


2020

## Ethical Leadership in the Arts: The Power of Storytelling and Representation

2019 Academic Symposium

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/ijel>

 Part of the [Applied Ethics Commons](#), [Business Law, Public Responsibility, and Ethics Commons](#), [Leadership Studies Commons](#), and the [Legal Ethics and Professional Responsibility Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Academic Symposium, 2019 (2020) "Ethical Leadership in the Arts: The Power of Storytelling and Representation," *The International Journal of Ethical Leadership*: Vol. 7 , Article 5.  
Available at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/ijel/vol7/iss1/5>

This Symposium is brought to you for free and open access by the Cross Disciplinary Publications at Case Western Reserve University School of Law Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in The International Journal of Ethical Leadership by an authorized administrator of Case Western Reserve University School of Law Scholarly Commons.

## 2019 Academic Symposium Transcript

Ethical Leadership in the Arts

The Power of Storytelling and Representation

### **LeVar Burton**

actor-writer-director-producer, children's literacy and AIDS/HIV research advocate, and recipient of our 2019 Inamori Ethics Prize

### **Shannon French**

Inamori Professor in Ethics and Director, Inamori International Center for Ethics and Excellence

### **Joy Bostic**

Associate Professor, Department of Religious Studies, College of Arts and Sciences and Interim Vice President, Office for Inclusion, Diversity and Equal Opportunity  
and

### **Cara Byrne**

full-time lecturer in the Department of English and a SAGES Teaching Fellow

---

VINSON: Good afternoon everyone! It is great to see everyone out here again. For those of you who were here at last night's brilliant and incredible symposium, thank you.

For those of you who are visiting us for the first time, my name is Ben Vinson III. I am the Provost and Executive Vice President of Case Western Reserve University, and it is my pleasure to welcome you to the 2019 Inamori Ethics Prize Academic Symposium. Joining me on the stage today is LeVar Burton, actor. He is known to all of us, of course—he is an actor, writer, director, producer, children's literacy, AIDS/HIV research advocate, and the recipient of our 2019 Inamori Ethics Prize. Also joining us is Dr. Shannon French. She is the Inamori Professor in Ethics and Director of the Inamori International Center for Ethics and Excellence right here at Case Western Reserve University. Joy Bostic. She is Associate Professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the College of Arts and Sciences and also our Interim Vice President for the Office of Inclusion, Diversity and Equal Opportunity. Our final panelist is Cara Byrne, who is a full-time lecturer in the Depart-

ment of English and a SAGES Teaching Fellow. I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge that we are here today because of the generosity and vision of Dr. Kazuo Inamori and the Inamori Foundation, whose generous endowment created the Inamori International Center for Ethics and Excellence here at Case Western Reserve University, and his vision and foresight also created the annual Inamori Ethics Prize. I would also like to acknowledge our title sponsors: the Callahan Foundation, Eaton Corporation, along with all of our generous sponsors and community partners. You will be able to find a complete list of our benefactors in your program. In addition, today we are delighted to have with us students from Shaker Heights High School. We also have students from Case Western Reserve's own Global Ethical Leaders' Society and sprinkled throughout the audience today we have students from our SAGES classes, Greek Life, and the Schubert Center. We want to thank all of you for being a part of today's events.

We want to get into our conversation as quickly as possible, but first, let me briefly tell you about our panelists, beginning with our 2019 Inamori Ethics Prize honoree, Mr. LeVar Burton. Now many of you know him from his ground-breaking role in the 1977 award-winning ABC television miniseries *Roots*, where he portrayed Kunta Kinte, the main character in Alex Haley's powerful epic about slavery in America. Others, of course, may know him as Lieutenant Commander Geordi La Forge from the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* TV show and movies. A brilliant, blind, black engineer who the entire crew depended on. Or you may also know him as the host of the long-running PBS children's series *Reading Rainbow*. In this series, he brought the joy of reading into so many hearts and helped children everywhere believe in their own uniqueness and potential. Today, he helps reawaken in adults that same excitement for reading that they once felt as children with his podcast *LeVar Burton Reads*. Everywhere he goes, he opens the eyes of both children and adults to the importance of reading and education. Now, as a historian myself of the African Diaspora, I can say with special conviction that when Mr. Burton brought Kunta Kinte into American living rooms, his powerful performance made an indelible contribution to this country's effort to confront and address the reality and the legacy of slavery and racism. When he portrayed Lieutenant Commander Geordi La Forge in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, he not only provided entertainment, but also representation. There, on the screen, was a person of color and a person with a disability who was an engineering genius at the heart of the flagship's crew. In addition to his many other activities, Mr. Burton also serves on the Board

of Directors for the AIDS Research Alliance, a nonprofit medical research organization. The Alliance works to speed the recovery and implementation of effective HIV treatments. We are absolutely thrilled to have Mr. Burton here with us today. Let me say just a few more words about our other panelists. Dr. Bostic, of course—as I mentioned earlier as the Interim Vice President for the Office of Inclusion, Diversity and Equal Opportunity here—she is an Associate Professor in the Department of Religious Studies, and she is also the Founding Director of the Minor in African and African American Studies at Case Western Reserve [University]. She is also a program faculty for the Women’s and Gender Studies and Ethnic Studies programs. She is the author of several book chapters and scholarly articles on race, gender, and religion, and her forthcoming book explores religion, ritual, and race in visual culture, music, and dance. Dr. Byrne is a full-time lecturer in the Department of English and a SAGES Teaching Fellow, but her teaching and research interests are centered around studying literary and visual texts as well as exploring race, gender, and age. In 2018, she received the Emerging Scholar Award from the Children’s Literature Association. You can read more about our panelists in your programs. But now, I look forward to hearing your conversation today, and I hope all of you will take the opportunity to listen and engage with our panelists this afternoon. I’d like to turn over the program to Dr. Shannon French.

**FRENCH:** Thank you so much, Provost Vinson. Just getting organized here. Now speaking of organization, the way this is going to work—we hope—is that I am first, as the moderator’s privilege, going to ask a few questions of our panelists to get things going, but we absolutely want this to be an interactive event, so you will notice that there are microphones in the aisles. I feel like a flight attendant. I will give you a bit of a heads-up, but you can be thinking of your questions in your mind, and you will queue up behind those mics, and we will get to as many as we can. We will undoubtedly not get to them all, but we will do our very best to get through quite a lot of them. But I would like to open things up by beginning with a question for LeVar Burton. At the prize ceremony last night, you spoke so eloquently about the power of storytelling, and our theme for this panel today is “Ethical Leadership in the Arts: The Power of Storytelling and Representation.” So I would actually like to start off our discussion with that last word: “representation.” Why does representation matter in the arts? Why is it important for people to be able to recognize themselves in works that they view or read?

**BURTON:** That is an amazing question, Dr. French. First of all, I genuinely believe that it is the arts that hold the responsibility in society to carry the culture and to carry the culture forward. It is the job of artists. It is difficult, if not impossible, to develop a healthy self-image unless one can see oneself reflected in the world around them. As our world has increasingly become more focused on the media and the different technologies of media for our stories, and to expose us and bring us the world, representation has become an even more important issue to wrap our arms around because now your world contains influences from other places and other cultures. Your whole world isn't simply the village in which you live, where you see yourself reflected everywhere you look. Now the world is much larger and to not see yourself sends a very dangerous message that you are not important, that you do not matter.

**FRENCH:** That is an important point and an important reminder—

**BURTON:** That's just my two cents.

**FRENCH:** That was more than two; that was priceless. Actually, I want to build on that a little bit, so I am going to you Cara. So you have done work on diversity and representation in children's literature in particular, so building off of what we just heard from Mr. Burton, can you please tell us about that work and help us understand in that context why representation matters, for example, to children?

**BYRNE:** Absolutely. So picture books—when I tell people that I am a scholar of picture books, I often get confused looks like, “How is that possible?” But picture books are some of our first interactions with literature and thinking about stories and also—like you said—a chance to see yourself reflected, but we know statistically that there are many underrepresented groups in the genre. But it is important, and I want to use a framework that Dr. Rudine Sims-Bishop developed. She is a librarian scholar out of the Ohio State University, and she talks about how every reader deserves a bookshelf with mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. And this is a beautiful metaphor, because what it means is that when you open a book, you should have mirrors, so you should see yourself, see your community, and know that you have a place in this world. You are not alone, and you are important. But you also need windows. You should open books and see books where you don't see yourself or your community, so you can look beyond yourself and say, “I live in a beautiful, diverse world among

people who I may not have interacted with yet.” But you also need sliding glass doors, books that are reflective, but also transparent to look beyond, but then actively be able to step outside of yourself and develop empathy, develop who you are in this world. We know statistically that there are some children who have lots of mirrors and some who have very few. Representation is really important for all children, because they need those different experiences to engage with the world and to also find empowerment within themselves.

**FRENCH:** Excellent points again! I’m now going to bring you in, Joy. As an interdisciplinary scholar, you have frequently integrated the arts and you have been able to integrate the arts into your teaching and your writing. And I was wondering, Is there something unique about the way that people connect to or learn from different forms of artistic expression that further enhances the importance of diversity and representation in those fields? Or, I guess if we wanted to flip that question around a little bit, What is lost if people cannot find themselves reflected in these various artistic representations?

**BOSTIC:** Thank you, thank you both for your answers to the previous questions. I think it is about how we can bring the freedom and power of the whole self to engage the community. Artistic space provides a flexibility that moves us beyond the rigidity of stereotypes, of images, of assumptions around race and sexuality and gender and privilege that give people room and space to imagine the possibilities of who they can be outside of the scripts that they’ve been told. So when I think about *Roots*, I remember growing up in elementary school and the only thing that was said about slavery was in a box and usually was Harriet Tubman and a couple of heroes. But we didn’t deal with that story. And, as an African American, I see this with students coming to my class when I ask to identify ethnicity and race. Oftentimes, the ways in which my African American students identify themselves are “My family migrated from Mississippi” or “My family migrated from Alabama.” They don’t have a broader context of where they come from. I remember—particularly seeing the connection with your character in *Roots*—I remember running home from school and the entire community was around the television set to watch the next installment of *Roots*. But what it said to me was that I have a story, as a young person even when I didn’t get that story throughout my education or someone tried to silence or exclude me from that—that I have a story, that I am a part of this, that I am connected to this geographical space,

and I have this connection that is diasporic around the world. So to see those images, I find my students finding ways to connect to their identity and when you can connect with an artist who is bringing their whole self and their whole intent and you connect with your whole self, there is a creative space and flexibility where people can imagine themselves around difference in a way that goes beyond the scripts of family, of religion, of culture, which don't give them the tools to be able to do that.

**FRENCH:** Thank you so much. Well, to keep with our themes, we are going to turn now to the issue of literacy. LeVar, in your work, I am absolutely certain that you have encountered people, both children and adults, who have that transformative moment where they learned how to read, and it opened something up for them. I wondered if you can describe for us—actually, I know you can describe for us—why is that one skill so important? What does it open for them?

**BURTON:** The gift of literacy opens up the world. There are no limits when you can read. I personally believe that being literate in at least one language is my definition of being free. No one can imprison your mind. If you are free, you can “pick up a book and take a look,” maybe?

**FRENCH:** I've heard that somewhere before!

**BURTON:** And so literacy, for me, is literally freedom. And this comes from a person for whom it would have been illegal just a hundred years ago to know how to read.

**FRENCH:** Well, in light of the importance, then, of the literacy that you are describing, Joy, do you worry about reading and storytelling becoming lost arts in this current age? I'm not a Luddite, I've got my phone and things here, but there is a lot of technology and sometimes it might interfere with this. You have a reputation, a well-deserved one, as an engaging and innovative professor; have you done things to try to keep the love of language alive in your classes, and could you tell us a bit about that?

**BOSTIC:** I've actually struggled with this in classroom spaces. And I finally came to the conclusion that I had to require people to bring hard copies of the reading, buy the book, bring that into the classroom, and I had to tell students “no electronics.” And the reason I had to do that was not that electronics are not a part of our educational process, but the distraction of people checking their phones, of people checking their email, people doing other kinds of research. Even I had to engage this because I had students

who were fact-checking me and didn't realize this and they would give me a reference that they just looked up on Wikipedia, but this is a different context, and this is why this doesn't actually apply to what I was saying because I have a wider context of what that is. What I found was that people were not present in that space, in that community at that time. And that is where the ethos is created that grounds us in this exchange among human beings, to see differences, talk differences. What I found was that by taking those things out of the classroom, we were able to create a kind of ethos, and when we needed to take out our laptops, we would do that. In fact, I do intros and outros and students bring in aesthetic forms. They bring in videos, bring the reading, bring something in that speaks to how you understood that reading, something that sparked you. And it helps, so when they bring in something, it may change the way I actually conduct that course session. And when they end, it is almost like an invocation and benediction—it creates an experience in that classroom setting.

I do worry about the first time I wrote in cursive, and they said “I can't read that,” and I remember learning how to write my name in cursive, and how identity-forming it was to create my own name in cursive, and the fact that this student can now not read their grandparents' hand-written letters in cursive. I try to do that dance of bringing in technology and memory, because I think we lose connection with memory, but the bigger thing with technology is not to lose the memory of different forms. So if I am teaching “Lemonade” class and Beyoncé or Prince, I am taking them back to Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey and Aretha Franklin, and I take them back to the earlier rituals, the ring shouts of the 17th and 18th centuries, where African Americans created their own spirituality. I take them back so they understand the connection between the jazz improvisation and the ciphers for the hip-hop rap artists in Washington Square. They need to maintain those connections. You can look at technology in light of the backdrop of all of those antecedents. They are always cocreating together. So for me, that is how you bring technology. But the distraction and the diction of it is what impedes our process and community and our creativity.

**FRENCH:** As a philosopher, we have the Socratic method, which is questioning and always questioning further and further and further. Socrates took it so far that they got annoyed and poisoned him. No hemlock, thanks, I'm driving. So, you know, the idea that it is an activity is something that I try to get through to my students, and it is so exciting when they are a part of that and where you explain to them that you are joining a conversation that



has been going on for centuries, and we need to hear your voice. But now from what I am learning from the three of you, I also want to think of that in terms of being a part of this larger story that we are all in, and I want to keep that in my own mind to help inform what I do a lot. Now we do have to talk even further about other kinds of barriers. Cara, I'm going to bring you into this as well, if I may, because before you came here to teach at Case, you worked for an educational nonprofit. Can you talk about some of the barriers that exist today that might actually prevent young people in particular from becoming fully literate and therefore achieving their educational goals?

**BYRNE:** Absolutely. So when I was working at an educational nonprofit in Akron, I was working with parents and children [ages three, four, and five] and they were so excited to learn. We would put together packets where they would play with educational games, books. And we would work with them, and they would be so excited, and then next week we would go back for our second home visit, and the home would be empty because of housing insecurity because they were evicted, because they were living couch to couch. And that was my first realization that we have resources and tools, but we can't just focus on giving this child the skills—we have to think of the whole community. I also think of Chris Matthews, who is the founder of Literacy in the Hood here in Cleveland. Her son, Derek, was three years old when he started to read, which is incredible! I'm still working with my five-year-old very hard on that. She was so excited to give him resources, and she explained to me that she had to go three zip codes away to get those resources for her son. So even here in Cleveland, we need to think really carefully about what opportunities are available to children, especially when we think of public libraries and public schools as being tax funded. Think about the money streams coming into those communities and again, does it help and enrich and bring up those communities?

**FRENCH:** It is so important for us to hear. There are other conversations where I've heard people talk about things like "food deserts" and you're talking about "book deserts." We can't have "book deserts." This can't be a thing.

**BYRNE:** Again, there are so many wonderful people, including people in this audience who are working, like Chris—who is with her son, who is nine—started Boys Who Read, a club in his elementary school where they come together and read books together, which is wonderful. But there is also the Cleveland Kids Book Bank, which has collected over two million children's books over the last four years! Thank you, Cleveland Kids

Book Bank! And distributing the book in little libraries throughout our city. So, I mean, there are definitely ways, but we have to think about the larger systemic issues because we can't just laser-focus on one skill without recognizing the complexity of the social situation.

**FRENCH:** You also have to be creative. I remember you said something about books in barbershops. Is that right?

**BYRNE:** Yes! We have a wonderful system of barbers who provide picture books. They actually distributed a recent Caldecott-winning book called *Crown: An Ode to a Fresh Cut*. It's a wonderful book, if you have not read it. So, there's this connection, but there's also an enthusiasm, and just like LeVar did in *Reading Rainbow*, you spoke to children. I mean, there was a thunderous applause because so many of us feel that connection, we feel that even if this is the first time we are meeting, we know you. You cared about us from the screen because you were reading with us. It doesn't have to be a parent or a teacher. Having that bond and establishing that with another person is so powerful, and in this case, it is a barber. So we have barbers in the city that are establishing "this is important, you are important, and here is a book that we can explore together."

**FRENCH:** That's glorious. By the way, when LeVar arrived here in Cleveland, of course I had a bunch of people ask me things like "What is he like?" and I was delighted to tell them that he is exactly the way you think he is. There are not two LeVar Burtons. The LeVar Burton that you've seen and grown up with and so forth is the one you have before you today: a very authentic person.

I'm going to do another question, but this is your heads-up, if you have questions, start to get up. You know we just talked about being present and not missing opportunities, so let's not be shy. Let's get in line for these two microphones if you have questions for our panelists while I ask my remaining question. LeVar, whether it's your work with children's literacy or raising funds as we heard of for HIV/AIDS research, and, of course, we also heard about your ground-breaking performances in these incredible shows that had such an impact on so many people from *Roots* to *Star Trek* to *Reading Rainbow*, a word that people associate with you is "hope." We live in challenging times, I know I don't have to tell you that, and sometimes it may feel like hope is hard to come by, that for every step forward, there are a couple of steps back. So I am going to put you on the spot here. What keeps you going? Where do you find hope?

**BURTON:** There's a movie called *Roger Rabbit* and one of the lead characters, Jessica Rabbit, says, "I'm just drawn that way." I'm a hopeful person. I'm an Aquarian, I believe in humanity. I'm betting on the human beings to get our shit together and cooperate more than we compete.

**FRENCH:** Joy, Cara, would you like to add anything about where you find hope for positive ethical progress in the world?

**BYRNE:** My classroom. I'll start first and foremost: you all, so many of you, professionals that are inspired by his work, students that are here from high school or college classes. I am inspired daily by the innovation and the ideas coming from young people. And that is the young people in this room, but also the four- and five-year-olds that I'm working with and doing community outreach with. So that really gives me hope. And you are here for this conversation, and you are going to be part of this conversation, and that gives me an incredible sense of hope as well.

**BOSTIC:** And I would say the same thing: these kinds of conversations, students. But there are so many artists and writers who are just doing exquisite work, and we see people gathered around these texts, we see people gathered around these narratives and stories where people are bringing together the multiplicity of who they are in these stories so we can see the complexity of who we are and who we can become. I am just excited when I see students making different kinds of connections and finding their place and their voice in the world. That's hope, walking.

**FRENCH:** Hope walking, I like that! I do want to mention too that we had an audience member who is too shy to come up and ask a question but wanted to say that they do arts and crafts and works like that. After hearing your words and learning from you, they want to turn their art towards helping the community and helping vets and so forth. You can't make a move without inspiring people, LeVar! So let's begin over here. Please indulge me; try to keep your questions fairly succinct just so we can get to as many as possible. Please go ahead.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Hi. Welcome. So my question is, in the United States, we have a cultural tradition where our most powerful and popular stories have happy endings. They combine ideas that are aspirational and relatable, so "you win" in the end. What are your thoughts on the ethics of stories that have sad or ambiguous endings?

**BURTON:** I love stories with sad and ambiguous endings. I think here in the United States and this culture we have fallen in love with the hero myth. We love to see our characters be heroic and triumph, but that's not all there is.

**BURTON:** There are other states of being in humanity, and we need to be exposed to those through our storytelling as well

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Thank you

**FRENCH:** And thank you. And now we're gonna go over here, go right ahead.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Hi, my name is Helen. I'm a senior at the Cleveland Institute of Music. I just wanted to ask since you were talking about the gift of literacy and being able to read, how do you feel about musical literacy and the ability to read music?

**BURTON:** How do I feel about musical literacy?

**FRENCH:** The ability to read music

**BURTON:** Oh wow, I wish I could read music. It's a language, isn't it? Music is another language, and I have so much love and respect for musicians who know that language and can sight read. I'm a pretty good sight reader in English! To sight-read in another language is like a superpower to me.

**FRENCH:** And you integrate music into your podcasts when you are reading, don't you?

**BURTON:** Well always, look, the human animal is genetically, biologically predisposed for storytelling. Our senses—sight, touch, smell—all of that is designed so that we engage with the world around us. So storytelling should be a combination of all of the stimuli that push our buttons for engagement. There's nothing more powerful than moving pictures and sound, right? Movies have proven themselves and television, the filmed media, has proven itself to be the most powerful tool in the history of civilization for selling shit, for encouraging social growth and change, moving pictures and sound. There is no more powerful way to communicate.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Thank you for being here, Mr. Burton. It's such a pleasure to see you. My question is for the panel returning to the topic of representation specifically in film and television. There's been a lot of conversation about ethnic characters being portrayed by white actors, and I wanted to hear your thoughts.

BURTON: Not in my movies. [*audience laughter*]

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Well thank you for that. [*continued laughter, applause*]  
So I'm just curious of the thoughts of the panel about the representation of those characters, which is so important, as compared to the people portraying them.

FRENCH: Who wants to take that, Joy? I'll throw that at you, you got this!

BOSTIC: I think bodily representation means something. I remember going to Alvin Ailey—I can't remember the piece, it wasn't *Cry* but it was one of those classic pieces—and there was a different ethnic person performing in that, and it was powerful. But for me, visually it was telling a different story. So the issue is what kind of story and representation are you presenting, and that has a context. It comes from a geographical space, and so if we are gonna tell the truth, then we need to be honest about whose bodies and whose stories we are telling and whose bodies and whose stories we are excluding. People need to be honest about that and not dismissive of the context of anything that they're appropriating, and they need to be in conversation with communities about what that means.

FRENCH: Thank you. just a quick point since we heard from your friend Patrick Stewart last night, which was wonderful, along with all of the other friends who were celebrating you. I once saw him do a performance of *Othello* in Washington, DC, where he was the only white actor and everyone else was a person of color. That was a case where he flipped the usual representation, but very intentionally, to make a point about how people have certain assumptions that they bring to that story. I can understand that is a certain thoughtful way of doing it, but that's very different than some of the examples we've seen where it does not seem to have had that kind of thought.

BURTON: No. Purposefully, it can be an educational tool. It can spark discussion around the issues that it brings up. When it happens out of ignorance, it's just plain ignorant.

BOSTIC: Rendering whiteness visible because the assumption that whiteness is normative means that we render that, as a construct, invisible. So the notion that when you bring whiteness into as normative is "Well, this is universal." No it's not. It's a construct and you need be intentional about what you're saying around it.

FRENCH: We're gonna come over here, and I recognize this particular student. I'm gonna embarrass you further by saying this is Halle, and she

is the president of the Global Ethical Leader Society that we were hearing about before. So no pressure, Halle, but go right ahead.

**HALLE:** Thinking of the access to literacy obviously brings up questions of access to education, and I think that something that's very disarming but true about higher education is that sometimes the degree of higher education that you're allowed to achieve—or that you will achieve or that you can have the means to achieve—is just as determined by the zip code you were born into and the family you were born into as the work that you put in. I think in a way that gap is widening between people who do have access and people who do not. So moving forward in a society where the gap is widening, How do we overcome that? What work can we do?

**FRENCH:** Great question. So who wants to take that easy little problem?

**BURTON:** Specifics I can't give you. I do know that we need to work harder. We also need to reallocate resources. We spent far too much money in this country on war and machineries of war. We used to do a fairly good job of educating our children in this nation. We don't anymore. We have sacrificed generations of children on the altar of conflict.

**FRENCH:** Yeah, I have to admit I'm tired of hearing arguments that say we can't afford to do certain things around education, and there are of course other nations that have free education. Really? We can't afford it? I'm a little skeptical myself.

**BURTON:** And rank much higher than the United States currently does on so many indices.

**FRENCH:** Absolutely, so we have work to do. Over here—

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Hi. I'd like to credit this question to my Theory of Knowledge class because I didn't come up with it. *[laughter]* To what extent do you think public figures such as yourself have a responsibility to share what they believe in? And I only ask because I feel that you're just people, and you're not required to do anything, but to what extent do you see yourself being responsible to do that for the public?

**BURTON:** I feel that I'm responsible for every story I tell. I am responsible for the content that I create. I'm not responsible for the impact that it has, but I do take personal responsibility for that which I put out into the world. Beyond that, I don't have any of the responsibilities except to not embarrass my family.

FRENCH: Your wife Stephanie laughed at that one. [*more laughter*]

BURTON: Well, I hope I'm not embarrassing her. For my twenty-five-year old, I can't help but to embarrass her, but that's a dad thing

FRENCH: Some things are universal! Did that answer your question?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Oh yes absolutely, thank you.

FRENCH: Thank you, please go right ahead.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Good afternoon. My name is Mark Anthony—middle initial S. We put the S in there because of the connotation. My parents gave me a conversation piece of putting the S in there, so that's me. So I've had the privilege of teaching every grade from kindergarten to college and one of the common conflicts or problems that I see is when you wanna infuse arts and humanities into curriculum, administrators and sometimes teachers and other students will say, I don't have time for this, we have a pressure cooker situation where we have to pass this standardized test, so we have to teach to the tests is what they want. I would like to know—first of all Joy, it was mentioned last night that God is time and that makes him the author of time, so I feel that we should take the time for what is best for the children. So what advice do each of you on the panel have for those administrators and teachers who just want to teach the tests because of the pressure that they feel for getting the State Standards?

FRENCH: What a wonderful question, we will just go down the row. Joy, want to start us out?

BOSTIC: You know I think it goes back to the mission of what it means to educate and what kind of human beings are we growing. I think this one can apply in any industry. When we are trying to go for the bottom line, we lose a human content in a larger sense of why we're here and so, I think that this is maybe not a practical answer, but it goes back to what is your mission and what is your priority. So you've named it, the problem, the priority is the test. And if the priority is a test, we will fail our students each and every time, and so we have to have courageous leaders who will stand in the gap between those who are demanding—be they legislators, whoever they may be—this focus on the test and remain focused on the human beings that are students and parents and teachers. I think teachers need to be encouraged to press beyond the limited sort of narrow sense of let me just do this and have to be bold and open enough to teach to the whole child.

**BURTON:** I think it speaks volumes about who we are as a nation. The fact that we have eliminated a lot of arts from public school education. Maya Angelou said when people show you or tell you who they are the first time, believe them. We need to believe about ourselves more truth about who we really are based on our priorities, our decision making, and our actions. We have to stop burying our heads in the sand about the nature of life in America today. We really need to be a lot more honest and forthcoming about who we are as a nation and how we got to this now moment in time. We are at an inflection point in this country that is critical because we are in the process of determining what direction we want to go. The choices are really clear—it's either we focus on the human or we focus on the money, and in America money is God. We worship the dollar. I don't care what church you go to. The choices are really clear and the lines have never been more pronounced. So that should make it easy for us, you know what I'm saying? It's are we focusing on the human or are we all about the money?

**FRENCH:** Team human! Go ahead, Cara.

**BYRNE:** First, thank you so much for your work as an educator and for all the educators in this building. I think we recognize your job is not easy, especially if you're in the public school system, where again you have so many changing standards that you're addressing and depending on—again the administration and state pressures—and depending on what district you're in, and what you're dealing with in addition to caring deeply about sometimes all hundred-fifty of your students if not more. So first of all, thank you for that. I think LeVar's and through your career—and again I'm just gonna keep bringing in *Reading Rainbow*—you showed us a way how storytelling can really be ingrained in every discipline and how you can build together. I think Case is really trying to push this. How do we bridge the humanities and technology and the sciences together and find the connection? Again, as overworked teachers it's going to be hard to do that, and again with administrators that aren't being courageous as Detroit challenged, but I think trying to find the ways in which to build those practices and to have that is again if we think about one form of hope. But I but I think you're right. It really does start with hoping for more courageous leaders.

**BURTON:** I also believe that we've arrived at a place where we have placed an importance in the educational process on STEM right or STEAM, which I think is great (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Math). I am



trying to start a national movement where we adopt STREAM as our acronym and include the indispensable R for reading (Science, Technology, Reading, Engineering, Arts, and Math). That addresses the whole child; it's a holistic approach to education.

**BOSTIC:** And I just want to jump back in, because I think the issue is freedom. Going back to the question before about zip code, Do we want people to be free?

**BOSTIC:** Because depending upon what zip code you're in, the money can become more of a bottom dollar than the whole child because they become expendable. Reading and literacy and critical thinking—that's freedom, that's you walking in your whole power because you have the ability to sit at the table and then be fully engaged. So do we want to create children who are really free, or do we want to create people who are expendable to the bottom line?

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Thank you sir, and I would like to say this too—I'm on the STREAM team and if I could, and if anything you can do to add an H to that with the humanities, not STEM, not STEAM, not just STREAM, but STREAHM.

**FRENCH:** Over here please.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Hi. I'm Aliyana. I am a freshman here at Case and I just wanted to thank you first, Mr. Burton, because I would watch *Reading Rainbow* every morning, and I got bullied for wanting to read so much, and you just made it okay. As someone who was asked if she could read—and people were shocked that I could read—I just wanted to thank you for breaking that stigma of who can read and can't read. So my question is for you. I am here as an English and Theater major and I want to be a screenwriter. What is your advice as someone of color to become a great storyteller?

**BURTON:** Take no nos. And write, write your ass off. Write every day, write every day, watch movies, watch movies, watch TV, watch TV, right? Get the form down, get the rhythm of storytelling in a visual medium down and then hone your voice. What is it that you have come to say? Every single one of us has a story and has a responsibility to deliver that story. You have chosen a very public way in which to tell your story, I can't help you with your decision making but I can encourage you to be good at it.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Thank you and thanks for being an avid science fiction reader 'cause so am I, thank you! [*laughter and applause*]

FRENCH: Right over here, please.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Thank you so much for being here. It's an honor. Yesterday you spoke eloquently about how *Roots* was that one moment in time as a country where everyone was together. Now that we are at a time where everyone's politically divided, which is especially exacerbated by the presence of social media, how can our generation start to have those tough conversations when we're a generation that's doesn't take too well to confrontation and doesn't want to address the raw realities of what's going on?

BURTON: Yeah, you guys have a real challenge in my view because of social media and because of our society's addiction to our devices. What my generation is kind of fearful of is the tendency that we see—and you're gonna need to prove us wrong—to isolate through electronic engagement. So what I believe is going to be required is discipline on your part. We can't impose any strictures on you at this point in your lives that we haven't already tried to and failed, so the onus is going to be on you, and I believe as it becomes increasingly more apparent that you are the adults in the room, you will make time for those things that are essential to survival. That's my hope anyways, because y'all love to be on your devices. Not that we don't, but we come from a generation that had both. We had both analog and digital. You all are growing up in a digital world, and you don't know analog. So analog is talking on the telephone to you, which to our generation is as natural as breathing, but you guys won't pick up the phone. You hold one in your hand 24/7 but you won't answer it, because you have this thing about talking on the phone! What's that about? I just believe that at the end of the day the bottom line is discipline. We've all had to learn how to enact discipline in our lives to be successful. It's something that I just think you're gonna have to get on your own.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Thank you.

FRENCH: I also kind of like what you're suggesting there. It sounds like if you guys want to be motivated to do this. It could be rebellious of you. If everyone is doing the isolation on their individual machines, then how rebellious could it be for that person to walk up and have a face-to-face conversation or to pick up that telephone? I'm just trying to spark that little rebel spirit that you must all have in you! Over here please.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Hi. I'm June. It's great to meet you all. My mother loved you on *Star Trek*. I liked you on *Reading Rainbow*. Considering all of

your progress as public figures and including other public figures, today would you consider yourself satisfied if you were to leave this earth with how things are now?

**BURTON:** With the way I turned out the way things turned out?

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Things turned out.

**BURTON:** I could not honestly say yes. No I can't. I'm ashamed of the mess that my generation is leaving your generation. I feel ashamed.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Because I heard things back in the '80s were actually a little more decent, and I don't know what happened, but now you know we thought we made change, right? People seem to be very averse to change.

**BURTON:** Human beings are naturally averse to change. I believe that to be true. Look, history tells us, informs us, that progress often looks like two steps forward, one step back. Yes, we are in a period of retrenchment—we all understand that—but in this retrenchment is an opportunity, as I say, to really define who we are going forward—what we want for ourselves, for our children, and for our world. Today, there are global demonstrations going on all over this planet, people taking to the streets to let their voices be heard on the issue of climate change and how we are despoiling what we should be stewards of. That's what gives me hope—people returning to the streets to protest. When you have protests in Hong Kong where people are carrying signs that say "Give me liberty or give me death," the last time we saw signs like that was in the American Revolution, right? So the spirit is still alive on this planet. It's just died a slow death over the past 200 years here, but it's alive. The spirit of freedom, make no mistake, is alive. In a lot of sense, what we have done in America is prospered ourselves into a state of privilege that leaves us blind to the suffering that still goes on in the world. And the idea that we shouldn't be engaged with the rest of the world when we finally come to see the world as a global village is insanity to me. What it speaks to is the fear that is inherent in human beings around change.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** I feel like we're living in *The Twilight Zone* or something.

**BOSTIC:** But *The Twilight Zone* has possibilities, right? So what you have to learn from our generation is be ever vigilant. We have created change: African Americans in the civil rights movement, Black Power movements, LGBTQ rights, women's movements. Most of the people in this country actually agree because those groups have struggled in community to shift.

But what we always have to know is that dynamics come to suppress freedom. Dynamics come because of the fear, because of the demand to give up privilege, and so we have to be ever vigilant to continue to be engaged, to bring our voices and our resources, to continue those efforts so however we move to the possibilities of this current *Twilight Zone* and get on the other side of another creative space, don't go to sleep. Be ever vigilant.

**BURTON:** Stay woke. Is that what the kids are saying?

**FRENCH:** Right over here.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Hi. I'd like to thank you all for being here and also the Shaker Heights teachers for opening this opportunity to us. So a couple questions ago, Mr. Burton mentioned the bottom line, and I wanted to address that question from the students' perspective. I think that a lot would agree with me that the education system is almost suppressing our creativity and our ability to show our identity through our work. So I was wondering if as educators yourself you had ideas for the student to be able to creatively express ourselves in this system that is trying to withdraw that.

**BURTON:** That is a great question. I wish I had a great answer, but what I know about humanity is that it is full of ingenuity, and that where there is a will, there is indeed a way. Y'all will find it. You'll find your creative outlet. You'll find it—if you can't get it here, you'll get it there. If they won't let you in here, then start your own. That's what black people have done for generations. They wouldn't let us into this thing, so we started our own. There's a black bridge-playing association in this country. Black people don't play bridge. Black people don't play spades. There is a black bridge association in the United States of America, so you know some brothers and sisters are playing bridge somewhere. Creativity will always find a way, always. It's the nature of creation. If it doesn't exist and we need it, we make it happen.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Thank you.

**FRENCH:** You know, LeVar, that makes me think of what you were saying about STREAM, because of course streams, they don't stop, and they encounter rocks, they find their way around. Your image is already making us think. Over here.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Hi. My name is Madison Owens, and I'm a senior at the Shaker Heights High School, and I just want to say thank you everyone for being here. Building upon the issue surrounding socioeco-

conomic factors and how it inhibits our access to and our focus on education in specific relation to how we digest information, do you believe that it is more liberating to process literature from an objective lens? And how it can be applied outside of our own factors of life? Or is it more empowering to look at it from a more subjective lens? And how can we use it to elevate ourselves in the situations that we're in?

**BURTON:** What is your name? [*laughter and applause*] Wow. This is hope y'all. This is hope. Wow. I am blown away. I think the objective lens is always valuable, but you have to know how you are in order to expand, to be neutral enough for that lens to be absolutely objective. It is so difficult to adopt an objective mindset, because we are such subjective beings. Ego is what's driving the train a lot of the times in humanity and so that subjectivity just goes with the territory, but the combination of the two—the objective, if you can get to it, and the subjective—is what is the ideal. Holding both simultaneously. I'd say go for that if you have a choice. Clearly, you do. [*laughter and applause*]

**MADISON:** Thank you so much all of you.

**FRENCH:** Thank you, over here.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Hi. My name is Claire Han and I'm a freshman here at Case. I just had a question for the general speakers. So the focus of today's symposium is on storytelling and representation, and I think we can all agree that there has been a common theme in a lot of the questions that have been asked about all the problems that are prevalent in the world today, and we've recognized the power of storytelling in trying to solve these problems, but I wanted to flag up how the stories that go through are often linked with power and representation in a different sense about which groups hold that power. I wanted to ask—for those of you who have probably observed and oftentimes driven this kind of systemic change throughout different generations and observed all this change—how can we even out the playing field for those people who may not be represented to get their stories across and get these different perspectives to solve these problems in the world?

**BURTON:** We are living in an amazing era right now—what I call the democratization of content creation. The barrier to entry to telling stories with electronic tools has never been lower. In the past, the power rested in the hands of a handful of people: studio executives and network heads. We

all walk around with a device that makes us journalists/storytellers, and if you have a story, there's no one who can prevent you from telling your story. You have the tools. You've watched enough media, so you know in your DNA what the format is, what resonates with you when you experience a good story. In the history of civilization, the tools to create stories and have them distributed on a wide basis have never been this widely available and accessible. Period.

**FRENCH:** Outstanding. Would either of you like to add to that?

**BYRNE:** I like to think of the We Need Diverse Books movement, so again I want to bring in the children's literature. When Walter Dean Myers published an editorial in the *New York Times* called "Where Are the People of Color in Children's Books?," he really sparked this revolution that librarians and parents and people who have been consuming picture books have been asking for a very long time. But now there's this movement again. It started with a couple of people wondering, yes, why are there these disparities, but now it's a grassroots organization. Now it's a nonprofit that supports what is also #ownvoice writers, so if you are someone who historically has been kept out of the publishing industry, there are now channels and resources within these new organizations, including We Need Diverse Books, to bring those voices in. We know how important it is to have those people, to have people of all sorts of different backgrounds telling their story in literature, and that's just one hopeful place where we're seeing that happen and that's again only about four years old.

**FRENCH:** Fantastic. Over here, please.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Hi. So my name is Gary. I'm not a student, obviously I'm older—

**FRENCH:** I love your shirt, though.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** But I still feel "Young, Gifted and Black." I just want to say first off, Mr. Burton, you were such an important person in my life around reading. Sorry, I don't mean to get emotional. In third grade, I was suspended from school for three days one time because I read too much in school, because they told me my voracious appetite of reading was distracting to other students in the classroom. My mother pushed back. She's probably related to your mother; we may be cousins. It got me back in the school and told them that you have to find a way to nurture my love of reading. So I just want to say thank you from a little black boy who grew

up in the projects in Baltimore, and you've really nurtured that growth for me when other people wouldn't, so thank you for all that you do.

So my question is, we live in a time that is really pushed back against inclusion. We see a rise in white supremacy in this country. We see all of that, but also if you are creative of color, there's this paradigm in which not only is there just this booming creativity and ways to get it out, but there's also artists who have ownership of what they're doing. Can you talk a little bit—all of you on the panel—about that juxtaposition of this rise of white supremacy in our country but then we're seeing this just overwhelming consumption and creation of content from people of color. And it's not just people of color that are consuming that content.

**FRENCH:** Gotcha, yeah.

**BURTON:** Doc?

**BOSTIC:** I mean we've seen these tensions particularly in my studies around African-American music and ownership and what that means in terms of content and how that's used. I think the hunger in this country for these sources speaks again to the way these sources coming from African diasporic worldviews speak to the whole self. That it brings in all the senses—movement and visual culture and fashion. These are the things that people seek to be able to play in terms of their identity and their own creativity so that music—and the music in itself is at the very core and structure of what is American in terms of what the arts and how that's been created. I think that what we're seeing right now is the way in which artists are commanding and creating their own spaces. I think it has to do with the accessibility and the way in which people are able to create their own platforms, but I also think it's the way in which these artists have learned and come up and created as they've been mentored and nurtured and are mentoring others. That we can sort of critique that in terms of capitalism and how those structures may continue to play out some things that are problematic in terms of these systems. But I say this: in my “Lemonade” class with Beyoncé when she performed “Formation” at the Super Bowl—and I have all kinds of problems and issues around Super Bowl Sunday and although capital—I was like, I'm not mad at a sister for making money on the biggest money-making day. I mean I have to say—and I tell my students because we deal with these kind of conflicts like Black Panther, Malcolm X, and capitalism—all of those things are questions and in conflicts, but I think that's a community conversation to have. I think that white supremacy, the pushing back power and freedom,

the way in which not only African Americans are consuming and taking in those images, but the way in which those images are consumed across difference, and what that means in terms of how we're pushing what it means for us to be together. People want to break those kinds of connections, but we also have to have conversations about the appropriation and what kind of accountability we have to one another in participating in it

**BURTON:** I also like to say, in my own life, I've had to evolve my thinking from being so attached to the twenty-six years that I invested in the *Reading Rainbow* brand and then bringing it back and reinventing a television show for the digital medium in the *Reading Rainbow* app, which is no longer called the *Reading Rainbow* app, because I finally got that I would never own that brand. You see what I'm saying? So now I'm still doing the same thing that I've always done, only it's called LeVar Burton Kids Skybrary. So ethics should never leave the equation. Seriously, if you're a right-minded human being, ethics is always a part of the solution. So I see no conflict there engaging in capitalism, none at all, because I know that my work is about enhancing and improving the lives of people. There's no reason why I shouldn't be able to take advantage of the system and create generational wealth for my families to pass on to because those avenues have traditionally been closed to people who look like me. So when we get an opportunity to create brands, right? That our consumer brands when we have an opportunity to have ownership—we have the responsibility to have right and proper stewardship of those resources so that that wealth is passed on generationally.

**FRENCH:** So all the love that you have for this panel is now going to turn to hatred of me because we are almost out of time and this is our last question. No pressure Sara. Go right ahead and keep strong.

**SARA:** As Dr. French says, hi. My name is Sara. My question is hopefully a simple one. I don't think it's possible for us to sit in this room and not be inspired to do something, so my question is, when we walk out these doors, what's our next step?

**FRENCH:** Oh, what a great question. Alright, I tell you what. Why don't we go Cara, Joy, LeVar?

**BYRNE:** I'll give the picture book challenge. So take the windows, mirrors, and sliding-glass challenge not only for yourself but for the children that are in our community. So go to bookstores, go to libraries, inspect



the shelves. Whose voices are heard, and whose are silent, and how do we seek those silent voices and bring them out?

**FRENCH:** Excellent. So be that advocate and be that eye. Joy?

**BOSTIC:** I would say do some self-reflection and select a book by someone from a community, from a perspective that you don't feel like you quite understand, that you have some discomfort with, and go find that book. Find a community or a space in which you and they both feel safe to actually engage in open honest conversation about it. Go get that book that causes you some discomfort around where you are at this point.

**BURTON:** I say have the courage to be that leader in your country. Engage your peers in conversations that are uncomfortable and difficult to have, but be that person among your peer group that initiates that kind of discussion and see what happens.

**FRENCH:** Outstanding. Can we please thank this amazing panel? *[applause]* Everyone is once again on their feet. Deservedly so. Well I hate to have to do this, as I said, but it is my sad duty to close this incredible event on behalf of President Snyder and Provost Vincent. I do want to thank you all one last time for attending these Inamori Ethics Prize events with our amazing 2019 winner LeVar Burton and look forward to seeing you at next year's events.

*[applause]*