

# **Surviving the Culture Change**

*(Version 5.0)*

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Good morning I want to express my sincere thanks to Raúl Ramos for the invitation to speak today. It's an honor to be here. Before getting started I want to say that while these are reflections from my time and experiences in the US I am hopeful that they will be useful and relevant to you. I believe there is much that we can learn from one another.

These are challenging times for many sectors, the arts included and we're going to talk about why that is, and what we may be able to do about it. The title of this address is "Surviving the Culture Change." Some of you may be wondering what I mean when I say "culture change." It's a good question. So I'd like to start with an anecdote and wind into this topic.

About 5 years ago, I attended a retreat with leaders of a dozen orchestras, at which one remarked, "I feel like I'm the Captain of the Titanic, and there's an iceberg ahead, but rather than being on top steering the ship I'm in the bowels shoving coal in the furnace. I'm afraid if I stop shoveling coal we'll run out of steam, but I know that if I don't start steering the ship soon we're going to hit an iceberg."

I want to talk about this iceberg.

About 15 years ago I was teaching a theater course at a small public university and on the first day of class each term I would ask the 120 or so students to raise their hands if they had ever seen a professional theater production. About 10 hands would go up. I would then say, "Raise your hand if you would like to see one." 15-20 hands would go up. And these were the students that decided to take a theater course!

Remember, this was *before* blogging, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Ipods, Ipads—even before cell phones.

So, I would ask of the remaining students, "Why wouldn't you want to go to the theater?" The answer was generally something along the lines of, "I've gone this long without seeing a play, and I don't feel like I'm missing anything."

These students did not have direct personal experience with "The Theater" or, for that matter, "The Opera" "The Symphony" or "The Ballet."

I won't be telling you anything that is not painfully obvious to all of you when I say that the fine arts are facing a society that is markedly different, and a consumer that is markedly different, from those faced 40 years ago—in the US this is due to cuts in funding for the arts in K-12 education, generational shifts and economic divides, increasing diversity in cities and towns across America, a trend towards anti-intellectualism, changing tastes and aesthetics, the culture wars, increased competition for people's leisure time, urban sprawl, and the decline in the quality and quantity of arts coverage in the mainstream media. Perhaps some, if not all, of these are conditions in Spain as well?

And yes, on top of all of these forces and others, over the past decade plus, new media technologies have begun to shift the relationships between people, space and time and change the ways that people create, consume, commune, and communicate. This is the culture change to which I am referring. What are the implications for the arts?

In 2006, Dana Gioia, the former Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, was quoted saying,

"...the primary issues facing the American arts at present are not financial. They are cultural and social. We have a society in which the arts have become marginal. We are not producing another

generation of people who attend theater, opera, symphony, dance, jazz and other art forms. Most of these audiences have declined in the last decade, some of them precipitously.”<sup>1</sup>

The marginalization of the arts ... the apparent lack of relevance to much of society ... The impact of the culture change on arts organizations ... this is the iceberg.

So can we survive it?

A few summers ago, on the recommendation of a colleague, I read the book *Deep Survival* by Laurence Gonzales. Gonzales spent years trying to understand why some people survive harrowing circumstances—like an avalanche—and others do not and trying to determine whether there are common characteristics of survivors.

I was particularly interested in a chapter in which he examines how people get lost.<sup>2</sup>

Gonzales explains that the way we navigate in life is by forming and following mental maps: literally pictures in our minds of particular areas or routes. Gonzales says you get lost when you “fail to update your mental map and then persist in following it even when the landscape,” (the real world), “tries to tell you it’s wrong.”<sup>3</sup>

Edward Cornell, one of the scientists Gonzales showcases in the book, gives an example of this. He says, “Whenever you start looking at your map and saying something like, ‘Well, that lake could have dried up,’ or ‘That boulder could have moved,’ a red light should go off. You’re trying to make reality conform to your expectations rather than seeing what’s there. In the sport of orienteering, they call this ‘*bending the map*.’”<sup>4</sup>

Gonzales describes five stages that a person goes through when lost. These correlate with Elizabeth Kubler-Ross’s stages of dying: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

Gonzales says that the final stage—acceptance—is the one that separates those that survive from those that don’t.

Here’s how he describes it, “... as you run out of options and energy, you must become resigned to your plight. Like it or not, you must make a new mental map of where you are.” Not where you wish you were. “To survive,” he says, “you must find yourself. Then it won’t matter where you are.”<sup>5</sup>

Gonzales also says that one of the most difficult steps a survivor must take is to discard the hope of rescue.<sup>6</sup>

A couple years ago I interviewed a Stanford University professor named Jim Phills about his great book, *Integrating Mission and Strategy for Nonprofit Organizations*,<sup>7</sup> and one of my questions was,

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<sup>1</sup> Alicia Anstead with Dana Gioia, “The Gioia of it All,” *Inside Arts*, (Association of Performing Arts Presenters, August/September 2006): 30-32. Quote on 31.

<sup>2</sup> Laurence Gonzalez, *Deep Survival* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Laurence Gonzales, *Deep Survival*, 151-171. Quote on 163.

<sup>4</sup> Laurence Gonzales, *Deep Survival*, 163-164.

<sup>5</sup> Laurence Gonzales, *Deep Survival*, 166-169. Quotes on 166 and 167.

<sup>6</sup> Laurence Gonzales, *Deep Survival*, 169.

<sup>7</sup> James A. Phills, Jr., *Integrating Mission and Strategy for Nonprofit Organizations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

“What advice would you give to a world-class orchestra whose audiences were declining and whose deficit was growing?”

He said, “If you are an orthodox orchestra, the reason you are losing audience members (from your viewpoint) could be that the world is not good enough for you. “But,” Phillips asserted, “art really exists only in relation to audiences and their experience, particularly the performing arts. So if a symphony is seeing declining audiences, then the questions are: Would you sooner close your doors than change what you do? What is it that’s important to you and why? You cannot, however, answer these questions without considering your need for audiences and/or enough people willing to subsidize you. And the fact is the number of people willing to subsidize something that is narrowly enjoyed may diminish over time. At which point, you will need to be prepared to go out of business.”

He hastened to add, however, there is another option “there are organizations that are redefining their missions in relation to people.”<sup>8</sup>

In other words, they are rethinking who they are and why they exist.

No organization can be granted relevance in perpetuity based on its past achievements, or the permanence of its building, or the size of its budget. To exist, to thrive, to be artistically vibrant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century arts organizations need to accept – nay, *embrace* – this culture change.

So, I’d like to humbly offer some thoughts on adapting to the culture change.

### **#1—Don’t Conflate Big Numbers with Big Impact**

In his book *Convergence Culture*<sup>9</sup> Henry Jenkins talks about a relatively new configuration of marketing theory that he calls “affective economics,” which seeks to understand the emotional underpinnings of consumer decision-making. He says that commercial entertainment companies are beginning to realize what their fan communities have been saying for a long time: that what is more important than the number of people who buy your product or watch your television show is the depth of their loyalty and the quality of their engagement.<sup>10</sup>

Former Wired editor, Kevin Kelly wrote an article awhile back called “1,000 True Fans” in which he says that an individual creator—someone producing works of art – doesn’t need a hit to make a decent living, he just needs to acquire 1,000 true fans. What’s a true fan? Well, for individual artists he says, “A True Fan is defined as someone who will purchase anything and everything you produce. They will drive 200 miles to see you sing. They will buy the superdeluxe re-issued hi-res box set of your stuff even though they have the low-res version. They have a Google Alert set for your name. They bookmark the eBay page where your out-of-print editions show up. They come to your openings. They have you sign their copies. They buy the t-shirt, and the mug, and the hat. They can’t wait till you issue your next work. They are true fans.”<sup>11</sup>

There is a real danger if we conflate growth of the budget, economic impact, or box office success with having intellectual relevance and creating meaningful impact on individuals and on society. The arts, particularly the subsidized arts, can’t declare mission accomplished just because they get people

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<sup>8</sup> Diane E. Ragsdale, “Mission and Strategy Revisited,” *Grantmakers in the Arts Reader* (Vol. 17, No. 1, Spring 2006): 25-27. Quote on 27.

<sup>9</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2006)

<sup>10</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 61-64

<sup>11</sup> Kevin Kelly “1,000 True Fans” at [http://www.kk.org/thetechnium/archives/2008/03/1000\\_true\\_fans.php](http://www.kk.org/thetechnium/archives/2008/03/1000_true_fans.php)

through the door. It is not sufficient to create artistic experiences and sell or give them away without regard for the capacity of people to receive them and find meaning in them. The arts need to be cultivating true fans, and a sufficient number of them to be sustainable.

## #2 – Go Cellular

In 2005, I read an article in *The New Yorker*, by Malcolm Gladwell (author of *The Tipping Point* and *Blink*).<sup>12</sup> The article was called “The Cellular Church” and was about Rick Warren, head of one of the most successful mega-churches in the US. The way these churches maintain a “sense of community” as they grow very large, says Gladwell, is by creating “a network of lots of little church cells – exclusive, tightly knit groups of six or seven who meet in one another’s homes during the week to worship and pray.”

The church has thousands of volunteers who are charged with getting to know each member that walks in the door and getting that new member plugged into a small group, formed around shared hobbies and interests – knitting, quilting, mountain biking. These cells effectively function as social networks, fueling deep friendships between church members. Without the small group, Warren explains in the article, going to Church with 5,000 people could feel pretty impersonal. Perhaps a bit like going to a concert hall with 1,800 people?

What’s clear from the article is that people who are in small groups are more likely to show up at church on Sunday, stay a member of the Church longer, and give more money. These mega-churches are succeeding because they understand that for most people, it is the social connections they form as an aspect of going to church that in large part drive them to attend and donate.

The same is true for arts organizations. Perhaps like these churches, arts organizations need to help people create social connections as much as we help them form a connection to art and artists.

## #3 – Go Slow

Sometimes when you ask people why they are not attending more art exhibitions or concerts they will tell you that they have ‘no time.’ I think this is just a polite way of saying, “I don’t really want to go.” How do we get them to *make* time?

The Slow Food movement was founded in 1989 to counteract fast food and fast life; the disappearance of local food traditions; and people’s dwindling interest in the food they eat, where it comes from, how it tastes, and how our food choices affect the rest of the world. It has helped people develop their taste buds, and discover the pleasure and satisfaction that comes with savoring well-made locally-grown food, appreciating the place it came from and the farmers and artisans that grew and prepared it, and enjoying the company of the people with whom you’re dining. In other words, the Slow Food movement has given people a reason to *make* time for (and spend money on) buying, growing, preparing, and enjoying good food.

And this movement, along with cooking shows, has had a powerful influence on the US culture. Plenty of Baby Boomers who have no time for the ballet are spending hours shopping at their local farmers markets and chopping organic vegetables in their well-equipped kitchens, so they can enjoy gourmet feasts with their friends and families. The slow food movement was a revolution aimed at

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<sup>12</sup> Malcolm Gladwell “The Cellular Church” *The New Yorker* (September 12, 2005): 60-67. Quote on 62

changing the relationship between people and food. Perhaps we need a slow arts movement? A revolution aimed at changing the relationship between people and art and artists? How do we do that?

#### #4—Free the Art and Free the People

There are four points I want to make in this section

##### *Our Spaces Constrain Artists and Audiences*

Concert halls and proscenium theaters, long considered great assets, may not be able to accommodate the ways that artists currently want to make work, or the ways that audiences want to experience it. We need spaces (live and virtual) that support artists, support socializing, and that enable a more dynamic and intimate interaction between patrons and artists.

##### *We Lock Down the Art*

A growing number of musicians are giving their music away as a way of generating awareness, building a fan base, and developing an audience for their live concerts. In order to reach broader audiences arts organizations may need to create free and low-cost opportunities for people to sample, review, discuss, repurpose, and share artistic content and experiences with others. This is about giving up control: allowing patrons to be active participants and turning them into co-producers and catalysts for participation by others.

##### *We get hung up on artistic hierarchies*

Former National Endowment for the Arts Chairman, Bill Ivey suggests in his new book, *Arts, Inc.*, it may be time for us to let go of the idea of artistic hierarchies.<sup>13</sup> In other words, if we want more people to participate, we may need to stop hammering so hard on the idea that Bach is intrinsically better than Bjork, and Bjork is intrinsically better than my brother Mickey who plays banjo in a pro-am banjo club in St. Louis. A couple years ago, I interviewed Bill Ivey, and he said that rather than seeing themselves as “the be-all and end-all” fine arts institutions need to see themselves as an important part of a spectrum of art making.<sup>14</sup>

It’s all valuable—and in fact, many people would say that they find greater value watching television shows like *The Wire*, *In Treatment*, and *Madmen* than from seeing regional theater in the US. HBO and AMC and other networks are working with excellent writers, directors, actors, and designers and doing bold, ambitious work. Turning our noses up at television no longer makes the fine arts seem discerning; it just makes us seem out of touch. The same could be said of the vibrant pro-am arts arena. We need those hobbyists more than they need us at this point. Perhaps it’s time to stop dismissing them and begin paying attention to them.

##### *We make people feel inadequate and intimidated.*

We don’t often acknowledge that the experience of going to a live performance or museum can be unfamiliar and difficult. Like the gym, you have to start going on a regular basis before it becomes familiar and before going feels better than not going. If lack of familiarity and context is a barrier for

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<sup>13</sup> Bill Ivey, *Arts, Inc.* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008).

<sup>14</sup> Diane Ragsdale, “A New Conversation about Culture,” *Grantmakers in the Arts Reader* (Vol. 20 No. 1, Spring 2009) : 10-17

people then it is up to arts organizations to address this barrier and to provide encouragement, tools, information, and low-risk introductory experiences.

Furthermore, there is value in providing opportunities patrons to be active participants. Invite them to a rehearsal; ask them to write reviews; give them dance, acting, and music lessons. In January of 2009, the Joffrey Ballet needed a way to generate new income so it decided to offer dance classes to the general public (whereas before they had only offered classes to those training to be professional dancers). The program generated hundreds of thousands of dollars in revenue in its first six months running. Moreover, people who took the classes began buying tickets to Joffrey Ballet concerts so they could see their teachers perform.<sup>15</sup>

Several years ago, I was the managing director of an organization called On the Boards which launched a Patron Review Blog back in 2003. One of the first things we noticed was that some of the people we invited to blog about our performances started volunteering their time or contributing donations to us. People like to be invested, to be actively involved, to feel ownership.

#### **#5—You can't fake relevance**

When artistic director, Irene Lewis, arrived at Center Stage Theater in the early 90s the theater was producing works primarily by white playwrights, performed by white actors, for white audiences. Center Stage is based in Baltimore, Maryland where more than 65 percent of the population is African American.

Irene Lewis astutely determined that Center Stage was not actually serving the larger community of Baltimore, and the theater made the commitment to change that by programming 2-3 out of 6 plays each season by African American playwrights or about the African American experience.

Despite angry subscribers and negative financial consequences, the theater stayed the course. Today, the African American plays in the season generate the highest attendance and revenues. It took 15 years to get there.

Furthermore, the theater recently hired a new artistic director who is of African/Caribbean descent. This is quite rare in the US arts and culture sector, where the staffs and boards of organizations are predominately white despite the growing diversity of the cities in which they are based.

No podcast, YouTube video, Tweet, or other new media strategy is going to make 25-year-olds want to go to a performance that doesn't seem relevant to their lives in a venue in which they do not see other people their age. Intellectual relevance cannot be relegated to the PR department. Relevance starts and ends with what's on stage and who's sitting in the seat next to you.

Whether arts organizations are trying to reach younger or more diverse audiences, like Center Stage, they need to do it consistently and authentically and they may need to be prepared to lose some current patrons in order to gain new ones.

#### **#6—Be a Concierge: Filter and Make Recommendations**

One of the greatest challenges for consumers created by the Internet is having too many choices—people are bombarded with information. Consumers increasingly expect customization, and for retailers to understand their preferences and market to them accordingly. While many communities

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<sup>15</sup> Shelly Banjo "Helping Themselves" *The Wall Street Journal* April 23 2009

have developed arts and culture calendars, making it possible for the curious to learn that in the category of “Theater” in New York City they could choose from 287 events this past Friday, most haven’t gone the next step and helped people figure out which one, or two, events they might actually enjoy. It’s too often the same for individual organizations. Arts organizations tend to sell everyone the same package of performances. Instead, they need to be matchmakers.

We live in a time when most people don’t have a culturally sophisticated friend or relative to introduce them to the fine arts; arts organizations could create value by taking on this role – by becoming arts concierges: responsive, reliable, and trusted friends who help patrons make decisions about what to see, who to invite, and where to go for dinner beforehand.

And some of this could probably be completely automated. If I buy Malcom Gladwell’s book *Outliers* on Amazon, there’s a good chance Amazon is going to encourage me to bundle it with another Gladwell book get both at a discounted price. Or because I buy the books by Gladwell, it is going to suggest I buy books by other authors (based on trends it sees among people buying books through it’s site). In this case, it might suggest, among other titles, *Freakonomics* by Steven Levitt and Stephen Dubner.

Well, imagine an idea like this customized to the arts patron and scaled for an entire city. Let’s assume all the products from all the cultural institutions in your region were aggregated by a portal and you could get a periodic email providing personal culture recommendations to you based on your preferences.

When you click through to the portal, imagine you could watch a trailer; read reviews of the show by both critics and patrons; have a ‘live chat’ with a concierge whose job it would be to answer any questions you may have; check to see if any of your friends had already booked tickets to any shows; and easily plan and coordinate a cultural outing with others.

And what if this site allowed patrons to bundle artistic experiences from various organizations? These bundles could be customized or the site could suggest some thematic packages: “A Masterworks package” an “An Avant-Garde package” “An Opening Night Parties package” “A Family Entertainment package”. By doing this, one concert on your season could appear on hundreds of niche packages. And what if these bundles included nightclubs, commercial theater, films, gallery exhibits, books, music, and other entertainment?

What if because you bought a ticket to a concert, you could automatically get an alert when the soloist was being interviewed on your local radio station? What if the interview was automatically sent to you as a podcast? What if because you downloaded John Adams’ new album, *Hallelujah Junction* in 2010, or bought his memoir, you were alerted in 2011 when one of his works were going to be performed by your local orchestra? What if you were one click away from buying a ticket?

In 1992 sociologist Richard Peterson coined the term Cultural Omnivore to describe the tendency of many people to develop tastes for everything: high art and pop culture and everything in between.<sup>16</sup>

We may have a generation of cultural omnivores out there, but we’ve made it really difficult for them to feast because we’ve created silos between high art and low art, and between the disciplines of

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<sup>16</sup> Peterson, Richard A., and Albert Simkus, “How Musical Tastes Mark Occupational Status Groups,” *Cultivating Differences; Symbolic Boundaries and the Making of Inequality*, edited by Michele Lamont and Marcel Fournier (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

music, theater, dance, opera, the visual arts, film, and literature. Furthermore, by maintaining our “separate and better than others” status the fine arts could be losing their spot at the banquet. Rather than competing against one another, perhaps arts groups should be working together to build participation. How about “Cultural Omnivore Subscriptions”?

### **#7 – Focus on Seeing Better Rather Than Selling Better**

Should we stream performances? Make out permanent collection freely available online? Eliminate traditional advertising and produce clever videos for YouTube? Hire DJs and VJs to play in the lobby after the show? Expand the bar? Have a Facebook page? Get rid of the Facebook page? Use Groupon? Use Foursquare? Use Twitter to reach our patrons? Use Twitter to make our next piece of art? Text our patrons on their cell phones? Let our patrons use their cell phones to take photos? Reconceive the season brochure? Dump the brochure and re-design the Web site? Host some sort of amateur art competition? Host salons and artist dinners in people’s homes? Lower ticket prices? Raise ticket prices?

These are the questions that seem to be plaguing marketing directors across the US. The answer? Maybe. But before we can answer these questions we need to answer some other questions.

It’s been interesting to observe how arts organizations have responded to the economic crisis the past couple years—everyone seems clear: Measures must be taken! We need to be willing to make changes in our organization in order to survive “in these times.”

But what about the past 30 years as attendance was declining? In the US It doesn’t seem as though many of us were having nightmares as the audiences gradually turned grayer, and more conservative, and eventually dropped off. Why not? Perhaps *because* it took 30 years to reach the abyss rather than 30 days?

If you know the story of the boiling frog (and if not you can google ‘boiling frog’ and read about it) then you may be familiar with the idea of ‘creeping normalcy’. Creeping normalcy refers to the way a major change can be accepted as normality if it happens slowly, in unnoticed increments, when it would be regarded as objectionable if it took place in a single step or short period. Some couples wake up years after being madly in love to find that the intimacy that was created in the early days has faded slowly and silently because they stopped noticing and nurturing each other.

Relationships with our communities and patrons, just as with our partners, require attention to be sustained. Perhaps, like the couple that wakes up one day to realize “We don’t know each other anymore; we have nothing in common,” we failed to see that our communities were changing, and that art and artists were changing, and that we, as institutions that exist to broker a relationship between the two were not changing in response. We failed to see the culture change. We were bending the map. Seeing what we wanted to see rather than seeing what was really there. In the US, this is how we became marginalized.

We cannot command the love and appreciation of society. Relevance cannot be pursued and captured; rather, it is a side effect of serving society well.

Successful entrepreneurs look at the current state of things and are discontent with the status quo; they feel compelled to find a new way forward. They see something is missing in the world—something that is needed—and feel compelled to create that thing.

Rather than focusing on clever ways to drum up money, first look at the cultural landscape and *see* where the *status quo* is no longer serving the world well, *find* what's needed, *do* what's missing and I believe you will create value for society and that, as a result, you will be able to capture value (resources) back to your organization.

How will you know if your organization is serving society well? For one, you will listen to the artists and the public you exist to serve and take seriously what you hear. A researcher in the US, Alan Brown, has done 'public value audits' for arts organizations.<sup>17</sup> It sounds strange because, of course, the value of the arts is a difficult thing to measure. But the fact that it is difficult to measure does not mean that we can take for granted that it exists. What was valuable 40 years ago may not be valuable today. Society has changed. We exist within a social and cultural context—and if that context changes, then we must adapt.

Now is the time to focus on the core and think deeply about why your organization must continue to exist, particularly if there are other organizations that do what you do. And do not allow lack of resources to stop you from adapting to the culture change. In the US the organizations that did best during the downturn were those that made structural changes that they had been thinking about making but had not dared to make before the recession (and their significantly reduced budgets) gave them the opportunity to do so. Strategy is about making choices. It's as much about letting go of programs that don't work or serve your mission or long term vision as creating new programs that do. You can reallocate the resources you have and make *meaningful*, powerful changes in your organization.

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So to conclude:

In the end, Laurence Gonzales, the author of *Deep Survival*, writes, "Those who avoid accidents are those who see the world clearly, see it changing, and change their behavior accordingly."<sup>18</sup>

The possibility exists that adapting to the current circumstances— whether cuts in funding or an economic crisis—may not simply enable you to survive for the next few years, but to thrive for decades to come.

There is a distinctive role for the arts and culture sector. Look at the countless people whose lives and well being are affected by the declining economy, or by war, or who are simply worn down by the daily grind. We need to hold ourselves accountable for mattering not just to a few people, the cultural elite, but to society-at-large.

In 1963, the philanthropist John D. Rockefeller III proclaimed, "The arts are not for the privileged few, but for the many. Their place is not on the periphery of daily life, but at its center." America didn't fulfill Rockefeller's vision in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But wouldn't it be great if we, all of us, could do it in the 21<sup>st</sup>?

If we can be open to, and courageous in the face of, the changing world, I believe we can.

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<sup>17</sup> Alan Brown / Wolf Brown: <http://wolfbrown.com/index.php?page=alan-brown>

<sup>18</sup> Laurence Gonzales, *Deep Survival* 281