

THIS IS **OUR MOMENT**

met·a·mor· pho·sis



We have received a number of requests to share my opening comments at our recent IFEA 65th Annual Convention, Expo & Retreat, presented by Haas & Wilkerson Insurance, last month in McAllen, Texas. As we all close out the unimaginable chapter of the last three years and look forward to the New Year, with all of its many hopes and possibilities, I am pleased to share them below:

Good morning and welcome! This is certainly the moment that we have all waited for, and looked forward to, for so long. The universe has aligned again and here we are!

Singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen may have expressed it most succinctly, with a simple 'Hallelujah!'

He noted, in an interview before his passing in 2016, that the world is full of conflicts and things that cannot be reconciled. But there are moments when we can reconcile and embrace the whole mess, with others who understand, and that's what he meant by 'Hallelujah!' So, with that definition in mind, by all means... 'Hallelujah!'

For the past three years we have all navigated a journey, together, that none of us could have predicted, nor imagined. A pathway filled with endless hurdles that have felt like some twisted video game, where the reward for successfully completing or mastering one level, simply sent us into a new and more complicated level. Moving faster; adding new parallel challenges; and testing our resolve at every step of the way.

We all went through a crash course in health and safety – from masks and vaccines, to hand sanitizing and safe distancing. We retrained ourselves to find, understand, and secure every short-term/ one-time government funding source, until we could begin to recapture more sustainable revenues again, and start refilling our depleted reserves. We maneuvered through supply chain, vendor and labor shortages. We imagined, mastered and created new virtual event frontiers that had not been a part of our toolkits until 2020. We met new challenges with our human resources (staffs and volunteers) and workforce management realities, as offices closed and we began to work from home. We worked to manage the expectations of our boards, our stakeholders, and ourselves, as we did our best to learn the rules of this new game.

We stressed over the rising costs on virtually every front and line item. We charted new courses through changing city and sponsor partnerships. We did our best to embrace pivotal location changes

and to understand fluctuating attendance trends. We watched as any possibility of festivals and celebrations were shut down by war in the Ukraine, with our professional peers in that country still working to provide any small semblance of hope for those who live there, in any safe space they can find. And we rode the waves and impacts of climate change, gun control, drug control, and other political issues/protests that continue to touch our events and communities, mixed with our far more positive diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility desires and expectations that we would like to focus on. And we witnessed a far too quick return to the tragic risk management world that we thought and hoped we had left behind.

It has been a cycle that has tested (literally, figuratively and mentally) the health of our events; our partners; our communities; our countries; our world; our teams; and each of us, individually.

I have watched – from a front row seat – as we have taken our bumps and bruises and scrapes. I have watched in some instances, as doors have reluctantly closed, for good. I have watched as some remarkably talented professionals have made their decisions to move on. And I have, like all of you, come close to the wall on multiple occasions and voiced quietly to myself, “no more.”

The worst position that an event professional can find themselves in, is one where we do not control the circumstances. The last few years have placed us all in that untenable position, on multiple fronts, and none of our choosing. Off balance on our best days. We have survived by being constantly reactionary, with no history or ‘best practices’ to reference; embracing new learning curves that have often been straight up; and welcoming the invaluable support of our global peers as we all worked to make sense of the circumstances together. But despite the challenges, which continue to morph, like a Covid variant, into new and still uncertain ones, we, too, have all gone through our own metamorphosis – as individuals and organizations - and we are ready, once again, to be proactive vs. reactive; visionary vs. protectionary.

In Stephen Sondheim’s recently reopened, Tony Award-winning, Broadway musical ‘Into the Woods,’ the main characters share a wish that we can all relate to, more than ever before...a wish to go to the festival. And just as the musical itself is an analogy for life, it is fitting that a festival is used as the representative reward for many dreams and wishes.

To get to the festival, and to achieve all of their respective goals and desires, the characters must first go ‘into the woods’...a journey and place of uncertainties; danger; loss; life lessons; intertwined lives and relationships; and personal introspection...a place of wolves, and witches, and giants, and curses. A journey that brings them all to a point of pleading ‘no more;’...“no more giants; no more quests; no more witches; no more riddles; no more tests; no more curses... just no more.”

But through – and as a result of – their individual and collective challenges, and the new pathways that each chooses to follow, the characters go through their own metamorphosis. Some leaving – halfway through the woods; some thriving; but all changed for good.

In the three years since we last came together, we have all been ‘into the woods’...and we are not the same people who gathered together three years ago in Williamsburg, Virginia. The festivals and events industry...our events; our organizations; our host communities; our teams; our sponsors; our vendors and suppliers; our attendees; and each of us, as industry leaders and individuals... have gone through an unprecedented metamorphosis, not of our choosing. A metamorphosis that, while stressful (as metamorphosis can be in all of its forms) has arguably left us stronger; more creative; more resilient; more aware; more connected; and more important to our cities, states, provinces, countries and world, than ever before.

And now, this is our post-metamorphosis moment. Our first in-person gathering since 2019. A moment that we have waited for and looked forward to. A moment that all of us fought to be here for. A moment that I hope we all will seize and maximize. It is our moment. It is your moment.

As we reflect (not dwell) upon what we have been through, to better understand the uncertainties that continue in many spaces, in the days ahead, we will have a unique opportunity to continue our metamorphosis, but this time proactively vs. reactively – on our terms – with the friends and professional peers who can help us to re-energize; to reimagine our events; to reconnect with our communities; and to expand our reach and influence. To identify solutions vs. problems. To become the best version of ourselves – surer; smarter; more caring; more capable; more flexible; and better prepared - as we move into the future, together.

And as we gather here in McAllen (much like the Monarch butterflies do each year to start their new chapters) to take control of our destinies again - beyond the educational sessions, and the Affinity Groups, and the Expo negotiating - I would encourage all of you to embrace this moment from a different approach, for the mental health and motivation that we all need to protect along our journey.

I encourage you to:

- **Re-find yourself.** Remember the moment that you discovered the magic of this unique and special industry that we all get to be a part of and find a way to reinspire that part of who we all are. Don’t ever let that get lost or let yourself get too far away from those parts and pieces that drive your passion.

I encourage you to:

- **Remember the many moments when all of your hard work, and stress, and frustrations, came together to provide unforgettable moments that families, and friends, and others in your respective ‘communities’ will treasure and cherish forever.** That is why we do what we do and it is needed more today than ever before.

I encourage you to:

- **Remember and celebrate the obstacles, challenges and hurdles that you (and your team) have made it through successfully.** I am confident that there are many. And be thankful for the many IFEA friends and professional peers, from around the world, who have stood with us and shared with us and made the journey of the past few years beside us. With those friends...to steal another musical line from ‘Into the Woods’...“no one is alone”.

I encourage you to:

- **Remember the lives that you have touched (directly and indirectly), and get to touch, every day through moments that you create.**

Earlier this year, I was approached by my physical therapist and friend, who has a patient with an incurable disease that will slowly take away his ability to move and function normally. He shared his ‘bucket list’ with my friend; one of which was to attend the Indianapolis 500. I reached out to Bob Bryant, President & CEO of the 500 Festival, who graciously provided a special opportunity for him to do so, with VIP treatment at the 500 Festival Parade and events, and tickets to the Indy 500.

Immediately following his experience, my friend forwarded to me a text from

his patient that read "All I can say is this was an unbelievable, unmatched experience!" After a phone call with his patient, my friend reported that "He is soooooo appreciative for this experience! His voice...his stories...his enthusiasm...were palpable!"

Among Bob's other event wins, he can safely include 'life touched; milestone created.' And we all have the power to do that every day.

Many miles away in Asia, an event management student in South Korea, who has befriended a number of us over the years, shared a copy of her impressive master's thesis. And in her closing notations, she thanked us "for showing her a bigger world." Never underestimate the power that your actions and friendships and kindness can have on others – often unseen. I hope that we can all create many more of these positive and lasting moments, as others go through their own (planned and unplanned) metamorphoses.

I encourage you to:

- **Remember that our communities and our world need us - more than ever - to create more moments that will bond them closer together; remind them of and help them to celebrate who they are at their best; allow them to reflect on and deal with their own losses and challenges from the past three years... individually and collectively; and provide them with new and positive things to look forward to.**

Grace, an avid festival-goer, told 'The Conversation' in a recent interview, "I don't know what happens when you walk through the gates of festival...you leave behind your concerns and step into what feels like a more authentic version of yourself." That is what we all provide...and how great is that? I would argue that we are all mental health providers in a badly divided world.

I encourage you to:

- **Remember the moments when others have been there to support and encourage you, and make a point of being there to support and encourage others.** Ernest Hemingway once wrote: "One person alone ain't got no chance." As an industry, let's commit

ourselves to never letting that happen among our friends and peers.

I encourage you to:

- **Be intentionally forward-looking and realistically optimistic.**

Our problems won't all go away... we can't control that. But how we handle them, and imagine them, is in our control.

I encourage you to:

- **Learn something new; meet someone new; experience something new; and share something new... your time; an ear; or an idea; here at this convention and throughout the year...virtually and in-person.**

That active connectivity will change how you see the world...close to home and globally.

And I encourage you to:

- **Strive purposely to dream new dreams that have yet to be imagined; for our events, our communities, our industry, our world...and for yourself.** Dreams have a special magic that keep us inspired; motivated; energized; and make life – ours and others - meaningful.

The thing about metamorphosis, is that it is a cycle that never ends. Like life, it is continually changing, and often very hard. To be certain, we will all have to go back 'into the woods' at some point...to get to the festival...but when they beckon, or we must, even against our choice, we will be ready. And there will always be new witches and giants and unforeseen challenges there... but we will be ready, because everything we learned there, over the last three years, will help us when we must return there, as we clear new paths

and light the way for those who follow behind us. We may just have to be happy with 'limited test group practices' vs. 'best practices' for a while!

After a three-year Covid-induced hiatus, we are excited to welcome you, and your professional peers, to the 65th Annual IFEA Convention, Expo & Retreat, presented by Haas & Wilkerson Insurance. A family reunion. A celebration. A leadership summit. An educational conference. And a united new reset for our global industry.

A metamorphosis, and a moment, that I am confident will change us all for the better.

On behalf of the IFEA World staff and team, including all of our volunteers, local hosts, speakers, sponsors, service providers, exhibitors, and boards, I welcome you to McAllen and the IFEA.

Wishing you all a safe, happy and healthy holiday season and a bright, hopeful and prosperous year ahead!

**Steven Wood
Schmader, CFE**
President & CEO