

Thinking Outside the Box: An Interview with William Ferris, Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities

*Interviewed by Matt Bradley and Stephen Gencarella Olbrys
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MB: What is your notion of creativity? How do you define this very broad notion?

WF: I think creativity is being able to think outside the box we're taught to operate in, whether that is a family, or a field of study, or a profession. Creativity is being able to take all the best advice that you're given, and then to see beyond that advice. That may be creating a new form of fiction, like stream of consciousness, or moving from literal to abstract paintings, or telling a folktale, or making a quilt in a different way from the people who taught you. Creativity is linked intimately to change. There is an essay that T.S. Eliot wrote, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," which talks about how you have the great tradition of the novel or the sonnet, and you have the artists who work within that tradition, and each artist changes that tradition, but they can only change it so far without breaking from the tradition. You couldn't have a novel that was one word, but you can move to stream of consciousness and dramatically change what we think of as the novel.

And I've thought that you add a third element to that, which is sense of place, because creativity and tradition and the individual talent occur within a community—rural, urban, wherever it might be. I see creativity operating within that dynamic so that you have traditional blues that comes out of an African-American tradition of music, and you have the country blues of, say, the rural Mississippi delta, the urban blues of Chicago, which are places that define that music. And then you have the artists operating within those worlds, like a B. B. King or a Ma Rainey, who bring their own individual stamp to the art. So you have essentially three legs of a stool of

creative traditions, and the creative impulse is the impulse for both respecting the tradition but bringing change to it. I think that's a dynamic that works in everyone's life, but artists rise to a much higher level in using creativity. We can be creative about avoiding taxes, or catching a taxi. Creativity is something that's inherent in the human experience, but artists raise it to a level that is enduring. As Faulkner said, "You etch your mark on the face of oblivion through creativity and that is the highest level of achievement." I think creativity is something that we all aspire to in the various worlds that we operate in.

MB: How then does this three-legged notion of creativity guide you and direct you, both in your own personal life and what you do as Chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities? How does that manifest itself in what you see as the role of or direction of the NEH?

WF: Well, in a personal sense, as a folklorist, I try to use creativity, first of all to learn from creative artists with whom I've worked, and teachers, both in and outside of the classroom, and to see the work you do as a folklorist as part of a tradition. But also you have the freedom and obligation to change and etch your own stamp. And as an administrator within the National Endowment for the Humanities, you have to see a similar sort of dynamic. There is a tradition here of thirty-five years of funding excellent programming in education and cultural worlds, and much of my career has been enhanced by the Endowment—by *both* the Endowments—through their support, so that I understand that I am one of a tradition of Chairs here. I purposely put the pictures of my predecessors in the outer office to acknowledge their contributions. Many of our staff have been here for fifteen or twenty, some even twenty-five years, so there is a sense of tradition within the Endowment. There are individual staff people who essentially are viewed as the libraries of learning, of memory.

I have brought my own initiatives, which are basically the creation of ten regional humanities centers around the nation, and certainly that's a vision that grows out of my work at the Center for the Study of Southern Culture, and of my experience as a folklorist, and trying to reach into more rooted American experiences for the humanities. But I realize that in many ways this vision builds on programs that have been here all along that celebrate American regional culture. You try to add your own stamp. It's naive to think

that you're going to essentially make everything different. But by simply existing, and coming to work everyday, and having interaction as a folklorist, as a southerner, as someone who loves the humanities, you bring a quality of change that hopefully is creative. It's the most difficult job I've ever had. You have to relearn so much—the culture of Washington, the political process. Politics exist within the academy but it's on a whole different scale of complexity here. Ultimately it all boils down to an old sort of vision that all politics are local, just as all folklore is local. You're dealing one on one, whether it's a Senator or a university president or a foundation officer or a school teacher. Life is fairly clear and simple when you look at it that way, and I think that being a folklorist is a significant asset in these worlds, because no matter who you visit on Capitol Hill, you ground your visits in relationships that are local, and if they're from the American West, you talk about things western. You show how the humanities are creatively involved in celebrating the worlds that they are elected to represent, and that's a process that you have to learn.

There are no easy solutions to the problems of building support for the humanities. A lot of it is simply a winnowing process of day by day, talking about ideas, and educating and raising the profile. Our problem here is people don't know we exist. Very few Americans are even aware of the Endowment and what the humanities are, although they're surrounded by them. Two-thirds of K-12 education is humanities: your history, your literature, your language. One-third is math and science. We're going to need two million new teachers in the next decade for K-12 teaching, and four out of every five that are already there feel that they are inadequately prepared in the field they teach. This is a dramatic crisis for our nation that the Endowment is positioned to deal with. Through teachers' institutes and through new programs with technology we reach into the classrooms and make a significant change, but we're doing that on an incredibly modest scale because of our funding. My dream is to create a parity of funding here—and hopefully at the Arts Endowment too—with the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health. Multi-billion dollar support would give us exciting, adequately funded schools at K-12, college level, cultural programs in museums and libraries, and the kinds of resources for oral history and celebration of communities that folklorists understand so well. So I'm dealing with what I call a "widow's mite" of a hundred and fifteen million dollars. We need several billion to do this job properly.

We need the equivalent of a Marshall Plan to save America's soul for the next century, because we are in danger of losing our memory as a people—and no one understands this better than folklorists. When you lose those living libraries, when you fail to interview your grandparents before they die, a big part of your life—personally, community-wise, and nationally—is simply gone.

We have programs that are specifically designed to touch every American. "My History is America's History" will allow every American to do oral histories with family and friends, put those online, look at their genealogy and a timeline, and essentially link us as a people, and literally link the world, because it will not only be accessible to Americans, but to anyone who chooses to use it through the Internet. These are dramatic new windows. And we have an electronic newsletter that will reach every American who chooses to receive it once a month. We are harnessing technology in a very creative way. Technology will increasingly be a part of what we do here, an inexpensive way of letting everyone have access to what in the past very few people could use, whether it's presidential papers or the oral traditions of slave narratives or your own family history.

SO: There's a certain politics of creativity, and when you and Bill Ivey became Chairs of the NEH and NEA, there was some talk about the potential "danger" of having folklorists in these positions, that they could possibly threaten the very notion of creativity as high art by introducing the element of creativity as everyday life. In the role of NEH Chair, which you point out entails creative acts of negotiation, how has the left and how has the right responded to what you're charting out as a vision of creativity and of national and of regional cultures as well? Have they been supportive on both sides?

WF: Yes, we've had bipartisan support of our work here. Our mission is to help every American. If you don't agree with that, I don't think we're going to be on the same wavelength. This agency is funded by the American people, and our responsibility is to serve the American people. That means every American: every state, every community, every family. We are seeking as Americans to come to terms with who we are as Americans, to be proud of who we are. If you live on a Navajo reservation or you live in a neighborhood in Los Angeles or in the Mississippi delta or New York City, you have great things to discover there, and all too rarely do those worlds

enter the classroom, or enter the worlds that you officially study as a student. The conversations over the dinner table don't connect to the conversations in the classroom. And we want to make that connection.

We want Americans to be proud and informed of who they are— not necessarily celebrating everything as a rosy picture, but showing both the tragic and the beautiful. We want the tragedy of slavery and the problems of that era available and online as they are now. We also want the great dreams of democracy, through the papers of Thomas Jefferson and Martin Luther King, Jr., online, as they increasingly are. I'm finding on Capitol Hill that every congressional leader loves what we do. There's never been an unhappy word spoken during the many visits I've had with liberals and conservatives, Democrats and Republicans. They all come from somewhere in this country, they all have roots and we're here to celebrate that. It doesn't matter what your politics are or where you stand in the academic world, whether you're for certain forms of literary criticism, or what your academic vision is. We're here to support it, we want you to be able to do that work better. Whether you're working at a high school or college or university. The old issues of cultural wars are history here. They will never again be an issue as far as I'm concerned. We want people to have a rich, full life, and that's the only issue.

How can we enrich the American experience for every American? We do that through public radio and television. We do that through better classrooms and teaching experience. We do it through life-long learning, and we do it with a pittance. The total cultural spending in this nation comes to about eight dollars per person. In Germany that figure is thirty-nine dollars, in France thirty-five dollars. The entire cultural budget for Berlin, Germany is \$500 million dollars annually. That's more than double what both Endowments here have to serve our entire nation. We are starving our people. Someone said that if another nation were doing this to us, it would be the grounds for declaring war. But we're doing it to ourselves. We're the richest, most powerful military and economic nation in the world. We have absolute total control of our future, and yet we are choosing to ignore our own culture, our own souls as a people. And that's the message that I bring when I speak publicly because Americans need to know this.

We have literally trillions of dollars of new wealth through technology and other corporate venues. Where is that money going to be spent? We have a history of corporate investment through the

Rockefeller, Ford, Mellon, Carnegie families of monies made out of automobiles, steel, and coal. That money went into foundations to build museums and libraries that have become a national legacy. The question now is what are we doing for the future. We're doing very little, embarrassingly little, as a nation in terms of congressional support, and as a people in terms of corporate and foundation and individual giving. We've hardly begun to give what we can afford to give, and we will pay the price in the next century if we don't turn this situation around. The Endowment is the catalyst for that change. We're basically a barometer of where the future of the nation will go.

MB: You mentioned that you see the Endowment as being accessible and promoting or celebrating, being something for everybody in America, and mentioned a few ways that the Endowment strives to do that. What is the folklorist's role in that? How can the folklorist participate and support the Endowment in that endeavor?

WF: I think folklorists have a central role in the leavening of the culture. My dream would be to see a folklorist in every state arts and humanities council to address issues of oral tradition and community culture, and to see folklorists in every great university and college. One of the problems in our nation today—and our institutions of higher learning recognize this—is that they're disconnected from the communities in which they work. There's a deep division between town and gown, and they are seeking to somehow reach out and address issues of neighborhoods, the tensions between ethnic and racial groups and essentially the loss of community culture where they are located. Whether it's in Cambridge, Massachusetts, or Los Angeles or New Mexico, our universities and colleges need folklorists to help build those bridges. My vision of folklore is that just as we have two folklorists heading these two agencies [the NEH and the NEA], the cultural establishment and educational establishment need folklore to help link them in an intimate way with communities where traditionally they have been not only distant, but often at odds with the communities. This is why the regional initiative is so important. We're going to create ten institutions, one within each region, whose mission will be to get off the campus and to network and connect within a five to six state area all of the resources—not only the university and colleges but state arts and humanities councils, the national parks systems, elderhostel—in

order to become a hub of cultural exchange within that region, then reach beyond that region to the nation, and beyond that to the world. There will be international activities as well.

All of this is waiting to happen. All the ingredients and the elements are there, and folklore is a central part of that vision. America has to come to terms with its own identity, has to be proud of what it is, rather than embarrassed by and running from who we are. Whether we're from Brooklyn or Mississippi or Idaho, we have mixed feelings about our own identity and we usually don't know very much about our roots. It's time that we began to address these roots as a nation as we enter the next millennium. I think our presence here signals that that time has come and that these two great agencies will lead the change in the next century, and certainly folklore is fundamental to that change.

SO: I'd like to ask a related question. There's a good deal of talk about the very notion of "folk" as a label, as an idea. There's certainly a running discourse that it's a problematic label because it emerges out of a distinction between folk and elite and implies a separation of folk from others. And I'm wondering within the political context, and certainly this regional context of which you speak, if you find the notion still usefully engaging in your own career, and in your position as Chair of the NEH. Is the idea of "folk" still a vital one, or do you find there's a better way to talk about this process you'd like to see, this re-emergence of connection in a community? Would you say the notion of "folk," however defined, is a good one to still work with? Does it offer something to the political culture that others don't?

WF: Yes, I think "folklore" as a word has served us well for over a century. I see no reason to try to change the name of the field we study. Everyone understands in some way what "folk" and "folklore" are. Everyone may not use the same definition, and certainly they don't. But at least they have a sense of the field that you're involved in.

I think the average American, the average congressional leader, the average corporate person all have a warm feeling about folklore. They tend to see it as something that is part of the nation's heritage. The Folklife Festival on the Mall and the American Folklife Center are institutions that every state has been connected to in some point in their history. They all have folklore collections from the WPA period, so I think you don't have to be a trained folklorist to know

and to work in these fields. And there's a history of people like Alan Lomax and [Benjamin] Botkin, who while they've not always been welcome by academics in the field, have had a significant impact. Holger Cahill, a great art figure in the WPA period, was not a trained folklorist. But he used folk art and built a concept of folk and art as a major vehicle to bring the nation out of the Depression. He used it as a national banner under Roosevelt's administration.

And I think certainly the Clintons and Gores, and probably every future leader in the White House and on the Hill, will feel warmly about folklore. There's not a person who doesn't love B.B. King or does not enjoy seeing a great quilt. These are universally human expressions of creativity, so I would hang onto the name and essentially build on the strengths that we have—and folklore's definitely a strength. It's an asset. Now whether we define it one way or another as academics really is beside the point. "Folklore" and "folk art" and "the folk" are some of the most important elements that we work with, and that should be the foundation on which we build.