

Cultural Conversations

Public Talk at Key Theatre



Rowan William's address

Today's media holds up a mirror to ourselves and the society we're in. And there are moments where that narrative tells us, in the name of whoever's controlling the media, tells us who we are.

A certain kind of media outlet will say, we are threatened and frightened. Our identity is at risk. We are imperilled by certain kinds of unwelcome neighbours. We are rapidly collapsing into a totalitarian state. We are rapidly being taken over by fascists, communists, or whoever. There are any number of very negative stories from, frankly, left and right, which the media may hold up to us. We read them, we possibly don't think too deeply about them.

But if we stop to think, we may well say, what does it do to us if the picture of ourselves held up to us is like that? And quite often, coming away from reading a particularly, let's say, heavily invested media outlet, we may shake our heads with a little bit of bewilderment, if we've got any sense, and say, well, they may say that, but it doesn't entirely feel like that on the ground. I'm not sure I do feel petrified, oppressed, threatened by fascism, threatened by immigration, threatened by whatever. I have a rather more complicated story to tell.

And you might say, that is where imaginative culture really kicks in.

I, stroke, we, have a rather more complicated story to tell. And in the ongoing conversation of a society, it's really important to be able to hold up that rather more complicated story to tell. So when we look at that, we may reflect on ourselves more truthfully, even more transformingly.

We see this, we hear this, and we say, ah, I recognize that, and that helps me see something about myself and ourselves a little bit more clearly. So there's the first point I want to put on the table. Culture, the whole imaginative life of a society, matters so that the rather more complicated story to tell is held up before us, so that we don't constantly find ourselves driven into oversimplified, polarized, violent, untruthful narratives.

It's not that art tells us more truth than journalism, though there's an argument for that. It's that the arts, the whole world of creative culture, will tell us all kinds of things that reportage on its own doesn't. And if art is doing its job, it will be questioning the power of those people who think they can tell us definitively who we are.

Ideally, in spite of all the nonsense sometimes talked about elitism, creative art is one of the great democratic forces in society, simply because it pushes back at the privilege of those who think they have the right to tell us who we are. A healthy society, then, a healthy democratic society, is one in which the arts flourish. A civic community doing its job, a healthy civic community, is one where images are held up of who we are and who we might be, who we might want to be, and also, frankly, who we might want not to be.

And so that leads on to my second main theme, which is that culture helps us ask ourselves questions, helps us interrogate who we are. It helps us ask a bit more deeply and a bit more patiently about some of the things we take for granted. What if some of what we are or have been taking for granted is not as obvious as we thought? That's not to say that all cultural production is necessarily revolutionary, tearing down what's familiar and putting something else in its place.

But as is often said about great cultural production in any of the arts, part of the greatness is showing us what we know but have forgotten, making us a bit strange to ourselves, so we step back and say, really, is that us? Is that me? Saying, and how did we get to that point? All of these forms of interrogation are part of the genius, the contribution of imaginative culture to our common life. And without that extra energy, that extra needle, we might say, of creativity in our shared life, we tend to get stuck in what we think we understand and what we think we're on top of and what's familiar. We take things for granted as natural and given and obvious, which in fact may be curious, strange, worth asking about.

That great master of paradox in the last century, G.K. Chesterton, liked to say that one of the things we ought sometimes to recall was what the world would look like if we looked at it, as it were, from a distance and saw human beings hanging by their feet from the bottom. Because, of course, from certain points of view, that's exactly what we're doing. We're hanging by our feet by some kind of obscure magnetism from the bottom of a cusp on.

Above us are rising the roots of the trees, high, high above our heads, and down below us are the branches. Once in a while, say, Chesterton, try and think of the world like that. Just mentally turn it upside down and remember what you're seeing is not obvious.

There's another way of coming at it. There are questions to be asked, dimensions to be uncovered there. And that interrogating of who we are, what our cultural life helps us to do, that opens out onto something still deeper.

And that is wondering. Wondering in two senses. There's the wondering, which is, as I said a moment ago, how did I get here, how did we get here? Wondering why that seemed so clear to us, why that is what we inherit and what seemed obvious.

But also the wonder that is simply a fresh look at the world in a kind of open amazement. This is new. This is gift.

I'd never seen this before. And, as we know, part of the function of creative art is that renewal, that kind of cleansing of the vision, which allows me to see what's in front of my nose as if for the first time. T.S. Eliot said in one of his poems that the end of all our exploring is to arrive where we started and see the place for the first time.

And that's very much a part of what we do. The creative process of cultural production works. The familiar becomes strange, as I said a moment ago, and we wonder at where we are and who we are.

Not just wondering in the sense of asking questions, but wondering in the sense of an openness of appreciation. And so the third thing I want to spotlight in introducing a

conversation about culture is this. Cultures, of course, do not exist as hermetically sealed, eternally self-defining realities, dropping from heaven or somewhere on different bits of the world.

Cultures have always interpenetrated each other, deeply and lastingly. The way in which my neighbour makes sense of their life becomes part of how I make sense of mine, not because I agree with them, but because what they see and do and take for granted enters into my field of perception and changes it. I learn something.

And in the effort of a cultural creation, in the life of the imaginative arts in a society, I learn from another's perspective more about my own. I learn, therefore, how to converse more intelligently. I like to think of culture itself as all the time bringing us back, drawing us back to conversation.

Not conversation at the expense of doing things, talking away without having to make any decisions, but the kind of conversation that clarifies the decisions we have to make and how we might make them effectively and durably. Many years ago, when I had a job in the church, I was frequently told about the importance of leadership and decision making. To a degree that I found quite paralyzing, really.

Because what most people meant by leadership was their burning desire that I should say what they wanted me to say. But among the challenges and criticisms that came up was something quite often about the speed of decision making and the speed of change. One of the things that I discovered, I suppose, in that role, and many people who've exercised some sort of leadership role will probably recognize a bit of this, was that there are occasions where taking a bit longer to make a decision actually makes a better decision.

You may take a decision rapidly and find six months later that it was the wrong time, the wrong decision, the wrong strategy, whatever. It hasn't had the ownership. It hasn't had the backing up that it needed.

You may take that six months to make the decision that you might have made six months earlier and find that after six months it beds in better. Because there will have been more conversation, more shared exploration, more sense perhaps in an ideal world of a shared project, a shared activity. You're learning not only things about the world, you're learning skills of listening, adjusting your perspective, fitting it onto the reality you face and doing so with more resources, more truthfulness, even more hopefulness.

And culture in that sense is also about creating worlds that we share, meanings that we share. I stand or sit next to somebody at a concert or a play. For that time, we belong in the same world.

We may come from very different backgrounds, class, language, ethnicity, whatever. And for that time, mysteriously, our world is what's going on on stage, whether it's Taylor Swift or the Royal Shakespeare Company. But the world for us has come together because there we are side by side.

The opportunities that cultural creation gives for us to come together in that way are enormously important for social health and individual mental health as well. If we don't

want either our societies or our citizens to be locked up in non-communicating cubicles. And I think that has something to do with an issue which is constantly flickering across the radar of our cultural consciousness these days.

And it's something to do with the fact that we are quite rightly concerned that there should be legal controls on some things that can be said and should not be said. But there are legal controls on the expression of racism or hate speech or whatever. But while it may be perfectly all right for the law to take a view on this, legislation as such doesn't do it.

Legislation alone without cultural change, without conversation and encounter, becomes another expression of power which gets to be resented and becomes counterproductive. Whenever we think about the change of law to make something possible or something impossible, we ought to be thinking at the same moment about what kinds of cultural change, what kinds of real demanding mutual encounter and conversation need to take place for a decision to become effective and doable. And because we are a fragmented, large-scale, often anonymized and frequently very anxious society, we're often a bit inclined to reach for regulation rather than cultural change.

Instead of thinking how do we hold cultural change and growth in tandem with changes in our regulatory framework. But that's a long story and a little bit of a digression that I put it in because I think it has something to do with the way in which the life of a culture, creative culture, in the way that it creates a shared world, is part of what ultimately makes sense of the legal framework we inhabit together. You can't pull them apart.

And so to my fourth and final point, what I've been trying to suggest in this rather breathless overview of some aspects of cultural life is, as I said a moment ago, that the life of cultural institutions and cultural practices, particularly in the creative arts, is not an optional extra for a well-functioning society. All well-functioning societies need imaginative nourishment. They need to be able to see themselves clearly enough to ask the right questions of themselves.

They need to be lured, educated, into better and fuller conversation. They need to allow us to pause and wonder. They need to allow us to pause and celebrate.

This morning I had the delight of spending a couple of hours with a substantial and very talkative and lively group of young people. And one of the things which came out of that conversation, those conversations, from one of the tables around which the youngsters were seated, was, when asked for suggestions for cultural improvement, more festivals. More festivals.

More points at which we could pause, look, celebrate, participate, become, for a moment, strangers to our usual selves, and become more usual, more friendly with strangers. Because, again, we were all sharing a world of affirmation and celebration. And I wanted to give full marks to the young people who put festivals at the top of their list there.

Because they weren't thinking, as became clear in conversation, they weren't thinking of greater mass entertainment events, but of the kind of participatory experience where people from different backgrounds, different cultures in another sense, brought what they wanted to share, made it visible, made it shareable. And again, to echo something I've

already said, all of that set of approaches and attitudes in our social environment has everything to do with our own individual mental well-being. Once again, putting on my clerical collar for a moment, if there's a definition of hell that I think makes sense, it's the idea of being stuck with my own resources for all eternity.

Or, put rather more bluntly, stuck with my own company for all eternity. Sutter may have said that hell is other people. I'm much more inclined to think that hell is me.

That is to say, me, locked into what I can make sense of, what I can produce, what I can control, and nothing else. And that is, to my mind, a seriously alarming prospect. So, for my own mental and spiritual well-being, I need to learn conversation, I need to learn wonder, I need to learn how to ask the right questions of myself and grow with that.

And in that imagined, well-working city, society, whatever, there will be, we hope, those regular, familiar institutions in which constitution, in which conversation, wonder, questioning, and cooperation just go on, where people are used to talking to each other about large and small issues, talking about the direction of their society, but also talking about the solution of a granular, granular of local problems. And that's why I want to leave you with one particular picture of how I think that works from time to time in certain kinds of environment. And it's fresh in my mind because we've recently celebrated an anniversary connected with this.

In May 1923, the Welsh League of Nations Union, newly founded, held its annual general meeting in Aberystwyth. Douglas in the rain. A schoolteacher from the South Wales Valleys, Rose Davis from Aberdare, proposed a motion to the meeting, which was that the women of Wales should prepare a petition to the Congress of the United States of America, urging the United States of America to join the League of Nations.

This petition should be, in the first instance, addressed to the women of the United States of America. The chair of meeting, Annie Griffiths Jones from Llangaethla in Cardiganshire, married to a Presbyterian minister, then working in London, and widow from her first marriage with Tom Ellis, the great Liberal MP, not only endorsed this motion, which was overwhelmingly carried, she, Annie, took it on herself to organise the petition. The work was completed, believe it or not, by January of 1924, with something like 400,000 signatures from women over 18 in Wales.

Probably about a third of the entire female population of Wales at the time. People who were impressed by the rapidity of contact on social media and flash mobs assembled through WhatsApp groups and the like may wonder at how on earth they managed to produce and curate a petition like that within rather less than six months. And the answer is partly that a great deal of Wales at that time was characterised by a very intense local cultural life.

And by cultural life I don't simply mean that there were lots of concerts, there were, this being Wales, but it was of course the chapels and churches, it was also whether you like it or not, the temperance societies, in that context a major vehicle for women's involvement in public life in an environment where drink was a major social issue, a major social issue of course of gender-based violence. A very significant part was played by the political parties in Wales, all of them, all of them, and not least a very significant role was played by the

incipient National Union of Teachers, because at that time after the First World War there'd been an enormous increase in the training of women as teachers and young newly qualified female teachers throughout Wales became prominent and active in this movement for the petition. And the point I'm making is that the communal sense, the number of local grassroots associations, the channels for public cultural political involvement, being so rich and so diverse, enabled a rather complicated and very ambitious piece of political advocacy to be carried through in an extraordinarily short time.

I add in a footnote that no, the Congress of the United States of America did not immediately say we better join the League of Nations, it took quite a lot longer, but what did happen was that in response to this a number of women's organizations in North America intensified their own campaigning for peace and for better international institutions to the extent that four years after the petition was presented a major piece of legislation did indeed pass the United States Congress attempting to limit the spread of violence at that time. And many of those involved in that in the 1920s emerged, we can trace their histories, in the 1940s as eloquent advocates of the new United Nations and its agencies. So the petition wasn't exactly a waste of time but the significant thing for our purposes is that it was a particular kind of cultural life that brought before people a set of positive challenging models of who they could be that gave them a sense that what they said and did made a difference.

It was all of that that made possible this political act of advocacy with all its ambition, all its slightly utopian idealism, and unless you have that kind of closely woven texture in a society you're less likely to have that level of public engagement and confident political activism. And that's partly why I say we're not talking here about culture as a decorative extra but culture as something which enables resources that deepens our sense of belonging together as agents deserving respect, as people who can make a difference, who can indeed look into the mirror and not forget what they were like, go and do what needs to be done. Thank you for listening.

