“Whose Imaginings? Whose Future?”

Closing keynote talk for the Society for Music Teacher Education 2017 Conference
*Imagining Possible Futures*
September 7-9, 2017
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Sandra L. Stauffer
Arizona State University

Please know that I speak every word today with immense gratitude for all of you, everyone here at SMTE and for SMTE friends and colleagues who are not here. Your energy is boundless. Your commitment is tireless. Your sharing is generous. Your openness to ideas, to challenges, provides an endless wellspring of both personal growth and professional re-thinking for me and for many others. I am better because of you. When you hear your own words and ideas come back at you in this talk, please know that I speak with great respect for you and the work you do each and every day. Thank you for what you are doing.

Special thanks also to the Arizona State University extended community. You are amazing people who inspire me every day to stretch, grow, and be a better human. I am grateful.

What a privilege to be together in a challenging time. So please, let’s pause together.

Let’s pause for a moment and think about our colleagues and all of the people in Texas, Louisiana, Florida, Georgia, and elsewhere whose lives have been disrupted and complicated by massive storms.

Let’s pause to think about our colleagues and the people in the Dakotas, in Michigan, in the southwest, and elsewhere, whose lives are challenged by drought or by industrial threats to the water needed to survive.

Let’s pause to think about our colleagues and the people in California, Oregon, Idaho, Montana, and other states where health and homes are impacted by massive fires.

We have damaged our planet and jeopardized our own lives and the lives of our fellow humans for generations to come.

Let’s also be conscious that those whose lives are already tenuous because they live in conditions of poverty are also, typically, those for whom the impact of natural disaster and environmental change is most severe and for whom recovery, if it ever happens, is and will be the longest and most difficult journey.
Let’s pause and think for a moment about the more than 2 million children and young people in the United States of America who, even when there is no natural disaster, live in conditions of homelessness and the more 3 million children and young people who experience food insecurity, as well as even more children who lack access to basic health care or safe living conditions or safe drinking water.  

Let’s think for a moment about children and young people everywhere who, regardless of race or ethnicity or economic security, have sustained physical, mental, emotional or moral injury, either directly from adults in their immediate lives—people they should have been able to trust, or indirectly from adults in society who see them more as a means of generating personal and corporate profit than as people whose wellbeing is the foundation of our collective future and our public good.

Let’s also think for a moment about why we are here in Minneapolis instead of in Greensboro, which had become our gathering place. We are here, as Connie reminded us, because of the stand that the leaders of SMTE took against intolerance made manifest in political decisions about who could be where—a political decision that targets, labels, displaces and devalues our fellow humans. A decision that occurred in a political environment where adults seem to be allowed to speak and act in hateful ways toward one another with near impunity.

Why all of this at the beginning of the closing talk of our SMTE biennial gathering? It’s certainly not a happy picture.

Because, and finally, let’s pause and think for a moment about the hundreds of thousands of music teachers, our colleagues, who work every day not only in the context of all of these social, economic, cultural, environmental, and political circumstances, but also in a continuous stream of public and often witheringly critical commentary about their value, their competence, and their worth. In spite of everything, those teachers, our colleagues, do not give up. They are there, every day, making small and large differences in individual lives, school communities, and public spaces.

And, we have not given up either. We are here, together, in animated conversation, talking about change, imagination, and the future. Our gathering, our sharing of our work, is reason for hope, reason to believe in what is possible, reason to work, every day, to work hard, to keep working for change.

However, I mean the questions of the title of this talk in earnest. Whose imaginings are we about? And whose futures?

In the next few minutes, I will talk a little more about our context and a bit about change and why change seems so difficult. I will offer a few more ideas to consider along with the many great ideas you have already heard in the last 48 hours, and one radical proposal for how we might continue to move forward.
Context is important. Connie reminded us on Thursday evening that the first SMTE symposium occurred in 2005. In 2005, the second president Bush was inaugurated for a second term. The Summer Olympics returned to Greece. The identity of the Deep Throat informant who provided information that brought down the Nixon Presidency was revealed. Bombings occurred in the London Tube. Hurricane Katrina smashed into New Orleans. The Kyoto protocol intended to reduce global emissions of greenhouse gasses was signed by all nations of the world at that meeting except the US and Australia. The average price of a gallon of gas was $3.18. Popular musicians around the world organized a series of “Live 8” concerts to pressure G8 nations to do more about poverty. Microsoft released the XBox 360 gaming console. YouTube was founded in 2005.ii

Change? Yes, and no.

Let’s think about our own profession. To look at our history, one would imagine that music teacher educators are quite fond of change or at least enamored of getting together to talk about the future of music teacher education, music education in the schools, or even the future of schools of music. This is certainly not the first time we’ve imagined the future, or that others have done so on our behalf and sent us a report with their recommendations. Talking about the future or engaging in some kind of strategic planning initiative occurs in an almost predictable cycle in our professional organizations.

Think of the Yale and Tanglewood Symposia, the Juilliard Repertory Project, the MENC GO Project, the Ann Arbor Symposia—all of those (and there are more) get us only from the 1960s to the 1980s. From the mid-80s to the present there have been the Crane Symposia, the Eastman Symposium, the University of Massachusetts Amherst Symposium honoring Charles Leonhard, the national standards movement, and more. In 1999, some of our colleagues went to Florida to an invitation-only MENC gathering and came up with a document entitled Vision 2020: The Housewright Symposium on the Future of Music Education.iv We’re three years away from 2020, and that document seems oddly out of place and out of date. And then there’s the CMS Manifesto that has been mentioned several times here.v

The topics at these gatherings and in these reports include, among other things:

- The role and place of popular music in school and college curricula
- The role and place of world music in school and college curricula
- How to teach for the interests and needs of diverse learners
- Difference between the demographics of teachers and demographics of students
- Content standards and curriculum
- How to use technology effectively
- The problems of meeting NASM guidelines
- The problems of state certifications rules and alternative certification routes
• The problems of working with music colleagues and limited time in the undergraduate curriculum
• The social, political, and economic conditions impacting education and teacher recruitment and retention

Has anything changed? Well, yes and no.

Why does change seem so ponderously slow? Why does it seem so hard?

It’s easy to look outward for reasons, maybe for excuses, for surely the world is a messy complicated place and the need to change will always be with us. But let me also posit, gently, with respect, that in this historical moment, we ourselves may be in the way of the change we seek. Why? Because we are firmly imbedded—cognitively, socially, emotionally, praxially, musically—in ideas, structures, and realities we already know, and to shake ourselves loose from those structures will take concentrated, persistent effort.

It’s difficult to imagine a color you have never seen. The instant you imagine a color, your brain thinks of a color you know.

It’s difficult to imagine a sound (a timbre) you have never heard. The instant you try, your brain thinks of a sound you do know.

To imagine an unknown is challenging, and the future is certainly an unknown. As difficult as it may be, though, we should imagine possible futures, and we should do so while also admitting to ourselves two things: First, we have little to no idea about what the future will be; remember, we knew nothing of YouTube 13 years ago. And second, to paraphrase cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz who was paraphrasing sociologist Max Weber, we are caught in webs of significance that we ourselves have spun. The structures we have built, the codes, the signs, the stories, the narratives, the discourses that we share and know so well also constrain the change we seek.

Consider that the organization we now call NAfME was founded in 1907 and the organization we now call NASM was founded in 1924. At the time, a century ago, the need for structure and standardization was the talk of engineers and manufacturers at an international level. Standardization had become more and more urgent since the industrial revolution a century earlier than that. How was one machine to interface with another? One measurement to be compared to another? How could pieces of an enterprise or parts of a machine made in different places be compatible?

Standardization in gizmos and gadgets and many other places in our lives is a good thing. Standardization allows for predictability, which is why we know that, given the correct adapter, we can plug our iPhones into sockets nearly anywhere in the world and recharge them. Standardization is why we could all travel here with
relative ease and how we can make our way through this hotel without a great deal of confusion.

But, structures and standards have multiple downsides, among them, lack of variety, no guarantee that the standard is the best option, control of standards by inequitable or unjust market or political forces, and elimination or silencing of rival ideas when a standard is widely accepted, for whatever reason or through whatever set of circumstances.

So we need to be honest. Our structures—NAfME, NASM, and others—are a century old, based on language and ideas that are two centuries old and firmly grounded in standardization. And, in my view, our structures have impacts that stand in the way of change. Still, as Derrida says, within every text, every structure, is its own undoing. It is always already coming apart, cracking, rupturing, and in those cracks and breaks are the possibilities of opening and newness.

How might we hurry that along?

Perhaps we can begin hiking the horizontal, a useful metaphor that I learned from the amazing Liz Lerman. She uses the term, and also a gesture, as a means of explaining her philosophy and her desire to live in a non-hierarchical world. To paraphrase Liz (and please do this with me), imagine a long vertical line in front of you. Place one hand at the top and the other hand at the bottom. Grab the line. Turn it to horizontal line. Now pull it into a circle. We are hiking the horizontal, being polyvocal, nimble, moving along a spectrum, respectfully, with an eye and ear to the possible and the potential.

Our current structures are full of dualisms and binaries that are centuries old, colonial, and meant to perpetuate the paradigms and practices of their day. Some of us are products of those structures, which makes it challenging to pull that vertical line down to a plane, bend it into a circle, and begin to explore. To hike the horizontal means that we are willing to live and learn in places of discomfort, often, repeatedly. To hike the horizontal means a shift in perspective, in direction of travel, in language, in structure, in positionality.

What can we do? I have a few modest suggestions and then a radical proposal.

First, one of the impediments to change is our use of the word “standards” to describe the documents produced by NASM and NAfME. It’s misleading (remembering here that we are NAfME and NASM). What we have produced are guidelines. We should call them that, and demand that our associations call those documents guidelines. Why?

Standards are codes for compliance meant to keep things in place and predictable for a paradigm that looks like this (vertical line) and is about the past. That is not what we are about. (And I can’t help it here, but even the characters in the Pirates of
the Caribbean movies know the difference. The Pirate’s code is not really a code, it’s more like guidelines.) I, for one, refuse to acquiesce my sometimes questionable intelligence and my usually good common sense to being compliant to the vertical and living in the past. Go to the NASM website, where you will find the word “guidelines,” though not as often as the word “standards,” along with a statement that says NASM is meant to assist departments and schools. Is it? Is NASM helping you imagine the future? And, what would happen if we called the NAfME National Standards the national guidelines? I’m not sure it would make the document any more accessible, but at least it would be more honest and less punitive.

Second, since many of us here have been raised in the structure, we have adopted the language, the codes, and the gestures of the structure, and we perpetuate that language, those gestures, those codes, without thinking about it. For example, what does the word “traditional” mean? Traditional to whom? Traditional in what context? When? Where? Mariachi music is older than the saxophone, so which is more traditional? Language is code for what we believe is important. How we use language makes a difference. The same words can mean very different things to different people. Have we taken any time to think about that?

While we’re talking about codes, look at your school’s website, recruiting materials, language, descriptions, advertising. What are the messages encoded in them? Who are they important to? Why? And do we have enough courage to talk about that? To be honest and transparent about what those messages might mean?

Third, when you return to your school or department of music on Monday (hopefully), sit in different spaces and close your eyes. What does your school or department of music sound like? The sounds themselves are code for what is acceptable and what is not. Even if the sounds in your building are quite varied, where do you have to go to hear which sound, and at what time of day? And what does that signal about who is welcome and how far the vertical line has been turned to the horizontal and bent?

Fourth, we—music educators—are so used to asking questions about what should be taught and how we should teach that we have almost completely neglected the who and the where, and this, for me, is a fundamental shift. Our seeming perpetual need to focus on what and how questions means, to me, that the music and the presentation of music is the object, the “it,” the focus, the “thing” that matters to us most. I can no longer make the music more important than the people. I want to know who. Who is making this music? Why does it matter to them? Why are they passionate about it? It’s about the people. Every person has a musical self, a musical soul. Who are they? That has to be fundamental. Has to be.

And, where? Where matters. Place matters. Places are made by people. Places shape people and people shape places. When we standardize, we become placeless, colorless, static. The department of music at Texas State shouldn’t look like, sound
like, be like, a school district in Massachusetts. Where are people making music? Why there? Place matters.\textsuperscript{xiv}

Last, we have told stories about music education to ourselves and to others that have become public and even professional mythologies about what music education was and what it is. Music education is not band, \textit{any} kind of band. Music education is learning and teaching in many ways among many people in many places. It’s time for new stories and for making those stories evident, and that is \textit{our} responsibility.\textsuperscript{xv}

I don’t mean to be a wet blanket, but seriously, whose imaginings? And whose futures? To wrap up this part, the structures we have built turn us into compliers instead of imaginers, into followers instead of explores, into tracers instead of mappers. We created the structures, the systems, the narratives, the language that we claim to be problematic or even impossible to disrupt, even though we know that we can no longer responsibly or ethically sustain them. But I am optimistic. \textit{we can} act to turn closed and limited structures into vibrant, musical places of public life. \textit{We can} hike the horizontal. We must.

Perhaps we can begin imagining possible futures from a different point of view, a local point of view. Every view is a view from somewhere,\textsuperscript{xvi} and the local is where life is lived. Grand statements are nice, they are made by “us” for people we barely know. What do I know of the life of a child experiencing homelessness, or a popular musician becoming guitar/songwriting teacher, or a string student in New York, or an adolescent in West Virginia? What futures do they imagine? How do I know about them? And if I did know about them, then what? How can music making and music learning be meaningful if one does not know what it means to anyone else but one’s self?

So here is my bold proposal: What I propose is radical listening. As musicians, you’d think we would be good at listening, but sometimes we’re not, and that’s why the word “radical” is important. Here’s a story to illustrate.

A couple of weeks ago, the current occupant of the Oval Office came to Phoenix for a speech. I went downtown to participate with others in the protesting his past actions, his message at the time, and what we anticipated would he his pardon of a sheriff voted out of office and convicted of obstruction of justice for refusing to cease practices that amounted to racial profiling of Hispanic people.\textsuperscript{xvii} I learned a great deal.

Those who were lined up around the block to get into the convention center to hear the speech were largely quiet, mostly white, a few carrying signs and many wearing hats and shirts bearing the name of the current office holder or the slogan of his campaign. Two large signs of hate speech that appeared suddenly were removed almost instantly by the police.
Those who were gathered to oppose were loud, chanting, singing, playing drums, carrying signs with all kinds of messages, some in multiple languages. They (we) were of many ethnicities, dressed in all kinds of ways, and had various reasons for being there that evening.

The two groups were kept a street-width apart by police, who asked us to keep moving, I suppose for our own safety. So we wandered back and forth as best we could. It was loud, hot, crowded, and peaceful.

The speech began shortly after 7 p.m. I was home by 8:45. I turned on the local news at 9, where the lead story of the evening was the content of the speech and the fact that tear gas had just been fired when a fight broke out among people identified as protestors who were still at the scene.

And it occurred to me . . . the only voices that were heard that night were the one giving the speech and the ones on the news describing the post-protest incident. The people standing in line to hear the speech were not heard. The people protesting were not heard. We were looking at each other and our slogans and signs, talking, sometimes shouting at each other, kept apart from each other by a street-width that might as well have been the Grand Canyon for all the communication that occurred. We were certainly not talking with each other. There was indeed a great deal of speech, but not much listening, in fact, probably no listening at all.

Isn't that one of the reasons why we are in this mess? Even if the two groups had been side by side that evening instead of across the street, what would we have said to each other? Would we have known how to listen to each other?

By acts of radical listening I mean listening mindfully, patiently, imaginatively, repeatedly, and intentionally.

Why radical listening and not simply listening?

Because we are used to acting, thinking, speaking, and listening in certain ways. Automaticity takes over. Have you ever driven home from school at the end of the day with the intention of stopping at the store, then arrived at home only to realize you didn’t stop at the store? Have you ever been in a conversation only to realize your mind drifted and you don’t know what was said? Have you ever realized that you are listening to persuade someone to your own point of view rather than to actually hear their point of view?

To listen radically takes effort. Being mindful takes intention. It takes setting aside time, repeatedly. It takes asking questions again and again. It takes pausing in the moment to recognize that our fear of the unknown or simply of uncertainty in the face of someone else’s hope or distress, dream or desire, keeps us from being with, doing with, hearing with other humans. It takes asking questions again and again. And when simple weariness or our own wariness closes us off and makes us
mindless, we should pause, apologize, and ask again, listen more. Over and over and over.

Ysaye Barnwell, one of the original singers of Sweet Honey in the Rock and an amazing musician, was in residence in the School of Music at Arizona State this week. On Thursday morning before flying here, I was with the 23 students in a class called The Art of Teaching Children Music. We took time to reflect about our experiences listening to Dr. Barnwell talk about an African worldview of music and singing with her during the previous two days. The group members had lots to say, including a great deal of commentary about how they felt equal in her presence, how they felt challenged, how they felt that her request for them to sit soprano-alto-tenor-bass was an organizational convenience and not about voice parts, how they realized that they’d made amazing music, all new to most of them, all by ear. Toward the end of our discussion, a Hispanic woman said that she’d been thinking about the connection Dr. Barnwell had made between spirituals and hip-hop. To paraphrase, the young woman said, “I haven’t listened to hip-hop at all because I think it’s all vulgar and misogynistic. But it’s not all that way. I realized that by not listening, I’m missing out on some people’s stories. I’m missing out on knowing them. So I’m going to listen to hip hop.”

Willing to step into and learn in a place of discomfort. Willing to listen, not to know the music or not just to know the music, listening to know the person and the story. Radical. She certainly will be challenged. Not all stories are pretty stories. And what’s my role? To go on that journey with her. To ask her every Tuesday and Thursday morning about her experience. To listen with her. To listen radically.

After class I went to part of a small-group faculty meeting with Dr. Barnwell aimed at discussing transformation and change in the School of Music. I told her about what the class member had said. Another faculty member commented that Dr. Barnwell’s questioning about our worldview had made him pause and think and begin to reframe and understand. Dr. Barnwell commented, “The road between knowledge and understanding is full of potholes.”

Full of potholes indeed. We are going to take mistakes. There will be injuries, and injuries take time and effort to heal. To build trust, to move from “to” and “for” to “with,” will take not just listening, but radical listening. To get to “mutual flourishing” will take every bit of radical listening we can muster.

We will be asked to go back, to trace the outline instead of mapping new territory and hiking the horizontal. But we can change, we can think and act and be and do and listen differently. We already are. The evidence is here at SMTE in many of the sessions, and particularly in moments when we hear the voices of K-12 teachers, who are actually doing this work on the ground.

Connie called the names of the SMTE founders and chairs on Thursday evening, and that’s important. I want speak the names of the K-12 teachers who were or are here
either physically or virtually or otherwise represented in the last two days: Sarah Minette, Jim Yancey, Krystal Wells, Don Adams, Jennifer Hillen, Diana Clark, Abbie VanKloppenberg, Beth Hankins, Joyce Click, David Mollenkamp, Melissa Salguero, Jose Vergara, Chick Cushinery, Lisa Brandt, Heather Cote, Kevin Lynch, Allison Paetz, Matthew Tippets, Casey Clementson, Jennifer Greene, Paul Smith, David Brown, Brittany Raley. Let’s hold them up. Let’s make it more possible for them to be here. And let’s do some radical listening to and with them.

Whose imaginings? Whose futures? I don’t know. What if, instead of imagining a future for undergraduates we imagined with them? What if, instead of imagining a future for inservice teachers, our colleagues, we imagined with them? What if, instead of imagining a future for preK-12 learners, or any learners anywhere for that matter, we imagined with them? The future is not us. The future is them.

A few days after I received the invitation to speak, I met with a group of very wise graduate students gathered for an informal summer writing camp. I mentioned to them that my task for the evening was going to be this talk, and that John Lennon’s Imagine had been running through my mind all day. One of them, Austin Showen, commented that Lennon’s lyrics are a kind of thought experiment . . . an imagining of the disappearance, the improbable and impossible disappearance, of structures made by humans that keep humans from understanding each other. Imagine there’s no country, no religion, no possessions. What if we did that kind of imagining? What if we challenged ourselves with radical listening? What if acted from a different mindset?

So, here is Lennon’s tune, with different words, which I offer to you as a closing:

Imagine there’s no NASM;
Not so hard to do.

Imagine there’s no NAfME
And no standards too.

Imagine that listening to each other
Is what mattered to us most.

Imagine living and learning
In places of discomfort.

Imagine changing the narrative
One word, one phrase at a time.

Imagine hiking the horizontal
With every musical soul.
You can say I’m a dreamer;
I know I’m not the only one.
Children and young people are dreaming too
And so are you.

Imagine that our most important questions
Started with “who” and “where.”

Imagine that “with” mattered more
Than “to” and “for.”

Imagine radical listening
To every musical soul.

You can say we’re all dreamers;
We’re not the only ones.
Children and young people are dreaming too.
So what will we do?

(Slide: Whose Imaginings? Whose Futures?)

Thank you.

---

i For information about poverty, hunger, and homelessness among children in the US, go to: [http://www.nccp.org/topics/childpoverty.html](http://www.nccp.org/topics/childpoverty.html)
[https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/ecd/homelessness_profile_package_with_blanks_for_printing_508.pdf](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/ecd/homelessness_profile_package_with_blanks_for_printing_508.pdf)

ii The bill is/was the Public Facilities Privacy & Security Act, HB2.

iii The information for this paragraph came from various websites, including:

iv *Vision 2020: The Housewright Symposium on the Future of Music Education* was published in 2000 by the (then) Music Educators National Conference and is still available. Perhaps one of the problems is that all of the primary authors of the chapters are white? I’m not 100% sure of that, so please, someone, do a study.

v The entire title of the document is *Transforming Music Study from its Foundations: A Manifesto for Change in the Undergraduate Preparation of Music Majors*. The
document was released by the College Music Society in November in 2014 and is publicly available on various websites.

vi See Geertz’s *The Interpretation of Cultures*, which has been recently released in a new version (2017, Basic Books). The original was 1973. Geertz’s *Local Knowledge* (1983) and also the collection of essays *Available Light* (2000) are worth the time.

vii A good place to start reading about the history of standardization and then take a deep dive into the reference list: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Standardization](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Standardization)

viii Put Derrida on you reading list. Thanks to Isaac Bickmore and to the 2017 qualitative research class for getting the ideas going: Mallory Alekna, Russ Biczo, Nathan Botts, Vinny Brancato, Lauren Buckner, Tim Nowak, Tavious Peterkin, Austin Showen.


x The NASM website is: [https://nasm.arts-accredit.org/](https://nasm.arts-accredit.org/) The language throughout is contradictory (in my opinion). Did you know that NASM has a page for students and parents: [https://nasm.arts-accredit.org/students-parents/](https://nasm.arts-accredit.org/students-parents/) You do not have to have NASM accreditation to be accredited; there may be other accreditation options in your state and for your university. The process can be more (or less) onerous, so investigate fully. Some schools have left NASM or have chosen not to be accredited by NASM.

xi The NAfME “guidelines” can be found here: [https://nafme.org/my-classroom/standards/](https://nafme.org/my-classroom/standards/)

xii I base that assertion on the invention of the saxophone in 1840 and Mariachi music dating to the 1700s.


xvi The “local” idea is in Clifford Geertz’s writings, which have always inspired me, and also, as Austin Showen has pointed out, in the writings of Donna Haraway, from a different perspective.

xvii To read about the speech and protest:
To read about the pardoning:

xviii To learn more about Dr. Barnwell: www.ymbarnwell.com

xix Another idea from Donna Haraway.

xx With apologies to anyone I missed.

xxi The music used behind the words, which faded in and out on the slides, was a solo guitar fingerstyle version of Lennon’s “Imagine” played by Adam Rafferty.

Checked, 9/12/17 ss