



[Music]

Tom Kelley:

Okay, so doing my homework on our next speaker, Grant McCracken, I talked to the smartest human factor person I know and she described him in three words as quote "proper anthropologist," which translating from this woman named Jane Fulton Suri, translating from Jane's lovely British English into the American vernacular, I think she was saying, "he's the real deal." I also think she was gently reminding me that there are capital A anthropologists in the world and I should stop being so loose with the term. But I still stand by my previous point of view, which is, you can do some of this. It's best to do it sometimes with, the first couple of times, with a real anthropologist around and Grant is one of those. Jane also told me that Grant has this thing about good design being the enemy of coziness, which he will either talk about or I'll bring it up in Q&A or he's, he looks like he's going to deny that -- Oh by the way, capital A anthropologists, little a anthropologists, which is the one I use, can't use that in the state of Illinois because lowercase characters? -illegal in the state of Illinois. Who knew? Sorry, back to Grant. Oh yeah, so Jane told me about Grant, told about this proper anthropologist, told me about this coziness issue and said, "I think he's the only proper anthropologist who's ever been on the Oprah show." And so there will be questions about that if Grant doesn't give it in his talk, in his talk. So fans, if any of you are fans of Grant's blog, you might have noticed that he gave a lot of, he gave us a lot of clues last week about what he was going to talk about. In fact he gave us what seemed to me to be the whole story of his current presentation and then pretty recently, he told us it was all a red herring and that he didn't want to talk about any of that. So he threw us off the scent and so it's kind of a mystery about what Grant's going to talk about next. So let's embrace the mystery and please welcome Grant McCracken.

[Applause]

[Music]

Grant McCracken:

Thanks a million. Here it is. So I'll just, here we go, good. So this presentation is, I think, to put it in the context of the remarks given us by Debbie yesterday and Tom and Ric today, this is my chance to sort of comment on how anthropology can make itself useful to the world of design; to the world of designers. And, you know, when you think about, "What does anthropology have to bring to the party?" -- boy these lights are unbelievably bright. Forgive me if I'm, if I'm slightly dazzled by that, by the lights. So what does anthropology bring to the party? It's always culture. And, in fact, with that wonderful picture of those women pushing those hippos that we saw as we opened up, I thought, "That's anthropology, those are anthropologists!" That's a perfect metaphor for anthropology, it's always pushing its hippos filled with culture and hopeful that, in fact, the rest of the world is interested in the contents thereof. And that's really the problem. Tom delicately addressed the issue of anthropology being practiced by people who aren't anthropologists and I have to say, I mean there are some people who kind of police the distinction and insist that this is something only for anthropologists and I'm on the, in the other camp altogether. I think anthropology is too important to be left to the anthropologists. And point in fact, anthropologists in a fit of postmodernism on the one side and a post-, and a kind of political correctness on the other,

have persuaded themselves that we don't have a culture, that there's nothing much to study in terms of their own culture. They've absented themselves from the game, which is to say it's always my fervent hope that I, and I'm sort of here to proselytize on behalf of the notion that anthropology is not to be done only by anthropologists, so I hope you'll take it up then. You know that single, that "lower case a, upper case A" that Tom was talking about, I think that distinction will go away soon enough. You know, I hope -- in fact, this talk is about making anthropology part of the core competence of the designer. That's my pitch.

Okay, the more particular inspiration for the talk was a FUSE conference that I went to in the spring, in which I heard the bad girls of design talk about design, talk about defending the role of design in the corporation. Nobody used the word "culture" and I thought that's really weird. I would have thought that culture is the thing, or one of the things, that designers bring to the corporation and this was a, this was a discussion that was all about how do we defend ourselves when the corporation says, "Well how do you create value for us actually?" And not to hear designers use the word "culture" made me think, oh maybe there, this is an opportunity for an anthropologist to make himself useful. So my argument here is that this notion called culture is there for the asking, that it matters enormously, as I hope to prove in a moment, to the corporation. No one owns it at the moment, which means it really is kind of this fantastic opportunity. Designers know it, necessarily designers know it informally; what I'm going to be arguing for and -- clearly you know the geniuses at IDEO practice anthropology -- and a sophisticated understanding of culture routinely. My notion is, this is something, this is kind of a core competence built into the design world that can be made more formal as a competence and more formal as kind of one of the claims that designers make on their own behalf.

So what do I mean by culture? You know, this is where this talk gets distinctly un-Proustian. At this point we're going to be talking about culture in quite -- kind of fundamental kinds of ways and not, I mean Proust is, of course, famous for having identified how a **madeleine** in its design properties manages to capture the most delicate and evanescent moments of his childhood. Something so frail and so ordinary as a pastry can actually conjure this exquisite recollection of his childhood. That's the real power of design, practiced at, you know, at the top of the literary version of that art. What we're going to be talking about here for these purposes, just to get the ball rolling, is culture in a more, a more straightforward kind of way. But we can say that culture supplies the infrastructure, to use a somewhat too mechanical metaphor, it supplies the infrastructure for thought and action, it's there informing how we see the world. And that, in some sense, Tom was talking about that Proustian notion of stepping outside of and seeing the world plainly. In some sense, what we're doing there is stepping outside of the frame the culture builds invisibly into our experience of the world, and seeing our world without that frame in place. Which is why sometimes anthropologists are good at identifying that frame.

But just to use one case in point, men are not -- women are not from Venus, men are not from Mars. That kind of corny notion about how to characterize the difference between men and women -- these are not natural differences, these are cultural differences, and if you don't believe me, we're going to talk about Madonna's boy-toy videos, as a case in point here. Our notion of gender is in a constant state of turmoil. And I was just looking at the latest "Sarah Connor Chronicles" on TV and that's just a wonderful study in gender and it is just a part of the process by which our culture is now rethinking this notion of culture. And, of course, we've been doing that for the whole of the 20th century. The way the person who plays Sarah Connor uses her body in that show, I think, is revelational as a kind of reformation of what we think a woman is. So these notions come not from some natural idea of men and women, but from a culture that's constantly reworking them as we go. So what do

I mean by culture? Well if you'll imagine me as an Inuit visitor coming from the Arctic Circle, an Inuit aboriginal, and you imagine me saying to you, "Well, listen, so this thing called a Harley, that's a means of transportation, am I right? That's a way, that's a vehicle that people can use to get from one place to another and it's pretty much like a Honda or a Hyundai or a SUV, right? It's just a means of transportation." You'd feel obliged to say, "No actually, a Harley is a very, very particular kind of transportation," and everything you supplied to clarify what I need to know about a Harley, to really appreciate its cultural significance, that's all of that we claim as culture. The same with ballet slippers. Our Inuit visitor would say, "Well these are really just an insubstantial form of footwear, are they not?" We're obliged to say, "Well it's way more complicated than that, and here's the full specification of what a ballet slipper means in our culture." All of that is culture. Our Inuit visitor might say, "Well there's no real difference between this lovely rose-covered cottage on the one hand and this McMansion on the other. I mean, they're both just places you choose to live, is that correct?" And you'd have to say, "Well no, actually." It's everything that follows from "actually," is the culture that constantly works to shape our experience of the world. So by culture I mean two things. Just to make a crude distinction here, for purposes of argument, I just want to distinguish between "culture above" and "culture below." Culture above is all that stuff that is in constant turmoil, all of the trends that pass through and change the way, you know -- If we can look at pictures of ourselves as we're dressed right now in three years, we'll go "Oh my God, what was I thinking?" At the moment, we think, "Perfect! This is you know, close enough, if not perfect."

[Audience laughter]

But in three years you'll be going, "Oh please, what happened? What was I thinking?" And so culture above is in this constant state of turmoil. And it's crucially important that as designers and anthropologists we know what this culture is and that's part of our competence, part of our claim to being useful creators of value in the corporation, is we know all the latest stuff. But you know, I'm always concerned that this is sometimes all people think culture is, is the latest thing. And I want to insist on the other half of the proposition: it's culture below, it's all the rest. It's all the things that hardly we need say; to make a Harley make sense, to make ballet slippers make sense. All of that is culture, too. What a meal is, how we turn houses into homes, how to say hello in the deep South; it's a fantastic -- you know, it's that hippo we saw those women pushing down the path. It's a fantastic amount of information. One of our notions, and this is one of the things as Tom was saying, this stuff works invisibly to shape our understanding of the world and doesn't announce the fact that it's there shaping our sense of the world. This is a quote from Clifford Geertz. He's talking about our notion, the Western notion of the person, and he's laboring to point out that it feels absolutely natural to us, we will live it in the course of this day, we're living it as I speak and you listen, but in point in fact, it's very particular and peculiar way of constituting a social actor. So if I may, I'll just quote this because, of course, academics can't say anything simply, they have to dress it up so you have to read it three times to figure out what is being said. So let me just, I'll just read it quickly. "The Western conception of the person, as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated, motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment and action, organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against a social and natural background is, however incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context within the world's culture." So we have built into the code that makes us make sense, a certain notion of what a person is, and we live that personness all the time. But it is built into this culture below. You can think about our culture, the culture below especially, as being all the lines of code that exist to create all the software that exists on your Apple. That all that stuff

happens on the surface, but it only happens because people have painstakingly written all of this code to make the software work. That's the culture below we're talking about. [Sigh]

So does culture matter to the corporation? I mean this makes, makes, really makes no difference unless the corporation cares and here I think are two cases in point. Proof that it does. Levi Strauss, the jean-maker, missed hip-hop. This was in the early -- what is it? -- in the '80s and the '90s. They missed one billion dollars in sales in one year. As it turns out, they were chasing the wrong trend. They were chasing one-to-one marketing. And as somebody said somewhat plaintively after the fact of this debacle, you know, when questions were asked and accusations were made, one of the parties in question said, "Who knew baggy pants were a paradigm shift?"

[Audience laughter]

But they were. Something called hip-hop stormed into our culture and transformed it substantially. Here's another example, these are kinds of examples that, I don't know how useful they are for us, but this really gets the attention of people at Harvard Business School. You know, when I taught there and my mandate was to try to get them to take culture seriously and very often they'd go, "Oh please." But when you start running numbers, this Quaker example is especially good, I think. Quaker is, in fact, effective. Quaker bought Snapple for 1.7 billion dollars, they sold it three years later for 330 million dollars and that was because the cultural trend on which Snapple came up as a brand, the trend from which it was extracting the things that made it kind of charismatic as a brand and compelling as a brand, that alternative trend, by '96 it was dead. That's when Quaker bought Snapple. And so -- but Quaker doesn't know about culture. It doesn't know what -- in this case, it didn't know about this trend. So it figured -- actually there's a really good marketing, they had a really good marketing reason for making the purchase, but it turned out they missed the cultural content. And so I like to say the trend, the penalty for not knowing culture here, was 1.4 billion dollars and that really gets the attention of the C-suite. You know, when you make an error of this order.

So who owns culture now? It certain -- B-schools don't own it, I know that from my own experience trying to teach culture in a business school. C-suites certainly don't, there's nobody -- there ought to be a chief culture officer, CCO, but there isn't. MBAs systematically don't know about culture and that's largely the fault of B-schools. No one inside the corporation can treat this as their competence. And very often some of you will have seen this happen: A corporation will say it's contemplating a new something or other and someone will have the bright idea of getting the temp or the intern to comment on what's being proposed. So the corporation, the brand for which is worth, you know, fantastic amounts of money, is now rolling the dice on the basis of what the intern thinks because it doesn't have the core competence within the corporation, somebody they can call upon and, as I'm arguing here it ought to be, see how much better I talk when I walk? It's really a weird sensation.

[Audience laughter]

So I should have been walking from early on. But only, they told me, "Don't walk when you get up here," but I have to. I'm sorry.

So the corporation -- I think it's because I think you're going to rush the stage. And if I'm moving, the chance is I, I can be out of here before you actually --

[Audience laughter]

[Laughter]

-- get to this boundary. In any case, all of this cannot depend upon what the intern thinks and the fact that the intern assumes this kind of importance for these purposes is proof the corporation is really missing something. Proof, I think, that there's a designer here -- an opportunity here for designers. So can we persuade -- I mean, maybe this is just a done deal, maybe the corporations are going to be insensate on this issue. Maybe they're just going to refuse this proposition. I know from my own experience that this is not the case. I was teaching interns ethnography and anthropology at the Coca Cola Company and we, there's one kid in the class, he was a Harvard Business School student here for the summer, at Coke for the summer, looking at me with this expression of intense hostility. Like, "Culture? Please. Anthropology? I don't think so." I mean, just unmistakably hostile. But you could see him kind of come around. You know, kind of get with the program and by the time we finished the program he was all over it. He really got culture in a fundamental sense. And we had a graduation dinner for these kids as a goodbye gift and it just happened he ended up sitting beside one of the heads of one of the units at Coca Cola. And this guy had the very bad sense to sort of pat the kid on the head, figuratively speaking, sort of patronizing him with a question like, "So what did you learn this summer, sonny?" And he just looked at him with this, you know, with just something bordered on arrogance and he said "If you understood this method, you'd own your market." So this kid, who was nothing if not skeptical, underwent a complete conversion. So I think that's, so as it is now, I think the corporation is cheating. It smuggles in knowledge of culture, when in fact it ought to make this a more formal kind of understanding. As I say, it's using interns or the ad agency or someone else to supply this intelligence and that, when you think about, you think about how often corporations are subject to these blindside hits where suddenly the world just changes and the corporation, like a sleeping giant comes to and goes, "Baggy pants?" or "Online shopping?" or, you know, "Mom-and-pop carbonated soft drinks?" you know, the death of Coke and the rise of Snapple. Those blindside hits cost it dear, because by the time it's come to its -- gathered its wits and come to its senses, the game is usually over, right? So it can't afford to live without the early warning that comes when you've got somebody in the corporation who has, as part of their basic competence, this knowledge of culture. So I'm arguing here that design could make culture a profit center and that designers need to know culture and use culture and insist on culture to show the cultural architecture that's implicit in any given project and to make this part of its core competence. To make culture part of the proposition, so that this is always talked about, so that every time a marketer sits down with a designer, he or she expects to get the cultural 411 on what's going on here. Expects the designer to come and say, "Well, you know, there's a Western notion of the person that's being challenged by this new competitive threat. And our opportunity for response can be shaped by our understanding of the cultural code that shapes our notion of what the person is." That should just be just a basic part of the proposition. [Sigh]

So that's what I want to argue here, is that this notion of culture can be part of a discipline. And I guess that's my concern is that I -- I'm nervous that I have undersold this proposition and that you're going to go, "Culture? Yeah listen, I read "Entertainment Weekly," I watch television, I, I -- Listen, I live in Manhattan, I notice what's going on around me. Culture, I've got it." Okay and I want to argue that for culture above, chances are you do. For culture below, chances are you don't. And this is kind of a, there's a scholarly discipline here, there's a body of learning, there's a body of discourse, of collaborative discourse. You know, this is sort of a thrilling idea, I think about how badly anthropologists have studied their own culture, North American culture, contemporary culture, I think, "Wow." You know, if

designers would only step up. if lower case a anthropologists, to use Tom Kelley's distinction, would make themselves upper case a anthropologists, something glorious would be accomplished. So, far from kind of accusing you of disciplinary trespass, I'm inviting you to appropriate this thing called anthropology, upper case a and all. Because without you, in some important sense, the anthropology of contemporary culture isn't going to happen. So that's, so -- no as I say, it's easy to be glib here. It's easy to say, "Well listen, you know, good enough is close enough. And how hard can this be?" and that's a temptation we suffer, but it's also the skepticism that lurks in the heart of the, you know, the CFO in the C suite who thinks, "Culture, really? Like how complicated is this? Really. Like where are the numbers? Like where's the foundational stuff." And that's what I think we really have to fight off, by supplying this cultural intelligence in a thoroughgoing, scholarly, substantial way every time we make the argument. So just know it's not us with a bee in our bonnets, it's us reporting on the anthropology of contemporary culture as we understand this. So to make this part -- you know, to build a culture, the core competence called anthropology into the world of the designer, I think we really want to codify this knowledge and locate the scholarship and build on the scholarship. And that, for me, broaches the thrilling possibility that designers can take up the opportunity that anthropologists have let slip. [Sigh]

I thought you know, we could use this as, and I don't mean this entirely seriously, but I kind of like the idea of having some litmus-test questions that we can ask, the answers to which will let us know whether somebody's pretending to know about culture, or whether they do know about culture. So somebody who's a master of our, of our culture should be able to say exactly what the significance of Madonna's boy-toy video was, right? Kind of everybody knows this one so it's an easy giveaway kind of question. For those of you who don't, this video sounded the end of a certain kind of feminism and augured in a new kind of feminism, and we can talk about that later if it's interesting. Why was Snapple the brand of the moment in the 1990s? What was it about it, carefully constructed and some of it accidental, that made it so compelling in that moment? What, for culture below, what is hominess? What are the drivers of celebrity culture? Why did the great room colonize the American home? American consumers have spent hundreds of millions of dollars transforming their kitchens, living rooms and dining rooms into one great room. And you know how much academic scholarship there is on this topic? Absolutely nothing. Americans decided to revolutionize the built form in which they live, you know the center of their family life, the most sacred, special, the most emotionally rich and substantial space in their lives, they transformed at great expense and great inconvenience, they made it very, very different. The number of academics who've taken interest, followed up is zero. It's astonishing. What do Americans mean by self-invention? That's part of the Geertzian notion of what a person is; that the person has the right and, indeed, the responsibility and most of the skills and the understandings necessary to reinvent themselves; fantastically interesting idea, which in most cultures would be regarded with complete astonishment. We should know the answer to that question. Okay, how would design, how would the design community cultivate this knowledge? You know lots of opportunities here, some programs -- The medical program sensationally good at taking the latest learnings from science and working them into the professional competence of -- and I don't doubt that you do this in any case, but there are lots of opportunities here. Stanford now has a design school, as we know. The Rotman School at the University of Toronto, I think, is promising and working hard on this proposition and surely we can reinstall the design program at the Harvard Business School. That feels to me like ground we need to claim and as I understand it, it's, it's not claimed now. So we want to collaborate with planners and anthropologists, some of whom are keenly interested in collaborating with you. Readers lists and readers groups, I have -- the website Shelfari invites people to put libraries that they care about there, so I have a little library on American culture, so if you're interested in some of the readings that might be useful, that's my, my list.

So this is a strategic opportunity. Designers who own culture would protect the corporation from the blindside hit, master the gift economy, this is a topic for another conference, but this gift economy thing that's so changing the rules of capitalism now. It is a big deal at MIT and we're all trying to figure out what the dickens it is. We're going from capitalism is a tit-for-tat proposition to capitalism as brands now being obliged to release value into the world and have it circle around and come back to the corporation, but only if and when and as it travels from consumer to consumer. Fantastically interesting thing and it's going to really challenge the corporation in a big way. So we should be the people, designers should be the people who know how this works. And finally, this it seems to me would, is a way to make designers more indispensable. So I hope the next time the bad girls of design meet to justify the role of designing the corporation, indeed the next time any designers tell the corporation what it is they do, they'll be in a position to say, "We know culture and without culture you are blind, deaf and dumb." So that's all the time I have. Thanks a million.

[Applause]

Thank you.

[Applause]

Thanks.

Tom Kelley:

Thank you, Grant. That was good.

[Applause]

I'm not sure, I'm not positive you're aware, but you've just given me a large gift this quote, "Anthropology is too important to be left to the anthropologists." I will quote you many times.

Grant McCracken:

Great.

[Audience laughter]

Tom Kelley:

You know, I wrote in my current book, it's called "Ten Phases of Innovation," the first chapter is called "The Anthropologists." But it's mainly about people who are not degreed anthropologists playing that role and I have taken some heat from --

Grant McCracken:

Have you?

Tom Kelley:

Yes I have.

Grant McCracken:

Really?

Tom Kelley:

-- From real anthropologists for using the term loosely. And so now hey, I have you on my side, so thanks for that.

Grant McCracken:

Sure.

Tom Kelley:

So you did that whole thing and didn't mention Oprah at all.

Grant McCracken:

No.

Tom Kelley:

I would have been sorely tempted to do it if I were you. Could you tell us a little bit about that?

Grant McCracken:

Sure. I was doing a study of the material culture in people's homes and they kept -- when I'd say, "So why do you have that stuff on the mantelpiece or what have you done with this little nook?" They would say, "Well it's homey." And I'd say what does "homey" mean? And they'd give me that look like "Buddy, this is bedrock." You know, we're at the -- you know, it's that famous line about turtles all the way down. Everyone knows this line and one of the first anthropologists that goes to India asks a guy about the cosmology, the Indian concept of the world, and the guy said, "Well, it's actually the world sits in the back of a turtle." And he says, "What's under that turtle? And the guy said, "Well it's another turtle." And so the anthropologist said "Okay, what's under that turtle," and the guy said, "Well sir, after that it's turtles all the way down."

[Audience laughter]

So anyhow, there are moments when you're talking to respondents and you get to that last turtle and they just look at you like, "Here it is, hominess. We're done." So anyhow --

[Audience laughter]

Sorry this is long. So --

Tom Kelley:

No.

Grant McCracken:

So the point of the -- the point of the paper was to say "Okay, if I were a Martian and -- what would I need to know about hominess to know what it is these people mean? Why is this notion so central to how people turn houses into homes?" And so Oprah did a show on this topic and she sent me and a designer into homes --

Tom Kelley:

In a Chanel suit.

Grant McCracken:

In a Chanel suit, indeed. And she just laid waste to these homes in the Chicago suburbs. And she would just go in with the cameras rolling saying, "Well look at this place. These people have no sense of design or color or -- I mean, look at these curtains! They're absolutely the wrong color." And I looked at poor Mrs. Sullivan, whose home this was, sort of cowering in the corner thinking, "What have I -- ?" No I see it --

Tom Kelley:

Okay I just --

Grant McCracken:

Just a dramatic device, I -- Some of them were nodding off and I, just thought

Tom Kelley:

Some of you in the back row can't see that his heels were actually off the back of the platform there and you know, remember I said, "Anything can happen and some things will"? I, one of the things I did not want to have happen is, have a famous anthropologist drop off the back of the speaking platform.

[Audience laughter]

Tom Kelley:

So, sorry.

Grant McCracken:

They could bolt up here any second, so I just want to have one foot --

Tom Kelley:

But if you saw what you thought was an overreaction on my part, that's why, so.... It was a protective instinct.

Grant McCracken:

Oh sorry.

Tom Kelley:

You were saying....

Grant McCracken:

Anthropologist saved by designer!

[Audience laughter]

Tom Kelley:

Yeah.

[Audience laughter]

[Applause]

Tom Kelley:

The reverse!

Grant McCracken:

So anyhow, that was -- the show was about this question. And the designer in this case, I can't quite remember her name, but she was a designer --

Tom Kelley:

[Inaudible].

Grant McCracken:

Yeah exactly. No, but she was kind of like a, kind of like a Martha Stewart. Kind of, you know, arbiter from on high who deigns to comment on how people should live and those poor bastards in Chicago who don't know enough design. So that was my job to say, "Actually there's a, there's a cultural code here.

Tom Kelley:

So anybody know --

[Audience laughter]

Grant McCracken:

You could rush me.

[Audience laughter]

Tom Kelley:

No, no, I don't want to rush you at all.

[Audience laughter]

No, no, but did anybody watch the presidential debates? Right?

[Audience laughter]

You know how sometimes they'd say, "Yeah but what do you think of the economic package" Right? So I, so could -- maybe it's just me. In my world, you know maybe influenced by some people around me, Oprah would be certainly one of the top-ten most famous women in America and I think one of the top-ten richest, and I had this, I thought I might get some sort of close encounter. I wrote a piece for "O Magazine" last month; it was September. And I thought that somewhere in that process you might get to at least see Oprah on the other side of the room but no that didn't happen. So I pursued the topic with Gail Anderson, as you noticed, and her whole, and her entire Oprah story, I don't think she held anything back, her entire Oprah story was that Oprah asked her where the ladies room was and so -- But Grant, I sensed there's a story here somewhere because in your version of the story you didn't mention her name.

Grant McCracken:

There are several stories. I'll just tell you my most immediate encounter. She didn't help us collect the data onsite. That was a producer sort of standing in for Oprah. I got to see her in the studio and she was, it, what's the old Victorian phrase, that it was glorious to look upon her. I mean literally, her people say this about Bill Clinton and other people, I've never seen it true of anybody but it was true of her. Waves of charisma were coming off her. As it turned out, everybody in the audience, I'm on the soundstage kind of looking out at the audience

and they're beautifully coifed and dressed. I mean they're exquisitely presented because this is their moment in the presence -- and I was at the time living in Canada and I kind of had heard of Oprah but I didn't quite understand how important she was. And anyhow, as it turned out, there I was on the soundstage and these people were looking at her with a quality of adoration I've never seen anyone exhibit before and you could feel her kind of take that in and give it off. She was like a, you know, like a substation in some sense, pulling in this social energy.

[Audience laughter]

And it was really astonishing. And as it turned out, I had just come from the hospital, I had just had my appendix out and I had undergone kind of a medical crisis going into Chicago, as a result of which I had to go to the hospital. And so I had just made it to the studio on time and they frog marched me through Harpo Studios and the, the poor makeup man was patting me down and he said, "He's not going out there! He's not going out there! He looks like he's been dead for a week!"

[Audience laughter]

You know, just a look I sometimes cultivate for effect, but in this case, it wasn't. So, so anyhow there I was sitting on the stage looking at these people adoringly at Oprah and occasionally they'd look at me and go, "What is this guy doing here? Who dragged him in?"

Tom Kelley:

Right. And did she mention any of your books?

Grant McCracken:

No.

Tom Kelley:

While you were there? Oh, okay. Darn. That's my, that's my dream is -- you know Oprah, she just casually mentions your book and you're set for life.

Grant McCracken:

Yeah I know, exactly.

[Audience laughter]

Tom Kelley:

So, so speaking of books, I, so I have at least five of your books and I don't think I have --

Grant McCracken:

Hey, you're the one?

Tom Kelley:

Yeah.

[Audience laughter]

[Applause]

I won't tell them how I acquired the five, now....

[Audience laughter]

Grant McCracken:

Oh.

Tom Kelley:

Which is that Grant sent them to me.

[Audience laughter]

Grant McCracken:

Oh.

Tom Kelley:

So, but even with my five, I know for a fact I do not have the complete Grant McCracken memorial boxed set. So you've done more --

Grant McCracken:

No memorial yet, one hopes. But soon!

Tom Kelley:

No but you, but, so you've written more than five books given that I have a subset of your collection.

Grant McCracken:

Yeah, yes.

Tom Kelley:

Can you speak to that? Because, in my experience, this writing a book is the hardest thing that is, that one can possibly do.

[Audience laughter]

And I swore after one that I would never, ever write another one.

Grant McCracken:

Right.

Tom Kelley:

This too, I'm going to talk after lunch just a little bit about the process of writing books --

Grant McCracken:

Right.

Tom Kelley:

And things. But can you talk about your process or how --

Grant McCracken:

Sure.

Tom Kelley:

There's the kind of inspiration part and then there's that really, really big perspiration part.

Grant McCracken:

Yeah.

Tom Kelley:

If you can speak to either or both, that'd be great.

Grant McCracken:

Well if there's such a thing as the law of diminishing returns, I think there's a law of diminishing investment or something, because I find that the more you write the easier it gets and the mechanism somehow gets built into your sense of things. So it's the first two books that are the big investment and then unless you're doing more books, you're not recouping, you know, the very considerable cost you endured getting all of that going. That's my sense anyhow. It gets easier as I go.

Tom Kelley:

So the first 20 million is the hardest is what you're saying.

[Audience laughter]

Grant McCracken:

Exactly.

Tom Kelley:

Huh, wow. Okay. I love your idea. So you know, people, I talk to people who think that trends, you know, that's become some little fluffy thing, "Don't talk to me about trend, I've got a business to run here."

Grant McCracken:

Right.

Tom Kelley:

And things like that, and so I love your concept of the "miss the trend" penalty.

Grant McCracken:

Right.

Tom Kelley:

You know, 1.4 billion for Quaker and Snapple. Do you have other examples of that that you can point to? Because I'd like to start collecting the --

Grant McCracken:

Yeah.

Tom Kelley:

-- the "miss the trend" penalty.

Grant McCracken:

I'll send you some. But it feels like we're now into this kind of perfect-storm scenario with contemporary culture where the possibilities to miss the trend are going up steadily.

Tom Kelley:

Right.

Grant McCracken:

Which is why the corporation needs the likes of us ever more. You know we may not need to make this argument about culture to make ourselves indispensable, but I think when we do they begin to see, "Oh if you can spare us the blindside hit then, you know, we'll double your salary and we still owe you something." So I think yeah.

Tom Kelley:

Huh, well good. You know just if you'll send me some just to keep --

Grant McCracken:

I will.

Tom Kelley:

-- keep our karmic balance. I'll give you my example that's already in my collection --

Grant McCracken:

Yes. Yes.

Tom Kelley:

Which you may have already heard is, there's a guy named Kal Patel from Best Buy who tells this story. he's like an Executive Vice President there or something. And he, what he says is that at Best Buy, in, I think it was in the late 1990s, they had kind of maxed out their, you know, in certain areas, and they wanted to get into shopping malls. And so the senior executive team, a bunch of, you know, white guys in their 50s probably, said "Hey, here's a business, Music Land." They owned the Sam Goody stores among many others and they were like the biggest retailer of CDs in America. "So hey, we overnight, we can be a major player in that market."

Grant McCracken:

Yeah.

Tom Kelley:

And what he says is they basically missed the fact that already, you know, it wasn't like it caught up with them later, already --

Grant McCracken:

Right.

Tom Kelley:

-- kids were downloading music online at that point for free --

Grant McCracken:

Right.

Tom Kelley:

Through Napster and other places and so they jump in, they buy Music Land and in the process of running it all the way down.

Grant McCracken:

Right.

Tom Kelley:

They lost a similar number, they lost a billion dollars.

Grant McCracken:

Wow.

Tom Kelley:

But the lesson that they came away -- and when you screw up that badly, you know, for a billion bucks you ought to get some lessons out of it.

[Audience laughter]

The lesson they came away with was, they said, "Look, who was that that was downloading those music, all that music all that time?" It was like 18- to 30-year-olds. And Kal says, "Hey, you ever been in one of our stores?" He says, "Who's working there, right? It's 18- to 30-year-olds." And he so he says, "Look, shame on us." He said, we had -- it's about doing anthropology inside the organization. He said, "We had the answer, we had the knowledge inside the company and it didn't reach us."

Grant McCracken:

Yes. Yeah, yes.

Tom Kelley:

You know we failed to ask even the people who work for us about this super important trend.

Grant McCracken:

Indeed.

Tom Kelley:

Who knows, but... "Miss the trend" penalty. I love the idea, so --

Grant McCracken:

Yeah.

Tom Kelley:

So anyhow, great. So who knows? What else do we -- oh yeah, so you touched on a couple of times the idea of the C suite.

Grant McCracken:

Right.

Tom Kelley:

You know the CEO, the CFO, the whatever.

Grant McCracken:

Right.

Tom Kelley:

And the absence of a CCO, Chief Creative Officer, no, Chief Culture Officer.

Grant McCracken:

Right.

Tom Kelley:

Wanna talk about why you think that hasn't happened? In regards to the title itself, why the CEO suite does not own culture in an organization?

Grant McCracken:

Yeah. I mean, to judge this from my experience from the Harvard Business School, and not to speak ill of that distinguished organization, but it's clear that that organization runs on the assumptions given it by economics. So that -- and it's very hard to get into that paradigm. Notions of cultural meaning are, feel really squishy and they're hard to think and, well, I can see it in my own teaching, I sit and listen, you get together every Monday and you talk about the case in point and I would say, "Listen, there's a cultured take on this," and some of them would go for it; others would look at me and say, "You know what, I just don't know how to think about this and you can't ask me to." And so, to the extent that HBS is responsible for a lot of people in that C suite, I know they are culturally illiterate. They systematically don't know how to think about culture. And many of them do -- what's the sensible thing to do when you're confronted by something that's anomalous and threatening? You can either take a year or two out of your life and gather that confidence, make it your confidence, or you can repudiate it and say, "You know what, I don't think that really matters," and that's precisely what they very often do. So you hear people -- you know, it's the classic kind of generational construction as you get older, you tend to look at the beating heart of contemporary culture which is you know twenty-something, teen-something, twenty-something, and you find a way to make it okay that you're no longer in touch with that as you once were. And you know, you have that -- C suite compounds that problem; you're right, it's white men in their 50s and so there's lots of reasons why they are disinclined to take culture seriously. Because you know this is something we can, this is a fixable problem and I'd love to see what IDEO did to kind of think, I mean it's kind of a lovely problem to think about. How would we give cultural literacy to the C suite? And you can imagine some really interesting culture camps, you know, bringing people to New York City and just talking about, you know, music and film and a number of things, and then taking them out to the city and giving them -- I think people are eager to get back into the know and it's fun to be in the know and maybe that's something for another conference, who knows? But to proselytize, to colonize, actually, that C suite with the knowledge of what culture might be, that'd be a good idea.

Tom Kelley:

Yeah we do, when given the chance. The problem for, as a social scientist at IDEO and elsewhere is you don't get the chance to do it.

Grant McCracken:

Right.

Tom Kelley:

But given the chance we -- A.G. Lafley, whose name came up yesterday, CEO of Procter & Gamble, he was coming out every year to spend a day with us in Palo Alto or San Francisco and we were, like, taking him to Amoeba Records and having, you know watching him go through and try to make him culturally, you know more culturally aware. He's already a very, very smart guy.

Grant McCracken:

Yeah.

Tom Kelley:

But one of the things he did that avoids the Best Buy problem is he's been very emphatic about the idea of reverse mentors, about you know, somebody my age finding somebody 10 or 20 years younger than them to be their mentor. Because, you know, there's the old model called, you know, mentors, and there's lots of those around. So but, he's told all of his people to get reverse mentors and not just on pop culture. He, he called the senior-management team in a couple years ago and he says, Okay, he says, "Now be really honest. Who here feels like they're really up to speed on biotechnology?" And he's got his most senior-management team and nobody raises their hand. And he says, "Okay, anybody else think this is a problem?" He says, "I do." He says, "I think biotech is going to be important to the future of our company," and he says, "I want you to all go out in the next five days, get yourself a reverse mentor in biotechnology, preferably within the company and you know, report back." And he laughingly went out himself and got one of his own. And so it is one way, and it's one way we as designers and innovators can help but it's one way --

Grant McCracken:

Yeah.

Tom Kelley:

That, you know, if the CEO is willing to seek it out; it first takes the kind of humility --

Grant McCracken:

Yes.

Tom Kelley:

-- on their part to admit that they don't know everything.

Grant McCracken:

Yeah.

Tom Kelley:

And some people spend a lot of time trying to pretend that they do.

Grant McCracken:

Yeah. There's a wonderful -- Campbell Soup, I've done a lot of work, ethnographic work for Campbell Soup and they said "Listen, can you teach us how to do ethnography, you know the C suite wants to learn." I thought, "Really? Somebody like the Chief of Legal Counsel for Campbell Soup learning how to be an anthropologist?" Anyhow, so we did a day-long training, at the end of which we had the C suite people talk to, women all of them were, from Philadelphia suburbs and the CEO of Campbell Soup and this woman whose name, I'm sorry I don't know, from the suburbs, fell into conversation about the American home and

the American family. I mean, it changed the scene and you thought "Wow!" How often -- I mean, every corporation talks about how important it is to be consumer-centric and the consumer's king and all; we've been saying that for a hundred years, right? But here was nose-to-nose contact between the most powerful person in the corporation and the most powerful person outside the corporation. Really, really sort of thrilling to see.

Tom Kelley:

The only problem we run into with when you're taking a CEO out to do these observations is everybody wants to go with him, right? Because it's career-enhancing to spend the day with the CEO. But if you're going as we were that day, you know to go, to watch a three-year-old boy wash his hair, right, there's only so many people you can fit in the bathroom.

[Audience laughter]

So it is a constraint. He can't have his full entourage and the security guard had to wait outside and things like that.

[Audience laughter]

So there you have it. So okay, well, just one more question, which is books. I want to go back to books because I'm interested in them and I think the group is interested in them and so a few of us were over at AIGA and saw that great display of 50 best book covers of the previous year --

Grant McCracken:

Right.

Tom Kelley:

-- and things like that. So you've got all these books. Total number, like seven?

Grant McCracken:

Eight.

Tom Kelley:

Eight? Okay. Eight books, that means eight book covers, eight --

Grant McCracken:

Yes.

Tom Kelley:

dust-cover copies --

Grant McCracken:

Yes.

Tom Kelley:

-- stuff like that. Can you talk about that? Because for me that process was painful --

Grant McCracken:

Yes.

Tom Kelley:

Of negotiating between our team who wanted to do design and their team who --

Grant McCracken:

Yes.

Tom Kelley:

-- like wanted to, to bland it all out.

Grant McCracken:

Yeah.

Tom Kelley:

But the, but how did that work for you?

[Audience laughter]

Can you talk about the graphics?

Grant McCracken:

Right.

Tom Kelley:

The, the covers of the books.

Grant McCracken:

Yeah. The first book cover as you -- has a cover so atrociously bad that I thought, "I'm never going to let this --" I mean, I felt just embarrassed to be associated with the book. It looked like possibly the editor had handed it over to an eight-year-old child. I mean, it was really just sensationally, offensively unsuccessful as a piece of design....

[Audience laughter]

Tom Kelley:

No, tell us what you really think.

[Audience laughter]

Grant McCracken:

Actually -- So anyhow, really I just, you know I reached out to -- In a case of plentitude, I found that Bruce Mau was -- is a presence in Toronto and a woman whose name I, oh! Han used to work for Mau and she did a cover so beautiful. You know I was talking about something very frightening, like the world just exploding with cultural invention. I said, I want a book that's quiet and still and, you know, just makes it feel like this is an orderly little world within and she came up with a design that I thought was just exquisitely good. So you know, as usual, designers to the rescue.

Tom Kelley:

Good. Well thank you very much.

Grant McCracken:

Thank you sir.

[Applause]

[Music]