

Keynote Speech, 2006 Kieser Award Recipient

Thank you, Frank, for those kinds words. And thank you to the Humanitas Board of Directors for this great honor.

I am deeply flattered to be asked here today to address you all but I have to say I did question the wisdom of inviting a studio executive to give notes to a room full of writers—never mind the key notes!

I did not know Father Kieser but in reading his autobiography I was particularly struck by the simple challenge implicit in the dedication at the front of his book. He dedicates the book “to those who seek the truth with passion.”

He believed, with passion, that this was indeed the writer’s calling and I am very aware that this podium has, in the past, been reserved for you, the writing community, to acknowledge and celebrate the work of your peers.

But since we executives are a much maligned and misunderstood breed I thought I would take advantage of this unique opportunity to share with you, the view of the world from my side of the desk.

I started to write these remarks over the weekend while I was in the middle of reading a script we had commissioned about the war in Iraq.

I have always been in awe of how you as writers get up every day, sit quietly and alone in front of your computer and metaphorically look at a blank page.

How you conjure up a story, bring the characters to life, make it real, make it entertaining and even make it something you can sell.

I’m not sure what made me stop reading at that particular moment but it did suddenly occur to me that I was in the middle of a process that is the flip side of what you go through as writers.

Here I was at home, in my office, alone with a script. Being transported to another place—a place I had never been to—in the company of characters I had never met.

And I was struck by the symmetry of it all.

You sit alone and write. We sit alone and read.

And therein lies a tale...

Father Kieser would say that there was a moral transaction between the program maker and the audience. A transaction in which people entrust us with their time and we give them back something of value.

In truth I believe that this transaction is the last in a long chain of smaller but no less significant moral transactions. A chain of transactions in which people make decisions and choices about different courses of action that are informed by a series of value judgments.

Now it may seem that I am stating the obvious. But sometimes the obvious needs stating. And I was particularly struck by this last year when I was a panelist at a forum hosted by the Aspen Institute and the conference of Catholic Bishops.

The theme of the conference was moral responsibility in the Media and the agenda was to explore the moral decisions involved in the development, production and distribution of popular entertainment.

There was much talk about the pressure of creating programming that audiences want to see, and of dealing with the ever competitive and cluttered landscape.

And of course there was much discussion about corporate ownership of the media, the need to deliver ratings and box office and the tyranny of a stock market driven by quarterly results that frankly doesn't reward decisions based on moral criteria.

Indeed it was argued by some practitioners that "social responsibility" is a luxury that few entertainment executives, working for major corporate conglomerates, can really afford.

But in truth are these commercial pressures fundamentally at odds with the notion of a socially responsible media company?

I firmly believe that they are not.

As I began to present this point of view I could see my counterparts at the networks and studios glaze over.

I knew exactly what they were thinking. They were thinking—and once I had finished they were not shy in explaining—that those of us who work at HBO live in a gilded cage—underwritten by a subscription business model—that protects us from the pressures of box office, from ratings and from an unforgiving audience that relentlessly lets us know what it does or does not like.

Well maybe.

It is clearly true that HBO is not driven solely by ratings or box office. It is also true that we have an ability to present more graphic images on screen and we can be freer with language than others.

Indeed it would be disingenuous to suggest that we have not pushed the boundaries in those areas in some of our programming. But frankly if sex and violence were attributes that drove the audience to the screen then The Playboy Channel and Ultimate Fighting would be the highest rated programming on cable.

Indeed if you look at the body of work from HBO Films that has been nominated by the Humanitas Awards over the years—whether it was films like The Laramie Project, A Lesson Before Dying or this year's nominees Warm Springs or Girl in a Café, the truth is that most would have passed the test of any network's Standards and Practices.

The power of these films derives from something other than just the HBO business model—that model does not guarantee great writing; it does not guarantee great acting or great direction. It is a function of something else—people’s adherence to a set of values—people’s commitment to do business a certain way.

I was a producer for years before I became an executive and I learned early that the way things are made has a profound impact on what ends up on the screen. That the production process itself has a central role to play in the quality and integrity of the final film.

That the job of a producer, and now by extension my job as an executive, is to create a working environment in which creative talent can do their very best work. To create a working environment which allows you to pursue your vision, not ours.

A couple of years ago I attended a creative workshop for senior management from a variety of different business sectors. The first question the moderator asked us was to describe the circumstances under which we had done our most creative work.

Although the room was full of executives from a broad range of unrelated disciplines we all said the same thing. Everyone had been their most creative when left to their own devices, working on a high stakes project, breaking new ground, inventing the rules as they went along, flying high without a safety net where the risk of failure was every bit as real as the possibility of success.

We were then asked to describe how we managed our creative teams. And once again everyone had very similar answers. We all admitted that we second guessed the people who work for us, constantly looking over their shoulders, micromanaging their every decision. Asking them to do our bidding.

It was one of those light bulb moments. And a lesson I have taken to heart.

I have also come to believe over the years that the impact of our story telling derives not from the license that our business model allows, but from the power of the ideas that inform those stories.

Margaret Nagle’s script Warm Springs dealt with an uncomfortable truth. Here was the story of Roosevelt, struck down by polio in the prime of his life, who struggles to come to terms with his disability and fight for the rights of other sufferers. But at the very moment he returns to the public spotlight he hides his disability and will not let himself be seen in a wheelchair.

Last year’s winner, Lackawanna Blues, written by Ruben Santiago Hudson dealt with an equally provocative and uncomfortable truth—that with integration and the civil rights movement came the end of a certain type of mutually sustaining community life amongst African Americans.

These dramas explored the complexities and paradoxes of the real world in a bold and truthful way. They did not shave the corners to make them more palatable. And I believe the audiences recognized that authenticity and embraced the work because of it.

Audiences know how messy and complicated the world is. They live it daily. They can smell a fake. They know when they are being sold a false bill of goods.

Ask any studio marketing executive today and they will tell you that now, more than ever, the audience resists and is turned off by hype and spin.

Indeed we live in a new world order of “bottoms up” culture—of blogs and peer-to-peer internet communities—that in many ways are a defiant poke in the eye to manufactured pop culture.

Which brings me to the whole question of our evolving relationship with the audience. And the notion of respecting that audience.

Now let me be clear—when I talk about respecting the audience I do not mean being a slave to it.

I certainly do not believe that respecting the audience inevitably requires that one should only strive to make what an audience wants.

In truth I’m not sure the audience always knows what it wants.

I am talking about a respect for the audience that acknowledges that they want to be engaged, they want to be surprised, they want to partake in that great discovery of something new.

Indeed it seems to me that audiences are most attached to things they have come to discover themselves, that they have a different sort of emotional connection to those things that have to expend some energy connecting to.

There is an apocryphal story of a producer who went to see a network executive to get a better time slot for his show.

The executive told the producer: “Let’s face it most people aren’t interested in quality. By the time they plop down before the TV set at night they are tired. They just want to get away from it all. No one ever went broke underestimating the taste and intelligence of the American people.”

Sound like a familiar story?

Well the producer was Father Bud Kieser, the show was of course Insight and the meeting took place thirty four years ago in 1972.

And so we come full circle. To Father Kieser’s moral transaction.

Between the people who distribute and broadcast films and television programming and the audiences who watch them.

Between the people who commission and finance programming and the people who create them.

To the executives sitting at home reading your scripts.

Without you we have nothing to read.

Without you we have no stories to tell.

Abraham Lincoln is quoted as saying that at forty every man is responsible for his face. It is a striking metaphor. And as seasoned members of this creative community are we not by extension responsible for the face of the organizations and industry for which we work?

So we executives need you to be the smartest men and women in town, we need you to have a vision and a compelling idea, we need you to embrace the paradoxes of the world with truth and integrity, we need you to surprise and delight the audience intellectually and emotionally, and above all we need you to hold us accountable—accountable for those moral transactions of which we are a part.

...so that when you entrust us with your time and talent, you also challenge and compel us to give something valuable back to the audience—to help seek the truth with passion.

Thank You.