

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS OF DANCE

Annual Meeting 2017

President's Report

Jory Hancock, NASD President

It's tradition that the President of NASD makes a short address during the Plenary Session of our national meeting, and when I presented to Karen my idea about an approach for the three years I'll serve as President, she said yes to my request to speak about something personal to me. My hope is to do that in the context of one of the themes for this conference, so here goes.

You may recall that last year I spoke about my father-in-law, who was a visual artist, printmaker and jazz musician. I quoted from Albert Einstein about the importance of learning as legacy, and I explained how my father-in-law was my bridge from my teenage years to the present. Why was that so important? It was important because my actual father was no longer living. I lost him when I was twelve. So, today, I'm going to talk about my dad.

His name was Harvey Sumner Hancock, and he was born in 1896. That's right—1896. If he were still alive today, he would be 121 years old. His birthplace was Little Rock, Arkansas. The front door of the shack he grew up in was about 30 feet from the back door, and often the farm animals would simply wander through the middle of the house. Eventually his family moved west, and ended up in Oklahoma. My dad's life was hard—he worked in the smelters, which ruined his lungs, and later in life developed debilitating arthritis, ulcers, and other health complications. When I was born, he was already 54 years old, and had lived in poverty most of his life.

But he was very smart—a whiz at math. He was kind, dignified, and had a great, dry wit. And he had a dream—and that dream was to make it to California and to see the ocean.

Now put that against your average bucket list for people living today. Their lists are long. Maybe exotic ideas, full of excitement and mystery. In fact, do you know what *The New York Times* Best Seller list was in 2003? *1,000 Places to See Before You Die*. Honest—a book by Patricia Schultz.

My dad's dream in 1963 was simple by comparison—to get to California. Not so possible for him, but back then I could see that having that hope was part of what kept him going.

So now we move quickly to what dance means for our students—these young people with whom we work every day. Maybe they have a bucket list already, and on the list is the following: I want to perform; I want to choreograph; I want to teach dance; I want to study dance and understand what it means to our world; I want dance in my life in some way. And the students want us to help make that happen.

Mr. Vilella reminded us yesterday that falling short of one's goal cannot be taken as failure. So can we, as teachers, without deceiving, keep the hope alive for our students? Especially when we know that, for some of them, hope might be the only thing they have left?

How important is this idea? Each of us has interacted with students whose socio-economic status is strained, sometimes even desperate. What advice, what support, can we give them?

I quoted Einstein last year. This year, a different author. Let's see if you can recognize the book, and I'll help with a little set up.

After months of no work, starvation, and sickness, and drought followed by torrential rains that seemed would never stop, the people who believed California would be their salvation were at a breaking point. In the quote below, the word "break" refers not to relief, but rather a *break-down*. Here's the quote.

In the wet hay of leaking barns, babies were born to women who panted with pneumonia. Old people curled up in corners and died that way. At night, frantic men walked boldly to hen roosts and carried off the squawking chickens. If they were shot at, they did not run, but splashed sullenly away; and if they were hit, they sank tiredly in the mud.

The women watched the men, watched to see whether the break had come at last. The women stood silently and watched. And where a number of men gathered together, the fear went from their faces, and anger took its place. And the women sighed with relief, for they knew it was all right—the break had *not* come; and the break would *never* come as long as fear could turn to wrath.

What's the book?

The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck. It won the National Book Award and Pulitzer Prize for fiction, and it was cited prominently when Steinbeck was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1962.

For these people—the characters in his book—their salvation was to be angry. The seed of their wrath was the loss of human dignity.

But an alternative has to be that we find a way to help people stay the course. And we are so privileged to be in a position to help make that happen—especially for the people with whom we share dance. It is a privilege, and also an awesome responsibility, and that of course was part of the message we heard from Edward (Vilella) yesterday.

The Grapes of Wrath issues a stern warning about what can happen when people lose their sense of hope.

But turn that outcome just a little on its side, and you have my dad's story, and the reason he continues to be my inspiration. It is because of the way he lived, and the way he died. After three weeks in a hospital, in 1963, here is what he said to me, my four sisters, and my mom:

"If you should come to the hospital one of these days and I'm not here, you'll know I've gone to California."

That was my dad.