



Ben Cameron

Plenary Speech

National Arts Marketing Project Conference 2007

A program of Americans for the Arts



Good morning. Thank you so much for inviting me here today. I am so pleased to be here among you happy few—as Henry V would say—who have stuck it out to the bitter end, although I am hard pressed to know whether you are here for reasons of happiness, stubbornness or masochism. I am especially grateful to Americans for the Arts and to Bob Lynch whose power I had underestimated until he personally diverted Hurricane Noel so we could be together. And of course my thanks to you for all you do, every day, in making healthier, more vibrant arts organizations across the nation.

I have never trained in marketing per se, but I have long been fascinated by communications and have had the benefit of working with and learning from great people in marketing—the extraordinary John Pellegrine at Target Stores and his successor Michael Francis, foremost among them. During my participation at the NAS Stanford Program, I learned about the five dominant personalities of arts marketing, which must be controlled to establish a strong place in the market. And through my monthly reading of *Fast Company* I have learned to appreciate effective marketing as the intentional control of seven planes of engagement: emotion, aesthetics, distinctiveness, impact, ergonomics, predictability and quality—planes that are useful filters for me as I examine new brochures and assess their effectiveness.

Each of these demands its own seminar and presumably are things you already know. But as you prepare to return to your organizations, I want to look beyond the how of marketing and plumb deeper questions and challenges that uniquely face us in the nonprofit arts community.

Today, we live in a country where we are drowning in information but starved for knowledge; where daily life is a growing accumulation of white noise as

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advertisers invade our mailboxes, our email, our airwaves and our airspace—indeed, we are each subject to more than 5,000 different marketing messages every single day; where the downside of globalization is that our consumers now have—quite literally—a world of options and where the competition for their time, their money and their attention grows louder and more fractious by the day.

Moreover the audiences themselves are increasingly over-scheduled and exhausted. According to recent studies, more than half of consumers in all income levels now say that lack of time is a bigger problem than lack of money; more than 50 percent of women and 45 percent of men say they are too tired to do the things they want to do; and the number one preference for an unscheduled free evening is no longer socializing with friends or attending an event, but is “a good night’s sleep.”

In this world, the imperative for strategic communication has never been higher. Think of these comparisons, for example: Target is a strategic communicator, JC Penney’s (for me, at least), is not; Nike is a strategic communicator, Adidas (for me) is not; Volvo is a strategic communicator, Buick (who knows what they stand for?) is not. And as much as I hate to say it, in 2004 George Bush was a strategic communicator, John Kerry was not.

Much of strategic communication revolves around our ability to command and use language, of course: think of how Napster emphasized “file sharing” as opposed to plagiarism, copyright violation or theft; how the right has driven the debate around “gay marriage” as opposed to “fairness for same sex couples”; indeed, how we have a “war on terrorism”—a defining frame that determines a very different outcome than the one we could have had had we responded to 9/11 as “a wake up call for world peace.” Strategic communication in all cases. And in our world, to the strategic communicator go the spoils.

But there is something deeper going on than just word-smithing or framing, so eloquently explored by George Lakhoff. And while we could spend hours on the issues of word choice that manifest into marketing and ad copy, today I want to look below the surface at the unifying substructure that under girds the story you choose to tell: the domain of values.

Now the very word, “value,” can occasionally cause confusion. “I value our friendship”; “What is the value of that car?”; “Mitt Romney pledges that he will uphold family values”; “I bought this on sale—what a value!” Shifting from internal to external, spiritual to economic, from noun to verb, the very multiple meaning of values are distinct yet related. Indeed, values can be seen as a concentric, organized, interrelated family of meanings, each radiating out from one another like the ripples in a pool of water when a rock has been thrown. Anyone trying to tell their story without a clear understanding of their own values is likely to tell multiple, conflicting, confusing and unstrategic stories—the

antithesis of the clear, consistent and strategic ones we need to tell if we are to be heard.



At the center of this concentric universe are core values—those two or at most three things that you or your organization will go to the mat for every single time—not most times, not when funding is available, not when it is convenient, but every single time. Indeed, core values are ones we adhere to even if we are punished for doing so. Financial stability? Risk? Innovation? Honoring of tradition? Ensemble? Power? Service? Fame? The list goes on and on—and indeed, the potential for these values to come into opposition increases with each additional value—hence, the

limit to two or three.

How do we define and clarify these values? Core values have two salient characteristics: Core values are something that every part of the organization can attach itself to, can manifest and pursue. At Target Stores, for example, fun was a core value (as incidentally were fast and friendly): the shopping experience was supposed to be fun—bright lights, high sensory visual experience, animated and pleasant staff, to be sure. But a sense of fun became characteristic of the irreverent advertising; it manifested itself in the frequently arresting juxtaposition of color in the copy; the images of models, always seen romping and laughing and avoiding the suck in your cheeks and give me attitude approach to high fashion—unless that was evoked with conscious irony; that dog with the red-circled eye.

And as a manager, I knew that it was my job for my staff to have fun—to find ways to celebrate their achievements through excursions for pizza or breaks midday to go to a movie, through the weekly staff meeting where an horrific statue—a giant pepper mill in the shape of a Santa Claus-- was awarded to the staff member who had done the stupidest thing during the week—an award begun with self-nomination, not castigation, and which I won more times that I like to remember. I knew at my performance review that if my staff had not had fun during the year, I would be hauled onto the carpet as a poor manager. A value for the team member in the stock room, for the Vice-President, for the guest. A surprising core value, perhaps, for one of the most successful and serious minded corporations in American, but a core value with a precise meaning nonetheless. Not frivolity, not carelessness, not lack of purpose. But Fun.

Additionally, core values have a consciously rejected yet equally viable opposite. Excellence—a principle frequently cited as a core value by many arts organizations, is simply not a useful value for me in this context. In today's competitive world, the quest for excellence must be a given, not an option: who among us would wish to commit ourselves to mediocrity or inferiority? Diversity was one of our core values at my former employer TCG. Certainly, it would have been viable and perhaps even easier to stake out a particular segment of our field or of our population to serve. We could have chosen to serve only Shakespeare theaters, for example, or only actors; we could have opted to confine our activities to a particular region or budget size. But while it certainly presented some huge challenges to provide services for such a disparate membership, I firmly believed that the diversity of the theater field was our greatest cause for celebration—diversity of aesthetic and geography, diversity of organizational structure and size, diversity of race and ethnicity, of gender and sexual orientation, of approaches to problem-solving and thinking. It was a value that guided our hiring practices, our publications list, the grants panels we assemble to arbitrate grant selections, the composition of our fantastic board of directors, the way we thought about problem-solving and structure, taking a new fresh tack every time. A core value.

Core values can be easy for me to describe to you but difficult for an organization to define: indeed, it is easy to fall into a trap of articulating noble ideas that represent aspirations but not true values. For it is in behavior, not in aspiration, that our true core values reveal themselves. Diversity as a core value, but an entirely white staff and board? Not likely. Risk as a core value but a frequent default to palatable large scale musicals and commercial fare to balance the budget? Not likely. Core values identification begins with ruthless self analysis—not of theoretical ennobling tenets that we want to believe, but rigorous analysis of how we behave. The path to articulating these values lies in analyzing past successes—successes as you see them, whether or not they have been successful at the box office or reviews (unless of course financial success is a core value). Moments in production, moments in education programs, moments in staff and board meetings. What are the specific moments or incidents that have not merely gratified your organization but nourished, deeply nourished, it? No matter how disparate those moments are, they are likely to be united by common threads—threads that reveal, threads that are your core values. And if you're still unclear about your core values? Ask your audiences—trust me, they will know, as every focus group will tell you, even while it can often be painful to hear them do so.

In moving outwards in our concentric structure, value means something more: what is our transactional value? What is the value we bring that leads others to join us in the first place?

This orientation to value is not the way my generation was trained to think about the arts: indeed, we were raised in a time where we had the luxury to believe that our value was understood and assumed. But those days are past.

As many of you know, I had spent the four years immediately prior at the National Endowment for the Arts, a tenure that coincided with the days of Mapplethorpe and Serrano: indeed, having joined the Theater Program originally on a Fellowship, I watched two directors leave the agency for less stressful employment, leaving me as Theater Program director—a process I likened to an odd variation on the fifth act of KING LEAR, with the stage strewn with bodies and somehow the fool left on the throne.

For all of our ardor in defending the agency, our approach was fatally flawed--the full folly of which was made clear to me in subsequent conversations with Target executives. “You just never got it, did you?” they’d say. “All you could talk about was quality.” And yes, absolutely, quality is and should always be a paramount concern of ours in the arts. Every rehearsal is about improving the quality of the work, every critic takes us to task about the quality, indeed, most grants offered an organization reflect a belief in the quality of the artistic offering. And when confronted with the critics of Mapplethorpe in Cincinnati, we framed our case in quality terms: “look at the juxtaposition of light and dark”; “look at the careful structuring of the flower with the nude” and so forth, arguments designed to vindicate the museum by building the case of indisputable quality that would lift the work out of the realm of pornographic or obscene and establish it as art.

The Target executives went on, “But while you talked only about quality, the rest of the country has moved on. It’s not quality that determines where people spend time, money and energy: it’s value. You can have the best toilet paper in the world on the shelves; if people don’t see the value of coming into the store in the first place, they never get to see what you have. And PS- you better have the best if that’s what you’ve promised; otherwise they won’t be back a second time.”

In other words, in the heat of arts controversy, we answered value based questions with quality based answers—an inherent disconnect. We could not still our critics by saying, “Look at the juxtaposition of light and dark. Look at the eloquence of the male nude, etc.”—especially when their questions were not about the quality of the photography but of the value of having the photographs in the community in the first place. We won that case, parading witness after witness linking Mapplethorpe to art while the prosecution merely presented the photos and rested—but we did so in a way that built us no new allies, that left our critics suspicious and hostile, that convinced many that those elite artists had pulled another fast one again. Building allegiance begins with speaking to where your audience is listening from—a core principle of marketing, advocacy and development all three—by articulating the sense of value that accrues to a community through our presence.

As arts fields, we must be far better about conveying, not only the quality of our work, but its value. Nonprofit arts organizations promise by our very tax status that we will contribute to the health of our communities, forcing us to be prepared to answer three questions:

- What is the value of our work in our community?
- Harder: What is the value our group alone offers, or that our group offers better than anyone else? Duplicative or second-rate value will not stand in this economy.
- Hardest: How will our community be damaged if we close our doors and move away tomorrow?

If we can't answer those three questions, the only likely supporters we will find are those already seated in our seats.

Successful businesses often center campaigns in such transactional value, captured in a value statement. Target's values are fast fun and friendly: its value statement is "Expect More. Pay Less." WalMart, a.k.a. the Evil Empire, says "Always the low price. Always." Avis' "We Try harder." Three contrasting statements—one emphasizing economic value, one superior quality within a lower price point, one superior service—that nevertheless encapsulate the very value of choosing that site for transaction.

Those of us who hail from the world of theater at least LOVE words, and our volubility, our passion, our frustration at not being more roundly appreciated; all lead us toward long eloquent statements of purpose, flowery oratory rather than succinct conveyance of value. But if Target can boil down a multi-billion dollar entity—an entity that sells clothes and electronics and linens and food and kitchenware and DVD's, that dedicates 5 percent of its pretax profits to grants for nonprofits, that traffics in high name fashion designers as well as dishwashing detergent and more---into four words, can't we do the same? It is the shorter statement that compels—the ennobling, animating purpose that impels us, not merely the description of what we do—that can galvanize supporters that may now perceive they have little to do with us, and a statement that, ideally—just as Avis never references cars nor Target shopping--references the arts not at all.

A number of theaters, for example, try to articulate their value by saying, "We produce high quality theater..." a beginning that immediately disaffects those who perceive theater in general to be a less than pressing priority. Why is doing theater at all of value, they would ask. In contrast, consider how the Red Cross describes itself. While it would be comparably easy to say, "We distribute bandages, food and water to disaster victims," they instead say, "We serve the most vulnerable"—a statement of value that can be adorned by "We do that through distribution of bandages and food." Who wouldn't want to be part of that? Mark Moore in his celebrated must-read Creating Public Value, notes the shift—and the consequent resurgence in public confidence in the police force of Houston TX—when they began talking about their value, not through the filter of

what they do by arresting people or enforcing the law, but through the value of “Promoting public safety.” Who wouldn’t want to be part of that? And I was especially inspired by the theater for young people who stopped saying, “We create high quality theater for children” and started saying, “We bring joy into children’s lives.” Who wouldn’t want to be part of that? What is the higher purpose we are called to do—the positive, animating, galvanizing, ennobling value that the arts uniquely allow us to accomplish and pursue?

In the nonprofit arts community, our challenges are compounded by the need to promote two differing valuing systems to two different audiences. As nonprofits, our dependence on contributed income leads us to create transactional value statements that address our role in meeting social needs. Traditionally, these statements have revolved around the economic stimulus value of local economic activity generated in proportion to ticket sales, with its now expansive variant of Richard Florida; the education value, with the role of the arts in enhancing academic performance; and the social value, the role of the arts in encouraging empathy, social tolerance and healthier cross-cultural relations. The economic, the educational, the social—each of these is relevant, powerful and especially apt if talking to the chamber of commerce, the school board or the community center respectively, (remembering again value creation based in the ability to speak to where the audience is listening from). And (I would guess) at least some of you are responsible for the donor appeals, the annual reports, the special op ed pieces that position—rightfully position—nonprofits as good community citizens.

But let’s face it: no one actually goes to the arts for these reasons. Who sits home and says, “Gee honey, if we go to the theater tonight, it will leverage \$5-7 for the local economy?” or “You know, if we attend that Matisse exhibit, kids will perform more than 120 points higher on their SAT’s than if we stay home.”

In essence, our not for profit status orients us to value statements that address need: our dependence on earned revenue in a world of leisure opportunities and entertainment challenges us to create and address the realm of desire. We need transportation—which any Hyundai could afford us; we buy Porsche because we want speed. We need water to slake our thirst and replenish our bodies; we want Poland Springs because we feel good about being ecologically responsive and safe. We need a teapot to boil our water; we want to feel cool as it heats in our Michael Graves pot. Desire leads us to choices that we often pursue, even to our own financial detriment.

This is at times a Faustian bargain, and at our worst, we misrepresent ourselves in an attempt to position our value in this realm of desire. We promise “hysterically funny” for work that is mildly amusing at best; “an evening you’ll never forget” for an experience we can barely remember five days later; and “dynamic excitement” for an experience that will leave all but the most die-hard aficionado unmoved. Audience research indicates that anticipated experience

and actual experience must align to insure loyalty, and that creating a sense of anticipation for an experience that the audience is unlikely to have becomes an active disincentive to return.

Think of restaurants in this regard: is quality of cuisine the driver of behavior? Not for me: a five star restaurant where I am treated shabbily by the wait staff, given attitude by the maître d' and given a table in a dark corner is not one that I will patronize a second time regardless of how excellent the food. I eat frequently at a diner in NJ because it is local and relies on local growers, the staff remembers me, the food is predictable, and I'm comfortable in the booth—all of which I'm promised. Had the diner advertised five star cuisine rather than its true core assets, the disjuncture between my expectations and my experience would undoubtedly have been fatal. In the arts, do we often advertise five star food when we really have diner fare?

And, in the interest of compounding your challenges even further, let me add that you have the simultaneous challenge of marketing the product—the show, the lecture, the exhibit—even while every piece—whether the formal ads, the annual report, the website, or even the program—intentionally or not markets the organization.

I remember hearing Marc Scorca of Opera America dissect a program from a major arts center that shall remain nameless which publicly proclaims its full loyalty to the full breadth of its community and trumpets its universal accessibility to all citizens, regardless of income or class. The program—distributed to all audience members—was filled with ads for Mercedes Benz, diamonds, furs, vacation homes (which none but the most affluent could afford), and page after page after page listing donors at the \$50K and above level. Never was there a mention of the grass roots donor, the education program, the ticket subsidy efforts, the human interest story that would engage any but the wealthiest. Two conflicting stories told by the organization: a story of accessibility told by the leader, a story of elitism told by the program. And which do you think lingered longer in audience consciousness?

Effective strategic communication for nonprofit lies in harmonizing these stories, in reconciling the values of need and desire. This harmonized story is told at every opportunity, communicated in subtle ways in our lobbies, on our websites and more. We must train every employee to think of herself as an ambassador, and recognize especially in this regard the value of the board, doing as the Alliance Theatre has done in presenting every board member a laminated card with three talking points, backed with data, that they wish every citizen in Atlanta to know.

Core values. Transactional values, ideally captured in a value statement. Together leading to market value. This is what strategic communication is about. Indeed, strategic communication is a promise—a promise that once broken may

never be mended, that if contradicted will result in loss of market place and value—and marketing an invitation. Whatever the story, the rest of our energy must be spent in dedicating ourselves to embracing it, sharing it, living it.

Now many of these ideas are ideas that I have espoused for more than a decade. But as a recent series of conversations convened by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation revealed, the world today is far different than the world of a decade ago. After decades of growth, we are seeing loss of audience, both for individual organizations and in aggregate for entire fields. Arts organizations are struggling to understand the full impact of technology—as a means to communicate, as an expense obligation, most significantly as a shaper of consumer behavior.

Now I am a cranky, 54-year old Luddite who has seen this world of technology as an ominous dark cloud, even as I fear in my darkest days that my allegiance to live performing arts in a world of technology makes me the descendant of that tragically myopic group who, when confronted with the appearance of the model T, sniffed and said, “Nothing will ever replace the feeling of sitting atop a horse—and who could ever want a car when a horse can gaze at you with such love in its eyes?”

Two years ago, I decided to plunge myself into the belly of the proverbial beast and enrolled in Pop Tech, an annual conference in Camden, ME, for 500 high tech folks, bringing them together to listen to—and interact with—high level thinkers of every stripe and description. Contrary to my expectations, this was not a conference designed to talk about startups or financing: it is a conference where we listen to world thinkers about the human brain. Global warming. International warfare and terrorism. AIDS research. And more.

As someone who attends dozens of arts meetings every year, I found the experience fascinating.

While the traditional arts conference is characterized by the furrowed brow, the deep thought, the deep intake of breath and the constant nodding of heads, PopTech is characterized by euphoria, celebration, exhilaration.

While arts conferences are often notable for the air of earnest concern—gatherings where we seek refuge with comparably beleaguered colleagues behind closed doors, PopTech is a festive gathering of celebration, where strangers are sought for provocation, and where absolute transparency reigns—far from closing the door, the entire conference—start to finish—was broadcast live through webcasting, and every Q and A included questions from online observers.

And while arts conferences are dominated increasingly by prospects for survival—how will we fund? How will we keep ourselves on the funding agenda?

How can we market more effectively to insure our survival?—the issue of survivability was never raised at PopTech. The assumption is that many will not—and perhaps should not—survive. Instead, here the issues were not how we will fund, but how we will change the world. How we will solve global warming? How we will solve AIDS? How we will leave the world a healthier, ecologically balanced, less poverty ridden place? Indeed, the unspoken agenda was that there is nothing that we cannot do, and in the world of high tech, truly anything is possible.

You might call this folly of youth—and indeed, many of the participants are young.

You may call it hubris.

But what became clear to me is that within this world of infinite possibilities, there are new possibilities for us in the arts.

At PopTech, every plenary session was followed by a performance by a live performing artist—a single cellist using delay technology to create a quartet of sound, a hip hop dancer dancing on crutches, a remarkable spoken word artist Vanessa German who blew the roof off with her passionate poetry and raw release of feeling. These tech leaders responded both to artists who did formal plenary presentations about the creative process—to Elizabeth Streb who knocked their socks off, for example—and to the performers, but their response indicated something deeper.

On the one hand, I was encouraged that this group fought to get there. Camden, ME, is not an easy place to access, and if any community can convene virtually, this one can. Yet through PopTech and TED (Technology Entertainment Design Conference) and more, this community insists on coming together because of the unique value of live, face to face, collective experience, to conspiring—meaning to breathe together, to breathing the same air. And throughout PopTech, a minor chord, a palpable hunger throbbed in the background. This group was desperate to slow down, to led less frenetic lives, to find the courage to live for their passions. More and more, they placed premium on contemplation, on captivation, on focus and extended surrender to single experience—experiences that would captivate, resonate emotionally, at its best, enhance spiritual value—to the very things that we in the arts do.

They responded deafeningly to Daniel Pink, (interestingly enough a man in his 30's) in his new [A Whole New Mind](#), writes of the emerging emphasis on right brain thinking, “one that prizes the capacity to detect patterns and opportunities, to create artistic and emotional beauty, to craft a satisfying narrative and to combine seemingly unrelated ideas into something new—as well as the ability to empathize with other, to understand the subtleties of human interaction, to find

joy in one's self and to elicit it in others, and to stretch beyond the quotidian in pursuit of purpose and meaning."

Indeed, they confirmed the findings of Bill Breen and marketing experts who tell us that consumer desire is increasingly linked to authenticity, defined by four criteria: a sense of place, a strong point of view, the service of a larger purpose and integrity. God knows if we cannot position ourselves in this environment, we do not deserve to exist.

In looking at all of these tensions—need and desire, intrinsic and extrinsic, the classic art and entertainment—I for one believe in the "both and." I believe the arts are infinitely entertaining—or even better, endless engaging and delightful, delighting the senses even when the experience is sometimes unpleasant or caustic. But I also believe the impact of the arts is greater than simple pleasure—that our impact is essential to the health of a larger society—that the arts invite us to access, not the easiest or most facile parts of ourselves, but the best parts, the deepest parts, the deepest emotions, the most generous impulses, and yet at times the most urgent fears. "When you meet your life in a great poem, it becomes expanded, extended, clarified, magnified, deepened in color, deepened in feeling," says poet Jane Hirschfield. "Aren't we enlarged by the scale of what we are able to desire?" writes poet Mark Doty—a question that invites the reverse: aren't we diminished by the scale of the easy with which we content ourselves? In the arts, we not only ask for more: we demand more—more of one another, more of ourselves.

The clearest definer of our value remains, for me at least, MacNeil Lowery, who was the head of the arts division at the Ford Foundation, which began the great philanthropic arts movement in the United States, was challenged to explain why funding the arts was important, he said, "I will give you ten reasons." And here are his ten reasons:

- They are important, he said, because of their role in conveying an image of American society abroad.
- They are a means of communication and consequently of understanding between this country and others.
- They are an expression of national purpose.
- They are an important influence in the liberal education of the individual.
- They are the key to an American's understanding of himself, his times and his destiny.
- They are a purposeful occupation for youth.
- In their institutional form, they are vital to the social, moral and educational resources of an American community.
- They are good for business, especially in new centers of population.
- They are components for strengthening the moral and spiritual bastions in a people whose national security is threatened.
- They are the offset to the materialism of a new and generally affluent society.

The “good for business” argument aside, Lowry argued at every turn for the role of the arts in exploring and defining meaning. These reasons—even more resonant today perhaps than in 1963, are in our very DNA and call us to rally ever more to their fulfillment, and even while we have in the last century evolved and adapted enormously as fields, our purposes have been constant. Through the arts, we engage in a struggle or our national character, for the emerging sensibility of the young, especially the young, who prioritize the “bombardment” of sensation through violent film and video over the contemplation and deep understanding of experience, especially in a popular cultural context that often seems to value humiliation over humanity. We are living reminders of what it means to be humane rather than merely human, and we insistently—in an age of demonization and fear of difference, gather audiences to look at their fellow human beings with curiosity and generosity. If we have ever needed such capacity in our nation’s history, we need it now.

In closing, let me acknowledge my gratitude again to Americans for the Arts—and my gratitude to you, for you are, by virtues of your lives, Americans who live for the arts. Moreover, as we stand on the brink of an election year, we must acknowledge that we also are the arts for America—not the imperialist, homophobic, intolerant and elitist parody of America that our current administration has endeavored to create, but the real America—an America whose true dreams embrace the immigrant, encourage mutual respect for religious difference, promote meritocracy and resist entrenchment of an entitled aristocracy through policy and tax code. We stand for and embody free speech, free assembly and serve the true intentions of the Bill of Rights—the protection of the minority in the face of the tyranny of the majority—and recognize that the strength of a democracy is in the range of voices it encourages, not the number of voices it silences. In the time of the Patriot Act, we exercise true patriotism by questioning, challenging, celebrating: indeed, we honor the past, commemorate the present, shape and change the future in a way that does honor to all and violence to none. No matter how some might try to marginalize us or discourage us from this work, it is in nation-building that we are engaged—indeed, international community building—upholding true American values and standing for the real value of our nation.

In that light, I would like to thank you for your part in building a stronger, truer nation, regardless of where you come from and the communities you serve. I would like to assure you that our hands at Doris Duke remain outstretched to the national arts community, treasuring you for all you offer. And I’d like to thank you for your kindness and patience in listening to me this afternoon. God speed you in your work.