised, because they know we work in similar contexts. We don't even often go to concerts together, because if it's music he likes, there's a strong likelihood I won't. When you talk about "audience" as "a Black audience" or "a Latinx audience" without understanding there's an incredible amount of nuance, you're probably wasting your own time. Be honest about what you're doing: recognize there's a population who will be interested in this, or think about the population you want and program toward them - but if you say "this is for everybody," you'll ultimately leave a lot of people out, and then be mad at your director of community engagement for not delivering it.

Calida: *Shout out to all the directors of community engagement and the suffering they go through - holding y'all in our hearts.*

Participant: *I'm not completely related to the sports thing, but from my perspective - I came to America, having left my country four years before that, in South Africa. What made me keep going, even though I look different and people immediately recognize that, was the impact I could make in culture and how I could help shape it. I'm against the idea that the institution shapes the culture, rather than the culture shaping the institution. My role, as part of a small community, is to add to that culture and to value it. When I came to America, I volunteered with a Boys and Girls Club, and people freely asked me questions they'd learned from the media - offensive ones - but I didn't take it that way. I felt my role was more important: to contribute everything I can to society. That's what keeps me going. And when my family asked me to come to Oklahoma, I felt this is where I should be now.*

Lee: Thank you for your honesty, for serving in that way, for being brave. I feel that intensely. I feel a tremendous responsibility, specifically to queer Black kids, to exist in spaces so they know it's possible for them to exist there. And at the same time, I feel a tremendous responsibility to leave spaces that aren't kind to me, so they also know you don't have to stay if you don't want to. The gift of hyper-visibility is being able to make choices that affect other people. So I hope you're also being kind to yourself and taking care of yourself - so that in the moments when you're not getting what you want, you're still treating yourself well.

The Lighthouse and the Ecosystem

Dr. Lee Bynum responds to the Rolling Speaker Series prompt
University of Oklahoma · 6/27/26

Participant: *I come from a background of service - Easter Seals, and now politics - and I've been through multiple 501(c)(3)s. What keeps me awake is: even those of us who have these conversations, when is it enough to make the arts as important to people as sports? I sometimes use the word "sexy" - let's make it as sexy as the NBA, so people want to wear the jersey, want the trading card of their favorite. I understand the marketing machines of the NFL - but where's the Broadway equivalent? Where's the long game from PBS or the NEA? Where do we serve the goal of making the arts - puppetry, ballet, whatever - feel as necessary and desired as sports? We tell our audiences and funders we're the most vital thing ever, and yet we're dying. How do we look back twenty years from now and say we did it? I know that's an almost impossible question.*

Lee: I actually don't think it's impossible - but I don't think the arts organization is the entity that can do that work. I went to a special high school where a lot of people wanted to play pro sports; a couple dozen went off to the NFL or Major League Baseball. That's what my high school did really well - and I was fortunate that, because of it, we also had a great music program that benefited me tremendously. But those kids falling in love with sports wasn't about anything the NFL was doing. We don't even have a single professional sports team in Richmond - it's the largest city in the country without one. So that love came from a different cultural value. To me it goes back to what we say to our kids when they're kids: what are we uplifting, what talent are we acknowledging? If we see a three-year-old dancing wildly, do we think "let me support this" the same way we see a three-year-old and immediately think "let me put him in tee-ball"? You kind of have to have that value in the home for it to move through. Most of my friends are professional artists, and almost all of them had at least one parent who was also a professional artist - it was valued in the home. In my case, my parents were academics, so they were oriented toward supporting where they saw our talents. If that's not how the household value system works, it's not going to take root. And these external organizations don't have enough influence to change that. Even with more resources, most arts organizations are just trying to keep the lights on - and those of us who end up running them usually got there because we were artists. You know how to paint, sing, dance; you don't necessarily know the psychology of marketing and the campaigns that would actually shift the culture. So we need to be much more reliant on the culture itself. In my travels, you hear about cultures that prize dancing so deeply that nobody has to tell a kid to do it - it's just part of the value system. There's probably more we could do at the most local level - in the household - to advance that. The two major projects I'm building - the paddle boat, and the streaming movable theaters - are about distribution and delivery, making the spread greater. I genuinely hope you win at this, because it sounds like something America could really benefit from. I'm convinced we'd be a less militaristic society if we had a different outlet for some of the emotions we're being made to feel.

Participant: *I want to connect some dots. We exist so deeply inside capitalism that, as you said, we can't even imagine beyond it. To me there's a direct line between that and "sportsball versus the arts" - competition versus collaboration, and what we're trained to value as a country. Even in team sports, collaboration only exists to defeat someone else; it isn't for its own sake, or a way to deepen relationship. So do you think there's a psychological carrying-forward of something deeper in us as a capitalist society - that we attach to competition and beating someone more than to collaboration?*

Lee: Yes. And look at the one place the arts do reach that level - to use the action-figure analogy from our conversation the other night: it's movie stars. An individual who has risen to the top in terms of how much money they can make, and make for others. There's also a long American distrust of the expert, and an elevation of the "organic." You're probably not going to be an organic ballerina or an organic opera singer - but it feels like you can become an organic

The Lighthouse and the Ecosystem

Dr. Lee Bynum responds to the Rolling Speaker Series prompt
University of Oklahoma · 6/27/26

athlete, even though we know enormous money and training go into reaching those elite levels. The idea of spaces where you actually have to have some kind of training, formal or not, feels kind of un-American to a lot of people, and there's a way they don't want to embrace it. That's part of why people love movie stars and rappers - those don't feel like things you have to be trained to do. It's so much more comfortable to our thinking than processing what it means to spend your entire life in a practice room to become a brilliant concert pianist. That just doesn't even feel American.

The next entry in the Rolling Speaker Series will be in the Bahamas on July 15th, from Dr. Heather Sauyaq Jean Kwamboka Gordon. All recordings and transcripts will be available on MomentumRevolutions.com.