

**NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS OF DANCE**

**44th Annual Meeting**

**September 12 - 14, 2024**

**Oral Report of the President**

**Larry A. Attaway**

Good morning. I stand before you as the 15<sup>th</sup> President of NASD. I attended my first conference in 1988, at the Meridian Hotel in New Orleans, Louisiana. I will give you a moment to ponder the fact that many of you in this room were not yet born in 1988.

The group of people that occupied the Esplanade Ballroom resembled one of those huge historical paintings. You know, those allegorical settings that bring together the most powerful and influential people of any given time and puts them all into a pastoral scene costumed as Greek gods and goddesses. Each of them holding a symbolic item that identifies their specific magical power and their geographical home. The energy in the room was so strong you could actually see it.

This gathering of dancers (or if you'd prefer, "Dancers at a Gathering") included every major figure in dance administration. I was in awe. In my overly theatrical brain, harps began to play, and I heard the kind of glorious movie music usually reserved for the appearance of a host of celestial beings. A moment later, the vision returned to normal, and the first plenary session began.

The order of these meetings has not changed much in 36 years. We come to a point on the agenda where the President steps to the podium to deliver some words of wisdom. A tradition that has been firmly in place since 1981 when Joan Schlaich, NASD's first President, spoke before the group of Charter Members at the Arlington Hyatt Hotel in Rosslyn, Virginia. I do not know what her topic might have been, nor do I know the reaction of the group to her speech. I do know that she was followed by a Who's Who of dance luminaries; Nancy Smith Fichter,

Stuart Hodes, John Wilson, Enid Lynn, Ann Wagner, Patricia Knowles, Clara Cravey, Denise Jefferson, Danny Lewis, Sara Lee Gibb, Madeleine Scott, Jory Hancock, and Sharon Story. Each of whom brought their unique points of view to the dais. Each time, we were regaled with their professional acumen, their vision of our collective futures, their untiring service to the art form, and their steadfast dedication to NASD.

Often these conversations would dwell on the difficult challenges and very great hardships that we all face every day, sometimes bearing a small resemblance to the “Doomsday Chronicles”. Bleak, yes, but never without an unwavering sense of hope. Hope for the future of dance and for the future of the Association.

So, after this illustrious list of titans of education and artistry, what do you get? You get me. Yes, me. For the third time during my time as President I struggle to find words that might have actual value to you as the 21<sup>st</sup> century leaders of NASD. After lots of agonizing soul searching, I finally realized; I got nothing. Nothing at all.

So, if I got nothing, then why in the heck am I here? What odd set of circumstances brought me to this place in my life? How did I become the spokesperson for NASD? Exactly who do I think I am to even attempt to stand before you and pontificate on the “state of the art”? Is this some huge karmic joke or just the illogical progression of fate-induced life choices?

In searching for the answers to the somewhat self-centered, self-induced, questioning of my personal worth, I decided that it was time for me to step back and indulge in some self-reflection. Sounds good, but I had no idea how to go about it. Lucky for you I found the following information on the highly factual pages of my favorite research site: *Wikipedia*. Here it is: 7 ways to practice self-reflection.

Number 1: Think: What do you want to know? Take time to decide what questions you want to ask yourself during self-assessments. Ok, I got this one. I want to know how I got here and if I should actually be here.

Number 2: Practice gratitude. Sit back and review what you're thankful for. A bit more complex, but I know that I am hugely thankful for all of the amazing people that I have met and that so far, my "fake it 'til you make it" approach has managed to work in my favor.

Number 3: Meditate. Ok, this one is never going to happen. Something most of you don't know about me is that I have narcolepsy, so the idea of sitting still and closing my eyes to contemplate my life can only lead to one thing—I will, without question, be sound asleep in a matter of very few minutes.

Number 4: Set your goals. I got this one. My goal is to find out if I am actually worthy or if it is just that I fully reached the completeness and final steps of the famous Peter Principle—have I truly reached my highest level of incompetence?

Number 5: Put it down on paper. Duh.

Number 6: Have a conversation with yourself. Again, I have this one in the bag. I am very well known for talking to myself often and for extended periods of time, sometimes with a complete supporting cast of bit players.

Number 7: Get out into nature. Ok, no. Me and the "outside" are totally incompatible. I have a tendency to self-combust if I am in the sun for any length of time.

*Wikipedia* let me down. This was not helpful at all. So back to the original concept of self-reflection. Looking into the mirror. Just me and Alice.

What is revealed in that reflective surface that will give me any insight? Do I follow Alice and step through the mirror? That is very appealing. The world beyond the mirror is full of characters that avoid reality and easily exist in their own fantasyland. Very appealing indeed. But not all that helpful.

My older brother and I once had a conversation about how we respond to our relatives when they ask, “what do you do”? His answer was simple, “I am the Dean of the School of Accountancy at the University of Louisville”. They accept that and move on. When I tried a similar approach and told them about my work as a composer, sometime choreographer, etc. their eyes just glazed over and you could see that they had mentally moved on; what I was saying just did not compute. Later my brother in his infinite wisdom said to me, “You know, Larry, what you don’t realize is that your reality is other people’s fantasy.”

The lightbulb went on—that’s it—my real world is indeed beyond the looking glass. So, if I follow that premise, then self-reflection is never going to work since I must be seeing things from the other side of the mirror. Great metaphor but in no way helpful to the life-changing speech I was hoping to give.

Back to the internet. I actually found a reference to the “fake it ‘til you make it” phrase. In 1922, William James wrote, and I paraphrase, “...to feel brave, act as if you are brave, use all your will to that end. Do this often enough and people will believe that you actually are brave.”

I am not entirely sure that I fully believe that, but I do believe in the power of positivity.

Back to *Wikipedia*: Norman Vincent Peale—*The Power of Positive Thinking: A Practical Guide to Mastering the Problems of Everyday Living*. This 1952 self-help book provides anecdotal “case histories” of positive thinking using a Biblical approach, and practical instructions, designed to help the reader achieve a permanent and optimistic attitude. These techniques usually involved affirmations and visualizations. Right up my alley; I have “visions” every day, mostly in the form of very colorful and highly active dreams. Again, apropos perhaps but not exactly helpful.

Back to the “I got nothing” moment. I could just leave it there and pass the torch to my successor and leave it up to her to find better words of wisdom for you. That would be the easy path—you would be very well-served, as she is one of the smartest and most imaginative people that I know. Then I look around this room and remember that moment in 1988. Once again there is that celestial score playing in my head.

The cast has changed dramatically; there are new costumes, better lighting, updated scenery and much better imaginary music. That original group that I encountered included those educational pioneers that fought to take dance out of physical education and move it into the colleges of fine arts. So much so that many of those colleges had to change their names to the colleges of fine and “performing arts”. We sometimes forget that legacy, as we no longer are fighting to get dance recognized as a valued course of study. On the reverse side, you are dealing with challenges that the original group could never have envisioned. What hasn’t changed is the dedication you bring to addressing these challenges.

So, when I say that “I got nothing,” I know that is not entirely true because what I do have is you. You are the future. You are the new. You are the next generation. You have each reached this point in your careers by following your individual paths; creating new ones as needed; many of you pioneers in your own right.

The day will come when someone else stands up here and waxes nostalgic on the “good old days” of 2024 and the ballroom will once again be filled with a conclave of dedicated individuals dancing new dances, hearing newly imagined music, and finding new ways to use self-reflection that might actually be helpful.

In this, my last address to you as President—my last dance if you will—I was delusional enough to imagine that I could leave you with a cornucopia of insightful words that you would find not only useful but also vastly inspirational. I envisioned this speech to be so aggressively

provocative that it would be quoted in the most influential journals of wisdom in our field. This would be that moment you would all remember and tell the story for generations to come. “Do you remember that speech, Larry gave in Milwaukee?” “OMG yes, it totally changed my life.” No ego here. But of course, that is all part of my vibrant fantasy world. I haven’t done that, because I can’t. No one can.

These are my words and they have specific meaning for me. You must find your own words; those that have value for you. Can we as your friends and colleagues help you find those words? Absolutely, but you must be prepared to be your own inspiration. You decide whether or not you will step up and accept the challenge; whether or not to devote yourself to making the dance world better. If your decision is no, then get out of the way and let someone else take over.

Listen... Do you hear that? It is the ever-present life clock ticking away, constantly reminding us that our allegorical metaphorical time is limited. And as I stand on the other side of the looking glass looking at this amazing convening of celestial beings, these “Dancers at a Gathering,” I urge you all to embrace your inner fantasies, to continue to subscribe to the “fake it ‘til you make it” journal of unknown possibilities.

Is what we do magic? Of course not, but if we do it well and with just the right amount of fairy dust, it can indeed be 100% magical.

In 1988 I never envisioned this moment where I would be standing here thanking you for the honor and privilege of serving as your President. That fantasy is now reality. Embracing this momentary flash of reality, I leave you with just one more thought. If you ever come to the point where you begin to see things as your last dance, I urge you to follow the wisdom of one of our hugely unsung heroes of dance, Remy Charlip, “If it’s the Last Dance, then Dance Backward.”

Thank you.