

Georgia Humanities Council  
2011 Governor's Awards  
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Stanley E. Romanstein, Ph.D.  
Annual Humanities Lecture - Keynote address

Thank you, Jamil – and my thanks to each of you for choosing to be here today to celebrate the important role that the humanities play in our lives.

When I began to work professionally in the public humanities world, I wanted to know who the leaders in the field were. As I met new colleagues at the National Endowment for the Humanities and in other states, I asked, “Who sets the standard in this field? Where will I find exemplary work?” To a person they replied, “If you want to see the very best, look at Jamil Zainaldin and the Georgia Humanities Council.” That was true 10 years ago, and it’s still true today.

Jamil, his staff, and the board of the Georgia Humanities Council continue to inspire me and their counterparts across the country through their great work. Jamil, as Georgians, we’re proud to call you and the Georgia Council our own. Thank you.

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In a speech in Cape Town, South Africa in June 1966, Robert Kennedy said, and I quote:

There is an ancient Chinese curse which says “May you live in interesting times.” Like it or not, we live in interesting times. These are times of danger and uncertainty; but they are also more open to the creative energy of men than any other time in history.

Kennedy's words still resonate today, nearly half a century later. The "ancient Chinese" expression to which Kennedy refers (an expression that is, in truth, neither ancient nor Chinese) should not be taken literally, but used ironically. It juxtaposes "uninteresting times" – eras of peace, prosperity, and tranquility – with "interesting times" – days filled with disorder and trouble, and pointedly wishes the recipient a life lived in "interesting times." Curses aside, you and I do, indeed, live in interesting times. Evidence of that reality is abundant:

The country of Greece – the people who gave us philosophy and democracy – Greece is teetering on the brink of bankruptcy. Who could have imagined that? And Italy, where Galileo asserted the true order of the universe and Michelangelo created eternal art out of rough stone, is not far behind. Equally unbelievable.

Here at home things are somewhat better, but just barely. Atlanta lays claim to the highest unemployment rate of any metropolitan area in the country – 10.4%. But what can be done?

We live in an interesting time, a time in which scarcity has become our prevailing mindset. Pick up a newspaper, turn on a television, log on with your iPad virtually any day, any time, and you can find a pundit or two talking about how much we must cut, what we must learn to do without, about how seemingly impoverished we are.

To some extent, the pundits are right. But what I want to suggest to you this afternoon is that the arts and humanities have something important to offer – always, but especially in interesting times – and that you and I need to overcome our seeming reticence to stand up and say, publicly and proudly – and loudly, if need be – that the arts and humanities can make an enormous difference in people's lives, in the communities in which we live, and in advancing the democracy that we cherish.

Let's face it: despite the great work of the Georgia Humanities Council, the arts and humanities are not popular in Georgia. Research data linking study in the arts to academic success in every field is overwhelming and undisputed, and yet we quickly jettison arts programs from our schools in the hope that a myopic focus on math and science will put an end to the "interesting times" in which we live and return us to prosperity. It will not.

You and I know that it is the humanities that enable us to draw deep meaning from our past, to comprehend fully the present, and to make thoughtful, informed and creative choices about the kind of world we wish to convey as an inheritance to our children and grandchildren. Studying and embracing the humanities can make a difference.

In the fall of 2001, as I was beginning my tenure as president of the Minnesota Humanities Center, the director of the Cargill Corporation's Foundation invited me to lunch. After a few pleasantries she said, "Today's k-12 education world is all about math and science. You say it's the arts and humanities that make the difference. Would you be willing to prove that?"

We accepted the challenge. With financial support from the Cargill Foundation, my colleagues and I chose ten elementary schools in Minneapolis to take part in a four-year program to test the impact of the humanities on academic success. We chose schools like the Carter G. Woodson Institute for Student Excellence: high transition, low parental involvement, minimal level of school readiness.

A team from the Minnesota Humanities Center worked with the teachers and administrators at the Woodson Institute and in each of the other nine schools to shape both a curriculum and an environment that immersed students in the humanities. When the Social Studies class focus was the Harlem Renaissance, in art class students first studied and then created works in the style of Jacob Lawrence. When the history class topic was the explorations of Lewis and Clark, in "phys. ed." the students used pedometers to understand how long it would take them to cover the great distances travelled by America's explorers. When students at the Woodson Institute – students who shared a proud African American heritage – studied the American Revolution, they learned about the contributions of the

Founding Fathers and about the important contributions by African Americans in the formative years of our country. Every day and through every possible means, we made the arts and humanities an integral and relevant part of students' lives.

At the end of the four-year program the results were startling: In every year each of the ten participating schools saw increases in math and reading scores, and those increases surpassed both the city and state averages. Beyond test scores: attendance rates improved and behavioral problems declined. Teachers reported being more engaged, feeling more successful, and having a higher level of professional satisfaction.

How do we account for these successes? The only thing the students in our program had that their peers in like schools did not have was a steady and consistent focus on the arts and humanities. The humanities make a difference – and that's not just my opinion: an independent, longitudinal study of our work was conducted by the Wilder Research Center, and the results are unequivocal.

Let's look closer to home. We all know the statistics: Of the 50 states, Georgia ranks no higher than 45<sup>th</sup> in average SAT scores, and 47<sup>th</sup> in average graduation rates for high school freshmen. Here in Atlanta, the public high school graduation rate hovers around the 60<sup>th</sup> percentile.

The late Robert Shaw, my mentor and Music Director of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra from 1967-1988, was fond of saying "You don't have to change the world, but you are responsible for cleaning up your corner of the pen." The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra cannot singlehandedly change the fortunes of the Atlanta Public School System, but we can do our part. We can bring the power of the arts to bear on the lives of children in this city.

Our Talent Development Program does just that. For almost two decades, the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra's Talent Development Program has nurtured the musical talents of Atlanta's gifted, young African American and Latino musicians. Through our Talent Development Program we say, in effect, that if you have both talent and drive – a willingness to do the hard work that is necessary for

success – you don't have to wait until you get to college or beyond to study with a great artist. If you have the talent and the drive, even if you're only ten years old, we will make it possible for you to study privately with a member of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra.

The high school graduation rate in our city: about 60%. The high school graduation rate for students in our Talent Development Program: 100%. Last year's graduates are now at work on the campuses of The Juilliard School, Harvard University, and the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto.

I would suggest that a key reason for our students' success is that the arts and humanities require consistent effort and clear focus. There are no shortcuts to daily practice. There is no app. for mastering the violin or for making a poem by Maya Angelou or a novel by William Faulkner a part of your personal repertoire. The reward comes only through effort and application and creativity – traits prized by business as well as the academy.

Angelica Hairston joined our Talent Development Program when she was twelve years old as an eager young harpist. She has talent, matched with discipline and desire. We placed Angelica's talent in the capable hands of Elizabeth Remy-Johnson, Principal Harp with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra. Here is Angelica, after six years of participation in our Talent Development Program, performing with the Atlanta Symphony this past June at Ebenezer Baptist Church.

#### AUDIO/VIDEO CLIP [3:30]

Clearly, the arts and humanities can make a positive and measurable difference in the lives of our children, in their educational success. The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra is working to make that happen. Beyond education, what can you do? Especially in the "interesting times" in which we live, when scarcity has become our mindset, what can you do to bring the riches and the bounty of the humanities – of languages and literature, of history and philosophy, of civics and ethics – to the business of your life? How can you use the humanities to clean up your own corner of the pen?

Had we more time we could talk at some length about what you and I can do, if we are willing to stand up as vocal advocates for the importance of the arts and humanities. If you and I won't, who will? And if not now, when?

Let me leave you with that challenge, and with some exciting news as well. This past year Dr. Brenda Hanna-Pladdy and her colleagues at Emory University's Alzheimer's Disease Research Center have learned that studying music from a young age – starting at age three or four – and for a period of about ten years acts as a preventative against neurodegenerative diseases like Alzheimer's that can ravage the brain as we age. Music has the power to heal as well as the ability to position us for achievement in the classroom and success in life.

You and I have something positive and abundant to offer a society in which scarcity has become the prevailing mindset: we have the unlimited wealth of the arts and humanities as an antidote to the interesting times in which we live. Let's use all that we have – and let's do so proudly and enthusiastically.

Thank you.