Thank you for the invitation to address you all today. To be here, sharing some thoughts, within the framework of a lecture named for the extraordinary Nancy Hanks is truly an honor.

Of course, we all know there isn’t enough public funding for art in this country. There isn’t enough regard for art in our great nation. We are not a nation of thinkers, but doers, and the expression of will par excellence in American culture is the making of money, not art. To state it so baldly isn’t necessarily to bemoan it. Because one of the secondary effects of this primary focus on revenue and profit is a vibrant philanthropic sector that gives a lot of money to the arts — never enough of course, at least in my opinion – but all the same, the bigger picture of arts funding in America is not as dire as it may sometimes seem when compared to a country like Germany, where there is so much abundance in the government funding of the arts.
Whether funding is coming from the government or whether it’s coming from the private sector in the form of charitable giving – invariably, the process of giving and getting money is understandably complicated. Foundations and councils and family trusts and corporations have images to bolster (and protect) – and they have missions they often lay out in no uncertain terms. Mission alignment figures front and center in the dispensation of money in the American philanthropic sector. Moreover, as so much of the cash is ultimately coming from those who so profoundly understand cash, how to manage it, how to assess value in economic terms, the thinking around mission alignment takes on another dimension — measuring return on investment, that is, measuring the visible tangible effect of money given.

Many of us here in this room deeply understand how ultimately misguided this approach is, the reflex to measure prospect and product in terms of the tangible. We understand that art, what it is, what is speaks to and develops in us, can’t be measured in that way, at least not the most important part. What art does best is to nurture
and develop the most intangible interior parts of us; art enables and fosters the soul’s growth. But we, here in this room, know to be mindful of using language like that. We know that we live in a culture which long ago forgot that responsiveness to the world is fundamentally *rhythmic*. That attunement, for example, to cadence and phrase, to embody of *beauty* through song, to know harmony, physically — that these are fundamental human and social capacities, needing development. But we understand our nation doesn’t know things like this anymore – and so we understand why, yet again, our universities are cutting the humanities, and our schools are cutting funding for the arts. We don’t like it. But we understand. The real conversations about value are had in monetary terms in America. And so we don’t bring up the soul. We don’t want to be seen as those who just don’t get it.

Many of us here, in this room, have not been particularly gifted at making money. And we don’t necessarily see that as a failing. We may understand that our culture’s values are hostile to what we most cherish, but we’re here to do what we can. Toe a different line, even
though we’re not entirely able to resist the corrosive impact of the prevailing materialist metrics that dominate our society. Because see, we have not stopped hearing the whisper of the still quiet voice within, or living by the bright blaze of human imagination – these twin foundations of our humanity, these sources of our species’ miraculous creative capacity. We know the world, in fact, is made of these far more than it is made of cash. We know. But needing to bridge the divide with those who don’t, with a culture that refuses to understand, we make half-steps. We change the way we talk. We embrace the terms of tangible good. Advocacy. Changing minds. Opening perspectives. Dismantling barriers and fostering understanding. Diversity. Opportunity. Social justice. We learn to think in terms of causes that can help quantify art’s good. We find our fight, make our case, articulate the narrative – and transform ourselves into sales staff for our causes. With time, we grow hidebound. Understandably. Hidebound by our battles, beholden to our identities, committed to promoting and celebrating our differences.
But let me submit that art, at its best, the art that has us dedicating our lives to it, has always been about unity not difference.

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I want to tell you two stories today. About two pivotal experiences of art in my life, and how they shaped me. These two stories will, I hope, illuminate a distinction that may come across as somewhat starker than I actually believe it to be. Pointing out the contrast is important to what I want to say today, but it’s worth emphasizing in advance that anything worth knowing is always tethered to reality through nuance.

Just to rewind a bit, and offer some context for both of the stories I’m going to tell:

My parents immigrated from Pakistan in the late sixties, a few years after the quota for immigration from the Indian subcontinent was lifted. Before 1965, only 400 immigrants from Pakistan and India were
permitted. But that changed, in large part because of the Kennedy backed initiative to put a man on the moon and all that that implied, the push for scientific and technological advance in the era of the cold war, and the need expand the population of scientists and engineers in this country. My parents, both medical doctors, came over on a State Department program that was scouring the third world for this kind of intellectual talent— both of them were at the top of their classes at what was then the Pakistani equivalent of Harvard Medical School. They were given visas, plane tickets, jobs, and an apartment. I would become their first-born here, and the first born child on either side of very large extended families to be born outside Pakistan, let alone in America.

Suffice it to say, there was a lot of pressure to make sure I did something respectable with myself, on me, but also on my parents. Case in point, when I was four years-old, and starting preschool, my mother coached me to respond to the question of what I wanted to be when I grew up by saying: “I want to be a neurologist.” Of course, I
wasn’t sure what a neurologist actually was, but people seemed very impressed when I said it.

A little over a decade later, when I was fifteen and starting junior year in high school, I signed up for an elective in high school that I’d heard was really good. It was called World Literature, and it was taught by a teacher named Ms Doerfler. I remember homeroom that first day of the semester, and the football jock sitting next to me asking what my third period class was. I told him it was World Lit with Doerfler. “Dude, Doerf is going to blow your mind,” he said back to me with visible awe. Truth was, Ms Doerfler had a reputation for changing kids lives. She was one of those teachers nobody ever made fun of, but not because she was trying to be your friend, or because she was so entertaining. She exuded a kind of presence that made you realize you were with someone truly remarkable. By the time I’d met her she was in her late fifties, she’d been through five husbands, she lived on a 40 acres of land north of Milwaukee where she kept ten great danes, and tended a farm-sized garden every morning at 4 AM before coming into school. She carried herself with a regal bearing that
wasn't an affect. I recognize now what it was – though I didn't know it back then. It was the resonance of someone truly committed to an authentic life.

Our first day of class, she assigned a short story by a Swiss writer named Durrenmatt. I went home that night and read it. In the story, a man wakes up on a train. He has no idea how he got there. He has no idea where the train is headed. Confused, he tries to find out what's going on. Traveling from one car to the next, approaching fellow passengers. He hopes someone knows more than he does. But they don't. In fact, most are far more concerned with whatever they've got happening in their berths. The romance, the newspaper, the nap they want to return to. The protagonist finds a junior conductor who tells him that maybe the supervising conductor can answer his questions. But that turns out not to be the case either. Finally, having made his way to the front locomotive, our protagonist finds the person steering the train, a madman shoveling coal maniacally into the engine’s furnace. Over the noise of the fire, the protagonist shouts his question about where the train is going, but the driver just points at the ladder
leading to the roof. Our hero climbs the ladder and peers out over the
front of the train where he beholds an endless pitch-black tunnel into
which the train is falling with unstoppable fury. The story comes to a
close as he stares into the tunnel's abyss, overcome with primal
terror.

I remember finishing the story that night, and thinking, okay. No idea
why anyone would ever read a story like that, or write one for that
matter. Bizarre didn't even cover it. I didn't give it another thought.
Until the following morning.

The next day, Ms Doerfler comes striding into class, her right hand
buried -- as it often was -- in her sport coat pocket, as she played
with the set of keys she kept there. She walked up to the front of
class and wrote the name of the story out on the chalkboard. "The
Tunnel." And she turned to us and asked: "What's the meaning of the
story you read last night?" Everyone looks around at everyone else.
Meaning? Of a story? What is she even talking about? No one had an
answer. She waited. Still no answer. Finally, she started to speak: The
train is life. Sometimes one of us awakens to the question of what it is, where it might be headed. We look for the answer around us, only to find that most are not interested in an answer; many don’t even know there's a question. The one who seeks to know will keep searching until they are confronted with perplexing truth: That life is hurtling us into a great unknown, like the train tumbling into the abyss of that tunnel. And that the soul's innate reaction to confronting this truth directly is profound and primal terror.

What happened to me in that moment was unlike anything I'd ever experienced. Something cleared inside me; there was a bright silence and spaciousness, as a vast perspective opened up. All the murkiness of life vanished in a sudden moment of inspiring crystalline purity. It was fifteen seconds give or take. But it was already clear to me that literature was going to be my life.

A few years later, I was fully invested in the idea that a life devoted to literature meant becoming a writer. It was 1989. I was now eighteen, and the controversy over Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* was engulfing the
world. But it wasn’t just elsewhere, because the Rushdie affair had exploded like a mortar shell in my own community. I’d grown up in a tight-knit Muslim community in Milwaukee, and the people I loved most had very complicated feelings about what Rushdie had done. But no one I knew in my community, or in my family, had actually read the book themselves. That summer, I would. And what happened to me when I did was profound. I’d never before encountered so much of the culture I’d grown up with at home in the pages of a book, my questions, my preoccupations, the smells and sounds and tastes of my community and family, the mythos of our religious beliefs. I was shocked by Rushdie’s book, not as an instance of blasphemy, but by the sheer power it had on me. I was experiencing a potent of form of self-recognition I’d never experienced before, and it bred a new certainty. My writing didn’t have to be like the central European parables and stories Ms Doerfler loved and which had so inspired me. Writing could also come from what I knew. After reading Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses*, I saw the path I could take forward as a writer, writing in the world as a person who came from where I came from, with the particular history that I had.
The story of Doerfler and The Tunnel on the one hand. The story of reading Rushdie’s Satanic Verses on the other. These are the alpha and omega of my personal origins as a writer in the world. The first is about encountering the universal with a capital U. A direct hit of the human condition mainlined into my very arteries. The second story is less about the universal than it is about the particular. How I found a book that spoke to me as a Muslim, as a child of immigrants of the subcontinent living in the West, and made me see how writing about things I knew could set me on a path to finding my voice as a writer. Both stories embody something essential — on the one hand, an encounter with literature as an expression of our unity, our sameness, our collective membership in the human condition; and on the other hand, literature as witness to the power of difference, and how access to what was different than I had read before opened up opportunity for me, in the deepest sense.

I am loathe to compare these two experiences, but if I’m honest, they do hold different orders of magnitude in my life as a person and as a
writer. Which is to say, the first is far more central to my life than the second, far more consequential to the development of the soul I was talking about earlier. My experience with Doerfler and “The Tunnel” was an example of what I believe to be art’s profoundest transformative capacity — to introduce us to, and absorb us in, a different, higher order of being. To transcend the confines and limits of the self and connect us to something like source itself. The result, for me, of that encounter with source, was to fall in love deeply and endlessly with what had opened up this source for me, literature; in fact, I fell in love so deeply — that love has endured to this day, unblemished, undiminished, decades later.

In contrast, my reading of Rushdie, while no less essential for me, was an experience circumscribed and defined by the particulars of my life, particular to the situation I found myself in — wanting to understand how I could possibly write. In a sense, what I’m suggesting is that my encounter with Rushdie was a vocational encounter. But what made it possible was the earlier encounter with something that birthed my vocation itself.
I don’t mean in any way to diminish the importance of my reading of *The Satanic Verses* by somehow relegating that experience to a second order of centrality. But it is that. An experience not of unity, but of difference, and how that difference, which was my difference, could live in the world in which I found myself, with the newly-discovered love of my life.

Particular and universal — a focus on both is necessary. And sometimes, I do worry, honestly, that our ever-growing focus on the particulars of identity are not only fostering a civic spirit in which contest and disagreement, and grievance is pushing to the fore, but I worry that this focus on the centrality of particularity and identity might be helping us forget – it was likely the transformative power of the universal that landed us together in this room in the first place.

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So what am I saying? Let me boil it down, still doing my best to preserve the nuance — which is of course usually the first casualty of the pasteurizing and homogenizing process so much discourse undergoes today, as it meets the Manichean moral environment of our current politics, where everything is increasingly seen as either/or. On the one hand, either it’s a defense of dead white men like Durrenmatt, or on the other hand, it’s a celebration of the young writer, like myself, of a marginalized identity who’s going to finally be heard after generations of exclusion. Let me submit this is not an either/or. And yet, to the extent that we want to be fully alive to the art’s greatest strength, not as a measurable good to be laid alongside test scores, or as a tool of social integration, but rather, in the actual shape of art’s deepest, formative impact on us; to the extent that we are willing to meet art and its impact along the terms I have laid out here — I believe it’s worth considering just how much this interplay between the particular and the universal is, by definition, tilted in favor of the universal as the ultimate source of art’s inspirational and instructive power.
I’d like to say a few words about a particular characteristic of our social environment today, one which, failing to comment on would be irresponsible, given its profound impact today on these questions of difference and unity. I’m speaking about the digital technologies changing the way we communicate, what we take for worthy of communicating, and what we take as true. Unfortunately, it is beyond the purview of this talk to lay out a larger vision of how these seismic changes are reshaping us in fundamental ways that impact so much I’ve spoken about today. But I do want to linger on a new social ontology resulting from the endless curation and enslavement of our attention to the digital devices which have increasingly turned us all into addicts. We owe our dependence on those devices to the release of dopamine that engagement with those devices occasions, momentary content selected and delivered to us for its capacity to thrill, enrage, titillate and reaffirm us. This technology metes out its
algorithmically curated stimuli as the reward for sustained and prolonged attention. This is all by design. The longer you are engaged, the more data can be collected about you; the greater the haul of data, the more your behavior and purchases can be predicted, even manipulated and the more that data is worth on the open market. All of this is driven by profit, profit which has created the epidemic of diminished concentration and pathological distraction rampant everywhere today. This is a profound, even apocalyptic social ill that we all recognize and feel powerless to change.

The technology driving these attention-damaging devices understands something about us. It understands that what tethers us most deeply to the device confirmation bias. The algorithm learns to affirm our tastes, our desires, our points of view. This is the deeper pleasure that the technology offers, a cognitive flow formed from our own preferences and comprising a world in our own image. We pick up the device. We find there some form of what we already know, served up in a computer-curated diet of posts and photos and other sundries, content tailored to our desires, that the digital technology
knows will keep us scrolling. We click and scroll, and click and scroll, enjoying the steady stream of tiny pleasures, familiar enough to keep us happy, surprising enough to keep us excited. Over time, we learn to trust in the path to understanding that leads only through the familiar, that leads through “me.” “I” become the arbiter of what is true. “I” am the measure of what is real. What could possibly be more real than me?

What I’m describing here is a profound technological support for enthrallment to primary narcissism. And though we all know this is what is happening, we still may fail to appreciate just how pervasive the social attitudes engendered by this orientation have become. Self-obsession is seen as a route to self-realization. Affirmation of bias confirmation reigns supreme. “I know” is a social prime mover. Elevation of the “I”-that-knows is a greater social good. Exhibitionist displays of self-esteem are conflated with instances of political defiance. Self-valorizing anthems. The elevation of “me” and “my” to categories of knowledge itself. And the now-widespread misreading
of the self’s fragility as resulting not from the contingent situation of selfhood itself, but from society’s failure and neglect to protect and recognize “me.” Accustomed to the neurotransmitter boost of constant digital approbation – the likes and shares and comments from followers and to those who we follow –; we are increasingly convinced by a moralizing rhetoric that passes off our dependence on technology as righteous activism. And so, the new social ontology emerges. Pleasure is the glue. The purpose is sales. It’s the advertising model of thought; the entertainment model of consciousness. Self-promotion, self-commodification, self-marketing – all these are now increasingly taken for forms of legitimate commentary and critique; ceaseless affirmation of our personal biases emboldens the strident certainty of our moral positions.

The foregoing picture is an essential one to understand the primacy placed today on difference as a category of social being. Let me put that more simply. The technology transforming our societies and our brains is incentivizing us to be deeply invested in our particularities, our differences, and to embrace the confines of the self rather than to
push for some meaningful transcendence from them. But let me submit to you, friends, that art, at its best, is an ever-mysterious bridge to transcendence of exactly this sort. Other, not just self. Empathy, not narcissism. Transformation, not validation.

In closing I’d like to remind us all once again of the importance of nuance. The argument here isn’t against difference, it’s against the primacy of difference. The argument isn’t against measurable metrics, it’s against the faulty notion that, ultimately, art’s benefit can measured in this way. It isn’t to elevate Durrenmatt over Rushdie - or even to suggest there is not a place for narcissism in our lives. What I’m suggesting is that there are important distinctions that must not be lost, that some things are not others, and shouldn’t be. American novelist, Ottessa Moshfegh, in speaking about the novel as an art form, puts it this way. And I quote:

“Art is not media. A novel is not an 'afternoon special' or fodder for the Twittersphere or for journalists to make generalizations about culture. A novel is not Buzzfeed or NPR or Instagram or even
Hollywood. A novel is meant to expand consciousness. We need novels that live past the political agenda described on social media. We have imaginations for a reason. We need characters in novels to be free. How else will we understand ourselves?”

A wonderful question indeed.

Thank you.