

Arena Stage Power Play Summit

By Jacqueline Lawton, Power Play writer

On Monday, December 9th, I took part in Arena Stage's Power Play Summit, which is one of many special events marking Arena Stage's 70th season. The initial focus of our conversation was one piercing, provocative and urgent question: "Is Democracy worth saving?" The goal of the event was to bring artists, policy makers, leaders and critical thinkers in the worlds of journalism, religion, politics, the environment, theater, education and museums together for a day to discuss some of the most pressing issues of our time.

The day-long Summit began with breakfast and an opening exercise. The opening exercise is one that I will take with me back to my classes and future sessions that I facilitate. (In addition to being a playwright, I am also an Access, Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion facilitator. The focus of my work is to disrupt white supremacy and dismantle systems of oppression.) We were given open-ended statements and were asked to write our responses on a post-it note. These statements are perfect points of entry for participants to help them begin to think critically about themselves and the world. We were given 5 minutes to complete this task, which was invigorating! Here were the prompts:

America is ...

Art can ..

My community needs ...

What gets in the way of change

Effective communication requires

Difference of opinion can

Ideas become active when

The responses varied, but the major themes that arose were hope, justice, empathy, urgency, community, power and change. These themes permeated across the two discussions that I participated in later in the day.

During the Think Sessions, each group focused on one question. Here was my first group's question:

"Traditionally marginalized communities (LGBT, women, racial minorities, etc.) are speaking up more and demanding more equitable treatment. But change -- especially large-scale social change like this -- is scary and hard. Are gradual, cautious reforms a more palatable and more effective pathway? Can we ask those who have been marginalized for so long to wait a little longer?"

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Almost immediately, we found ourselves dissecting the question. We wanted to know who the “we” was in this question and who the “community” was. We wanted to reframe the question because we didn’t see ourselves in the question being asked. We discussed the term “gradual” and what it means to ask marginalized communities to wait for justice and equity, especially when those communities are suffering and dying. We discussed the urgency for this change and how both social media and the 24-hour news cycle has both increased the sense of urgency and created compassion fatigue. We talked about how the framing of the question put the burden and responsibility on the marginalized groups to comfort the group in power. Ultimately, this exercise also helped us to reflect on the magnitude and power of language and the impact of certain frames.

The most powerful statement from this session had to do with how we perceive radical change; specifically, that change feels radical when it hasn’t reached a consensus. The label radical is applied to issues that seem extreme. And we often think that change occurs when a community or country reaches consensus, but that isn’t true in the history of our nation. The decision to end slavery had not reached consensus. A war did that, and there are small pockets of people still fighting that war today. The decision to give women the right to vote had not reached a consensus, and all women did not win the right to vote once the amendment was ratified. The decision to grant civil rights to all people regardless of race, age, gender, sex and religion took a series of court cases that are tested daily.

Towards the end, we acknowledged that it often takes great humility to have your perspective changed, so we wanted to focus on small ways that we can implement change in our daily lives and work that helped to disrupt powerful, oppressive systems. One way we all agreed would help us achieve this is by educating ourselves, gaining greater social awareness, and improving our cultural literacy.

For our afternoon Think Session, here was my second group’s question:

“Is the struggle for racial and gender parity just a distraction from larger economic and environmental threats?”

This group also wrestled with the framing of the question. Words like “just,” “larger” and “distractions” create problematic framing for these conversations. We discussed how marginalized communities have to work, survive and attempt to thrive in a world where this kind of framing isn’t questioned at all. This framing represents assumptions that are taken as fact and policies that permeate every aspect of our daily lives. We then tried to determine was it better to try to challenge the assumptions and policies or do our best to make progress within them. Ultimately, we decided it was better to exist in a world where such frames didn’t exist, but that is not the world we live in, so we dived back in!

Next, we all agreed that you cannot begin to have a conversation about economic and environmental threats without first discussing racial inequities and gender inequality. When you look at the communities that will face the greatest environmental threat and will have the hardest time recovering and rebuilding, those communities are filled with people of color, particularly black and indigenous residents. When we look at the economy, we have a minimum wage in this country that is not sustainable and a pay gap between men and women, and between whites and people of color widening.

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By the end of this conversation, we wanted to figure out ways to elevate the communities most impacted by economic and environmental threats. We wanted to create space for them to lead the conversations and pathways towards change.

After our second session, we gathered for a report out from all of the groups. I think we left there with a deeper understanding of how hard this work is and how much time it takes to get started. We learned that how we frame issues is just as important as the issues. We learned that valuable lessons can be gained by stepping outside of our silos and setting aside time to engage in meaningful discussions.

Ultimately, to create change, it starts with the individual. We have to examine ourselves and understand how we fit in this world. We have to be clear about what we're saying and doing and understand there is an impact to each word and every action. We have to be clear about our goals and intentions. We have to stop thinking about equity and inclusion as a zero-sum game. Someone doesn't have to lose something in order for everyone to gain something. Because when we are conscious and aware, we can plainly see that there is enough room, enough space, enough food and enough money for us all. That starts when we begin to envision a world where equity across the board looks like an interconnected ecosystem. If you suffer, then I suffer. So, we must work to ensure that we all have what we need to advance and achieve.

We get there through compassion and empathy, and that is where theatre meets every discipline that was represented in that room and more besides. And that is what I think Molly had in mind when she gathered all of us together that day. We took time to listen and learn from each other, to break bread and grow together, to deepen our connections and widen our interconnected circles. What we do from here, can only be a greater benefit to us all.