

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS OF DANCE

Annual Meeting 2019

President's Report

Sharon Story, NASD President

When I accepted this position last year I did not feel at all prepared or could imagine standing before you today. The most daunting aspect of the position for me is what I am doing at this moment, to have articulated my thoughts, but be fortunate to have the opportunity to offer them to such an esteemed group of educators. Well, I am here, and being here offers a privilege - that of sharing thoughts, and in particular, discussing a theme that has been prevalent this year, and exploring the existence or lack thereof of a value and awareness that I feel deserves some reflection, a value that is sorely lacking in our society, our institutions, and our daily lives.

This value, and the actions it inspires in our society, appear to be dwindling and therefore, are in danger of extinction in our culture. I do not know where or when this started, but I have witnessed a slow decline for some time now. Maybe you have as well.

People of all ages are isolating themselves through their use of technology. Daily examples include the use of cell phones by children and adults at the dinner table and for that matter at most all other times. Students are showing signs of growing disregard for their teachers. They are not recognizing their teachers as the individuals who carry the knowledge, experience, and expertise which, if welcomed, will prepare them to become gifted dancers and productive members of society. This truly worries me and I sincerely question whether we can return this vanishing value into the fiber of our collective conscientiousness.

The scarcity in our society of this core value became acutely evident to me during a recent trip to Japan. I witnessed that the Japanese culture breathes and evokes the practice of this word in every aspect of daily life. In Japan, people wait for each other in orderly lines for dining, transportation, shopping, and every other conceivable public activity. Even convenience stores have footprints to guide shoppers to where they will wait patiently for their turns. This structure is seen at the Shibuya Crossing, which although is organized chaos, exhibits an example of everyone crossing the street at the same time, and imagine this, no one becoming angry or flustered. In fact, they acknowledge and bow to greet each other and exchange items in manners that denotes that they are present and, in the moment, and not thinking of what needs to be done tomorrow or what happened yesterday. All purchases no matter how small are wrapped beautifully. Even the experience and presentation of bento boxes is a symbol of the word to which I refer to as – RESPECT – which includes an awareness for everything and everyone around you in the present moment.

Many of us have had the great fortune to have traveled the world and had the opportunity to observe other cultures. This is driven by our curiosity as dancers and educators which is marked by a desire to listen, learn and respond. Unfortunately, the lack of respect prevalent in our society today seems to

serve as a barrier and even at times prohibit our abilities to be curious, and to have and practice empathy for the perspectives and opinions of others. It seems to make way for a frightening readiness to categorize actions and thoughts of others as good or evil as defined by those who are making the categorizations. Such actions are void of necessary nuance, fail to embrace the real aspects of humanity, and seem to avoid consideration of the complexity inherent in truth. Unfortunately, following in this path causes us to miss the human connection that is necessary for us to engage, and therefore to thrive.

We have all observed more recently than in years past, the posting of codes of conduct at institutions. When and why did this tradition begin? What were the conditions that moved us from a collective understanding of the nature of reasonable conduct and discourse to the necessity to define it and post it on walls and bulletin boards? The “when” I would guess is within the last five years; the why is because we have become unaware of the necessity to practice simple acts of kindness and compassion that must be in place if the citizens of our society are to remain compassionate, and the society itself to function well, and cordially, and inclusively.

The availability of communication techniques such as email and text, which are not and don’t promote personal encounters, offer an easy way out or a fast way through, and replace the time-honored traditions of walking down the hall to say hello, or talking in person, or addressing issues face-to-face, eye-to-eye. Although easy and seamless, emails and texts are subject to misinterpretation, and therefore because tone, context, and temperament cannot be discerned, are often misunderstood, thereby creating an even more impenetrable barrier to connection. It is easy for senders to “hide” behind screens, craft emails or texts which reflect the emotion of the moment and hit the send button without thought or consideration to how such hurled and undeveloped thoughts will be received.

There is no doubt that social media platforms are wonderful tools that enhance networking, that enable us to stay in touch with friends and family. But it is equally clear that a tool unless used carefully and well can be void of empathy, can fail to address the humanity of any given situation, and therefore, can be void of the basic respect each individual desires and owes to others. These wonderful tools can be dangerous implements.

During this Annual Meeting we will give careful thought to a condition prevalent in our field, bullying. This is a major topic we as administrators deal with day in and day out given the high levels of competition that exist between and among our students, faculty and even parents. Bullying has become a fevered and destructive activity in our schools.

We as educators, as leaders in the field of dance, must lead by example and in doing so, ensure that our own daily interactions are infused with respect. It is and should be our calling and our role to return this important but sadly lacking value back into our daily lives and that of our students. This includes RESPECT for each other; RESPECT for each individual’s capacity to contribute and engage; RESPECT for the person who is struggling; RESPECT for the person whose opinions differs from ours; RESPECT for and acknowledgement of the success of others; and a deep and abiding RESPECT for the art form that we are so honored to have the privilege to practice.

As my first year as President of NASD comes to an end, I must be totally honest and tell you that I have

no words of wisdom to impart that you my dear colleagues have not already considered. No experiences that I suggest you face that you have not already faced. No ideas that you have not contemplated or realized during your own journeys as dancers, educators, and scholars. But I do have a request, and that is that you keep your hearts and minds and wills open – to all that will bind us, and our students, and our field together for a long time to come.

Even though each of us guides an institution which varies from the next in many ways, our paths are similar. What we share in common is a love of dance as an art form; a respect for the work of our predecessors, those fabulous icons who mentored and shared with us so freely their knowledge; and an abiding belief in and support for the national standards and guidelines which guide us in our daily practices and serve as a protective shield for our discipline and a protector of its depth of rigor. We must always hold onto the gift our art form bestows upon us; and in doing so, make this the reason for our being, make this the reason we must pass the knowledge and passion we hold as educators onto the next generation; make this the reason we stand firm in upholding our guiding principles, of which respect is a pillar.

I ask you, actually I challenge you, to keep respect at the forefront of everything you do during this year, and the years to come. Let us see if by accepting this responsibility and practicing it in our own daily lives, we can help society mend, we can bring back into the world, where the way has been lost, the value of respect and the pure and simple act of respecting one another. We as educators have the ability to make a difference in this ever-changing challenging fast paced world that we live in. I hope you will join me in this collective and honorable pursuit.

Thank you for the opportunity to serve as your President and for your tireless efforts to promote dance study.