

The Lighthouse and the Ecosystem

Calida N. Jones responds to the Rolling Speaker Series prompt
TCG Kickoff, San Juan · 6/12/26



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 Lighthouse and the Ecosystem

Calida N. Jones responds to the Rolling Speaker Series prompt
TCG Kickoff, San Juan · 6/12/26

The Response



Calida N. Jones - Rolling Speaker Series – Speaker #1

I believe we've actually been telling ourselves an incomplete story about the lighthouse. When most of us picture a lighthouse, we picture the bright, stunning beam — the thing you can actually see, the thing that's visible, the thing that's celebrated, that's alive, the thing everyone points to and says, "Oh my gosh, there it is."

But rarely do we stop and consider everything required to make that light possible. The architects who imagined it. The builders who constructed it. The people who supplied the fuel. The keepers who maintained it through storms. The smaller lights — the lanterns, the flashlights, the guideposts — that reach places the main beam never could. And perhaps most importantly, the navigators: the people who knew how to recognize the light when they saw it, who trusted it enough to change course and move because of it.

What if our cultural ecosystem works the same way? What if artists are only one part of a much larger constellation of people responsible for illuminating possibility? What if funders, educators, administrators, policymakers, board members, cultural organizers, audience members, and community members aren't standing outside the ecosystem observing it, but are actually helping determine whether the light stays on?

And if that's true, then we have some harder questions to ask ourselves. Who is building the conditions for cultural light to exist? Who gets the green light? Who is tending it? Who is fueling it? Who is benefiting from it? Who has been expected to keep

The Lighthouse and the Ecosystem

Calida N. Jones responds to the Rolling Speaker Series prompt
TCG Kickoff, San Juan · 6/12/26

it running without support, recognition, or rest? And what parts of our ecosystem have we become so accustomed to overlooking and dismissing that we've mistaken their exhaustion for sustainability?

Because if we're being raw and honest, many of our cultural lighthouses are operating on extraordinary acts of sacrifice — internally, in our bodies, and inside the organizations we work for. We've normalized burnout and called it commitment. I don't believe my ancestors laid down their lives for me to live in physical and internal pain with no recourse. And don't you dare speak of the problems — because then you're seen as a burden, a liability, instead of a beam of hope, an impactor, a culture builder.

We've normalized scarcity and called it resilience. We've normalized fragility and called it innovation. And then we wonder why so many lights are struggling to stay on.

So perhaps the question isn't simply, how do we support artists? Perhaps the deeper question to interrogate is: what ecosystem are we actually building around them? What are we sustaining? What are we starving? What futures are we investing in — and what futures are we quietly allowing to disappear? Because every decision we make — every policy, every investment, every partnership, every invitation, every omission — is helping determine what gets illuminated and what remains unseen.

The future is not shaped solely by the people holding the brightest lights. It is shaped by the people who decide where the light goes. And that requires a different kind of responsibility. Not admiration — participation. Not observation — stewardship. Not “What's my title?” but “What is my role in ensuring the light reaches further than it does today?”

Because the future of our work isn't a destination we're moving toward. It's something we're actively illuminating together. And the question each of us must wrestle with is this: when future generations look back at this moment, what will they say we chose to keep illuminated? Power? Control? And what will they say we allowed to go dark?

That's the piece I want you all to wrestle with.