

## Past as Prologue: Dreams of an Ideal Theatre

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2011 TCG National Conference

June 17, 2011

[My purpose] is to talk up a revolution. Where there are rumblings already, I want to cheer them on. I intend to be incendiary and subversive....I shall probably hurt some people unintentionally; there are some I want to hurt. I may as well confess right now the full extent of my animus: there are times when, confronted with the despicable behavior of people in the American theatre, I feel like the lunatic Lear on the heath, wanting to “kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill.

I didn't write that. I wish I had. It's the opening paragraph of Herbert Blau's 1964 Manifesto, *The Impossible Theatre*. Herbert Blau, if you don't know, was, with Jules Irving, co-founder of the ground-breaking Actor's Workshop in San Francisco and, briefly, co-director of the Repertory Theatre of Lincoln Center. Almost 50 years later, the “full extent of his animus” still shoots directly into your heart. You feel the roaring impatience of that original impulse, the crashing idealism that pulled you into the theatre in the first place.

This is just one compelling voice from the fanatical chorus of American theatre's artistic mothers and fathers, not when they were running multimillion-dollar institutions, but when they were kids with an attitude and a world to change. When Joseph Papp went

toe-to-toe with a man named Moses in Central Park, when the Fichandlers demanded an audience in the Capitol, when Robert Brustein stormed the Ivied walls of Yale, when Julian Beck and Judith Malina insisted on Paradise (Now!), when Bill Ball tried to shake the earth in San Francisco. It's the cry of others, too, who dreamed, with Blau, of an "Impossible" theatre or an Ideal, Open, Living, Organic, Immediate, National, Federal, Holy, Public one.

I want to steal from Blau and say that my purpose, too, is to talk up a revolution, but not the coming revolution, rather the one that happened over the course of the past century. I want to share with you some underlying principles of that revolution, as I understand them, and urge us, as a community of leaders, to reignite those principles, to accept their challenge.

TCG has been my tribal home for exactly half of its 50 years, and, so, this anniversary feels familial and personal. My role today is that of self-anointed memory keeper, including of memories that aren't my own. Some of you are new here; excuse me if I blow through the exposition. Some of you were present at the birth; forgive me if I get it wrong. I am profoundly grateful to TCG for letting me speak to you. I am determined to arm the tribe for the future with the weapons and ideals of the past. Particularly the ideals, because the revolution I want to talk up is a revolution of idealism.

I've spent the past eight years collecting into a book what I think of as founding visions of American theatres—manifestoes, memoirs, letters, diaries, statements of purpose

and desire, the words of theatre pioneers as diverse as The Federal Theatre Project's Hallie Flanagan, the Guthrie Theatre's eponym Tyrone, and Ellen Stewart, La Mama of us all. It's an anthology of those who have led the way: bohemians from Greenwich Village, builders of institutional theatres, and fearless activists from Vermont's Bread and Puppet to the Living Theatre, wanderers of the earth. There are singular geniuses, like Orson Welles and Charles Ludlam, and collective geniuses, such as the folks from the Open Theatre and the young smarty-pantses of Second City.

For me, the project has been a search for inspiration and influence—for impact. What is the lineage of our theatre? Why do certain theatres exert a hold on our imaginations over time? How can the voices from a theatre that lasted four years or six or ten, seventy or eighty years ago, make my blood burn when the theatre I live in too often leaves me cold? Where is our sense of unique, passionate mission in a world of nearly identical mission statements, where we leave the articulation of vision to fundraisers and vet them in marketing departments?

The book, which TCG will bring out next spring, is called *An Ideal Theatre*, because it's about beginnings, and every theatre begins as an ideal. Every theatre begins in dream form. It's about an ideal of our capital T theatre that I speak to you today, neither as an artistic director nor as a scholar, but somewhere in between—amateur historian; sometime-journalist; loving, engaged, occasionally enraged observer of the field in which I practice. I speak as someone who has been, as a collector of these founding visions, consorting with dreamers of theatres. Their dream-visions have possessed me.

I want to pass their torch along, or at least use it to light a fire for us to sit around for our precious time together.

So I stand before you like that slightly creepy uncle who spends too much of his too solitary time logged on to genealogy websites. I come to this 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary meal clutching bent-up file folders sloppy with print outs and lists of names. I carry, maybe, a portable reel-to-reel tape machine with something you have to hear. What I want you to hear is the voices of the people who led us to this day. What do they have to say to us now, fifty years on, as we ask ourselves “What if it were all different?” Now as we try to ready ourselves for the uncertain, if not terrifying, future?

Here’s what I’m *not* going to tell you: I’m not going to tell you that everything was better in the old days. I’m not going to tell you we’ve got it all wrong. I’m not going to tell you that there are no visionaries in the theatre today, or that our best impulses have in some irretrievable way been corrupted. Almost none of the theatres I will talk about are in this room, so I won’t tell you how exceptional yours is, or mine. We just received news of the present; this morning David Houle brought us flashes from the future. I bring messages from our common history. I am here to tell you that our progenitors have handed us a ball of thread to find our way through the labyrinth, or, better, a ball of wire, because there’s current running through it, an electrical charge. Maybe you don’t need re-charging, but I do—constantly—so I hold tight.

## **Revolutionary principal #1: The words of the Federal Theatre Project's Hallie**

**Flanagan: "Democracy speaks in many voices..."**

In almost a decade of research, my biggest epiphany was this: The theatre as we know it—the non-commercial, non-Broadway theatre—began as an immigrant theatre. Its *first* impulse was to celebrate cultural distinctions while searching for a common tongue. Specifically, it began in a settlement house in Chicago's urban ghetto near the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

"A house, easily accessible, ample in space, hospitable and tolerant in spirit, situated in the midst of the large foreign colonies which so easily isolate themselves in American cities...." This was how Jane Addams, Hull-House Settlement House's founding, guiding angel pictured it. Inspired by British social reformers in the London slums, Addams' utilitarian fervor—her belief in education, progressive reform, self-expression and democracy—led to the birth of the first American art theatre. It led to other firsts as well—public baths, pools, and gymnasiums in Chicago; women's labor unions; local investigations of sanitation, tuberculosis, infant mortality and cocaine trafficking. One more first: in 1931, Addams became the first American woman awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

The Hull-House Dramatic Association—or, as it came to be known, the Hull-House Players, made theatre as part of making America. Starting in the 1890s, Hull-House offered classes and staged plays, including some of the earliest American productions

of Shaw, Ibsen, and Lady Gregory, to audiences of immigrants, clustered in the tenements surrounding the corner of Halsted and Polk, where the house stood. The Greeks put on *Electra* in classical Greek to “[show] forth the glory of Greece” to “the ignorant Americans;” the Lithuanians, Poles, and other Russians staged work in their own tongue, which kept “alive their sense of participation in the great Russian revolution and relieve[d] their feelings in regard to it.”

At this crossroads, Hull-House was a contradiction of identification and assimilation, as the transplanted played out the stories of their distinct national identities *and* began to steep in the American melting pot. We make one world from the stories of many different worlds. Multiculturalism, or whatever you call it, didn’t begin in the 1980s, though we sometimes behave as if it did. Hull-House reminds us that ethnic, racial and cultural diversity is, in fact, our theatre’s foundation. Diversity was, simply, our field’s *originating premise*.

You’ve noticed I’m using the term “art theatre” instead of “nonprofit.” Nonprofit, as a label, gained traction in the late ‘40s and took off in the ‘60s to distinguish us economically from Broadway. Art theatre was our root name for half of last century. Nonprofit is a marketplace designation; art is an aspiration. I want to face the future in aspiration.

**Revolutionary principal # 2, from W.E.B. Dubois: About Us, By Us, For Us, Near Us.**

It's hardly a coincidence that one of the first visionaries to call for a theatre for, by, about, and near a particular race of people, was the man who wrote that "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line." W.E.B. Du Bois was many things—sociologist, historian, novelist, cultural critic, political activist, founder (including of the NAACP). He was also a playwright. His plays, such as the sweeping pageant *The Star of Ethiopia*, were designed to teach American blacks about their history and their connections to Africa and the Pan-African world. He wrote to provoke thought among his people. He wrote protest drama to agitate in the white world, especially by revealing the Negro "as a human, feeling thing," connecting him to "almost every event in American history." He wrote to stir white liberals to join the fight for equal opportunity.

From his longtime perch as editor of the NAACP's magazine, *The Crisis*, Du Bois called for the formation of a "Negro Folk theatre," modeled on the Abbey Theatre in Ireland, which would tell the story of the African-American people to the African-American people in one of their central communities, Harlem, New York City. If art would be for a people, it must be *of* them. If it would serve a community, it must be near that community. If it would truly be "about us," those who form that "us," must be its authors. "Thus it is the bounden duty of black America to begin this great work of the creation of Beauty, of the preservation of Beauty, of the realization of Beauty..."

The KRIGWA Players Little Negro Theatre grew out of a series of playwriting contests Du Bois sponsored, a way of supporting the development of the kind of dramatic writing

he espoused. KRIGWA Players ended almost as soon as it began—in part because of a dispute over prize money Du Bois withheld from playwright Eulalie Spence to reimburse production expenses. Outrageous Fortune indeed.

(Ok, I have to take a theatre geek break for a fun fact: Eulalie Spence, the playwright without prize money, was also an actress and director and, later, speech coach to a guy named Joseph Papp, helping him “scrub” away his Brooklyn accent.)

Back now: Du Bois’s theatre ended, but his call rang on. When in 1966 Douglas Turner Ward made the case for “a permanent Negro repertory company” to present plays relevant to the Black experience, train black personnel for all areas of the theatre, and cultivate what Ward dubbed “a sufficient audience of *other* Negroes,” he was echoing Du Bois. His appeal was answered by the Ford Foundation, and the Negro Ensemble Company was born.

When El Teatro Campesino began in the migrant workers’ camps of Delano, California in 1965, in the early days of the grape picker’s strike against the Di Giorgio company and other growers, its founding was as local and culturally specific as one can be. It was theatre of, by, and for farm workers.

The stages were flatbed trucks parked in the middle of the fields. The performers were young artists, amateurs, and the workers themselves. They “rehearsed on the run and performed on the picket line,” as founder Luis Valdez puts it, for a new American audience, made up of Chicano migrant workers, Filipinos and Mexicans—some literate,

some not, some bilingual, some speaking only Spanish. The stories were theirs, as were the struggles.

One of America's bravest theatres, Free Southern Theatre, founded in rural Jim Crow Mississippi, sought to open up a repressive system that effectively refused Blacks their own cultural reflection, that "refuse[d] the Negro knowledge of himself." Started by civil rights activists Doris Derby, Gilbert Moses, and John O'Neal as an integrated company, it was, by its very existence, a blessing to some, and a provocation to others. Free Southern performed, at times, under armed guard in parts of the South where gatherings of blacks were open to attack from the White Citizens Council or the theoretically legitimate authorities. Troupe actors hid in fields while KKK members, alerted by the local sheriff, hunted them. The company manager carried a gun. Free Southern reminds us that even recently America has had theatre companies that thrived in a system of Apartheid, like the Market Theatre in Johannesburg, or under governmental sanction and threat, like the Belarus Free Theatre today. What will we carry into the future? Can we carry their courage?

About Us, By Us, For Us, Near Us. Fargo, North Dakota, 1905. Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1918. Rural Wisconsin 1943. Central Appalachia 1975. The south Bronx, 1979. Everywhere USA 1935-39. Who will tell our stories, if we don't?

**Principal 3 for the Revolution: "...The gifted amateur [has] possibilities which the professional may have lost." – Susan Glaspell**

We all begin as amateurs. So it has been for our theatre. It was customary in the nineteen-teens—the first great boom of art theatre in America—to recount that the word, amateur comes from the French for love, the love of what we do. The Chicago Little Theatre, The Neighborhood Playhouse, The Provincetown Players, The Washington Square Players were all passionate amateurs in the beginning. Their beginning was, directly, ours. The great-grandfather theatres all began as amateurs, too: Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Cleveland Playhouse, Pasadena Playhouse.

“Life is worth play!” proclaimed the exultant George Cram Cook, known as “Jig,” who with his wife Susan Glaspell, rallied their bohemian friends to form the short-lived Provincetown Players. Provincetown became spiritual godmother to every experimental theatre after. A radical cabal of writers, free-thinkers, politicians, and suffragists, summering together on Cape Cod, spend a few nights writing, staging and performing experimental plays.

Maybe you know the story: A young man named O’Neill with a trunk of unproduced scripts. One night he reads *Bound for Cardiff* aloud and, according to Glaspell, “we knew what we were for.” Maybe you know the scene: a shack on the Provincetown wharf. The first-ever production of O’Neill. Glaspell remembers:

There was a fog, just as the script demanded, fog bell in the harbor. The tide was in, and it washed under us and around, spraying through the holes in the floor,

giving us the rhythm and the flavor of the sea while the big dying sailor talked to his friend...of the life he had always wanted deep in the land...

It is not merely figurative language to say the old wharf shook with applause. The people who had seen the plays, and the people who gave them, were adventurers together.

In the amateur theatre, we are connected, adventurers together: audience, writer, player, all one.

Another theatre geek pause. Some TCG lore. In 1961 Theatre Communications Group was established by the Ford Foundation or, rather, by W. McNeill Lowry, then-Vice President of Ford and the nonprofit theatre's first and greatest patron. Ford established TCG "to improve cooperation among professional, community, and university theatres." Did you hear? Community. University.

Three years later, TCG decides—under its first chairman, Theodore Hoffman—to concentrate solely on the resident theatres with *professional* infrastructure, such as continuity of artistic and managing leadership. The bridges between amateur, academic, and professional that had linked this burgeoning field tumble down. In '67, TCG limits service to 13 theatres. "Looking back now," one-time executive director Joseph Zeigler writes in 1973, it is clear that what seemed to be synthesis was really homogenization..."

Yes, there was a model. Now there are many. We are 700 theatres strong. TCG has been re-opening the family circle for a long time, a movement that exploded under Ben Cameron and now Teresa. Today the Biltmore Bowl houses artists, managers, teachers, theatres who pride themselves on the professional standards of their work, and theatres devoted to community and, even, communitarian amateurism. Is there tension among us? Yes, of course. It's a tension bred, if not in our bones, then certainly in the early history of our clan.

**Revolutionary Principle #4: "...The individual can achieve his fullest stature only through the identification of his own good with the good of his group, a group which he must help to create." Harold Clurman.**

Sometimes the genius of a theatre lives in an individual; sometimes it lives in the group. If a theatre's going to last, it better live in both. There may be great examples internationally of theatres thriving under the visionary leadership of a single, prominent artist. In the U.S., however, it rarely works that way.

Consider the nascent, mythic Steppenwolf ensemble, founded in a rolling fashion by a high school student named Gary Sinise and his friends and friends' friends. They incubated in the basement of a suburban church, and out popped a miracle of talent: founders Sinise, Jeff Perry, and Terry Kinney, John Malkovich, Laurie Metcalf, Moira Harris, Alan Wilder, and soon Joan Allen and Glenn Headly. How does it happen? Or

talent abundance of The Wooster Group or the early acting companies of Arena Stage and the American Conservatory Theatre. Unlike, for example, a great massive novel, where the marvel is how capacious Melville or Tolstoy or George Eliot can be, the theatre excites through the wonder of confluent gifts, powerful individuals “tied to the whole shebang,” as John Steinbeck put it.

How does it happen that almost every major acting teacher of the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century sprang from the Group Theatre—Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, Robert Lewis, Sanford Meisner? How does it happen that an idea, elaborated by a zealot named Harold Clurman in his crazy, lofty lectures, every Friday night from November to May, starting at 11:30 and ending in the wee hours, inspires “twenty-eight fanatics,” to offer their individual talents in service of the most unified, coherent, communal vision of theatre that had yet been seen on this nation’s stage.

“We must help one another find our common ground,” Harold Clurman said. “We must build our house on it, arrange it as a swelling place for the whole family of decent humanity.” How do a playwright and an ensemble—individual genius and group genius—find voice together? Clifford Odets, who made the Group sing, writes his first entry in the Group’s daybook, its shared diary:

I have begun to eat the flesh and blood of The Group. I partake of these consecrated wafers with a clean heart and brain; and I believe—as I have

wanted to believe for almost ten years—in some person, idea, thing outside myself. The insistent love of self has died with strangulation in the night....I am passionate about this thing!!!

The Group, it turns out, was impossible to sustain. It was pulled apart in a decade by the very American tension between the individual and the group. And we, heirs to its heirs, have been, likewise, largely unable to sustain companies of any size. This is why Steppenwolf's fluid, ongoing ensemble and the gargantuan acting company at Oregon Shakespeare Festival inspire hope. It's why a network of enduring experimental and community-based ensembles seems like magic. We are our theatres, and we are our artists. Where is our swelling place for the whole of who we are?

### **Revolutionary Principle #6: "Theatres or Institutions?"**

Ok, that's not a revolutionary statement. This time the energy is in the question. The interrogative form holds the principle. It's not my question; it's Zelda Fichandler's.

Zelda Fichandler is, to my way of thinking, the great founding rabbi of the regional theatre. She has, from nearly the beginning of Arena Stage in 1950, eloquently articulated and restlessly cross-examined the very field that she, as much as anyone, created. Her essays and speeches capture both the play of her own dazzling, Talmudic mind, and the aspirations and contradictions of the movement she pioneered.

Hear her go:

Separately and then together, we forged these theatres, these instrumentalities, these constellations of activities, these collective outposts, these—God forgive me!—institutions in order to preserve and recreate, in new forms, the art of theatre then fusting in us unused. We found a better way of doing things. Found? We forged a better way, we scratched it out, hacked it, ripped it, tore it, yanked it, clawed it out of the resisting, unyielding nose-thumbing environment.

Let us now praise famous women. Margo Jones imagined the American regional theatre into being. She laid out the vision for a nation of theatres—regional, resident, repertory—and she decreed what those theatres stood for—permanence, professionalism, and what she dubbed a “violent” dedication to new plays and playwrights. Thanks in large part to her—and to Nina Vance at the Alley in Houston, and to Zelda—we now have it. Tragically, Margo Jones didn’t live to see it. The “Texas Tornado,” as Tennessee Williams dubbed her, died as she lived, surrounded by a ring of scripts on the floor, her ever-present drink near at hand.

As I said, Zelda’s my rabbi. She not only clawed the thing out, she asked all the right questions. She held her work—and so ours—to its own highest standards. The Regional-Resident-Repertory-Theatre Movement was, she tells us, “in its first birth cry, organizational.” I do not mean to depreciate the artistic work that is done,” she writes, when asked to consider, in 1970, the future of the regional theatre,

...(Nor, on the other hand, do I mean to over-praise it), or to under-rate the hazards o'erleaped, or to minimize the courage, talent, and initiative of any of us, because I think that we moved mountains. Or maybe even made them and then moved them. And surely, and at any rate, organization is creation.

I don't know about you, but I find this very helpful. She has pinpointed the special brilliance of the triple-R theatre movement, and, while she was not, in 1970, particularly sanguine about its future, she pointed the way to survival: organizational energy.

Thirteen years later, in a Boston Globe article from 1983, Zelda sounds even more self-critical: "After 32 years of working, I come to this time when there should be an emergence, a flowering. And all I find is an aesthetic retraction. That bothers me deeply." In that same article, we hear a similar concern from Gordon Davidson, another giant who founded L.A.'s intimate Mark Taper Forum inside what he depicted as "an impressively regal setting...[that] shouts out to the theatergoer that he is moving in the world of the Establishment." "I'm not sure if anything greater can come out of the Regional Theaters," Gordon worries.

I'm not so tendentious as to suggest that these were Zelda and Gordon's final verdicts on the field they'd created. Their blazing careers have continued and continued to bear fruit. But I cherish their hunger to understand what they've wrought. I cherish their questions.

What is the relationship between a theatre and an institution? What does it mean to live in a theatre culture whose great accomplishment to date is the building and maintenance of hundreds of “instrumentalities” that are shepherded by a generation or two of extraordinary managers? What does it say about our ingenuity that our administrators are so excellent and our artists so confused? What is taken away from that extraordinary fact, if we say, with the founders themselves, that the art is in some ways still, to use Zelda’s phrase, “fusting in us unused?”

If I had time, I’d add another revolutionary principle here: honesty, self-criticism, dissent. We dishonor the ferocious efforts and truth-devotion of our ancestors when we refuse to publicly acknowledge our own failures, when we bullshit our boards and funders, when we fail to speak bluntly with each other and avoid duking it out over matters of art and principle, the way artists always have, before my baby boom generation and the Reagan youth got so slick.

Debate and conflict are that without which there is no theatre, but we sanitize our conversations, just as for years we as a field have pressured TCG to keep opinion and criticism out of *American Theatre* magazine. If I had time, I’d urge us to eschew what playwright Richard Nelson once called the “polite cruelty” of the nonprofit theatre. Give me Blau’s murderous rant any day. Give me Andre Gregory’s statement from the late ‘60s, after he’d been kicked out of his second regional theatre by a second board of directors: “I’m scared that the regional theatre, by the time it is mature, will have bored

the shit out of millions of people all over the country.” At least then we know what we’re dealing with. Give me Zelda’s questions.

One more revolutionary principle: **From Julian Beck with examples by Joseph Papp:**  
**#7. “You must enter the theatre through the world.”**

We need heroics. At least I do. They pump us up, encourage our little selves toward magnificence. They urge us to action. Almost every political theatre in America offers such incitement—The Living Theatre, San Francisco Mime Troupe, El Teatro Campesino and Free Southern, as we’ve seen. I’ve chosen as one final hero an easy one, a political man who founded a thriving populist theatre in a most elitist city. I’ll keep it brief, since you probably know it.

The tale of colossus Joe Papp and his New York Shakespeare Festival and Public Theatre is a story of many stories:

- How a little-known television stage manager and young theatre producer of unshakable principle faced down the House Un-American Activities Committee;
- How this same man, blacklisted, fought in court to keep his job at CBS—and won;
- How—to offer Shakespeare at no cost to the people of New York City—he bested Robert Moses, one of the giants of 20<sup>th</sup>-century New York politics;
- How he built a free theatre for all in Central Park;

- How he unilaterally established color-blind, multiracial casting;
- How he made a mainstream home for an eclectic array of work by writers of color—Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls*, Charles Gordone's Pulitzer-winning *No Place To Be Somebody*, Miguel Pinero's *Short Eyes*, and his successor George C. Wolfe's *The Colored Museum*;
- How a poor boy from Brooklyn, Yusef Papp, whose parents spoke Yiddish, fell in love with Shakespeare at the public library, and then set about to make a theatre in the image of that library—free for all.
- How that poor boy became arguably the most influential American producer in history, produced over 450 plays, including the entire canon of Shakespeare (minus one), and did more, it's been said, than any other single individual "to widen the base of the American theatre audience"

"If there is a single driving force which characterizes the New York Shakespeare Festival," Papp said, "it is its continual confrontation with the wall that separates vast numbers of people from the arts—[a wall] spawned by poverty, ignorance, historical condition." You enter the theatre through the world, and everyone who enters your theatre enters through the world.

According to historian Mary Henderson, Papp's manifesto is "one simple, direct, and unwavering statement: 'everybody needs theatre.'"

Ok, I lied. One more Revolutionary principle, but this one needs no explanation: This principle runs through the literature of our genesis. And it might be the most challenging to our world-wise, pragmatic, quantitative age. **Principle the last, which is also the**

**first: From Sheldon Cheney, who founded *Theatre Arts Magazine* in 1916.**

**“Idealism...may itself be put down as the first ideal of the art theater.”**

Some years ago, at a TCG Conference, I attended a session on stress and burnout. It was led by a research psychologist named Robert Maurer. Maurer's premise was simple. The symptoms of stress are fear-related; they are fight or flight symptoms. Stress is fear. Fear constricts breath, and its opposite is inspiration, which literally means drawing air into the lungs.

We should learn from children and animals, he told us. When they feel fear, they reach out for comfort. They reach out for inspiration. They reach out to their mothers and fathers.

We are all the daughters of our mother and father's house, and all the sons, to paraphrase Shakespeare's Viola. And we are stewards of that house, stewards of the principles built into its foundation. We are stewards of their fanaticism and idealism, their love of play, their devotion to making a world from all its stories. We carry their questions and courage. If we live in a time of fear for the form of theatre itself, and I think we do, we have each other to reach to for comfort and inspiration, and we have them. Breathe in.

We are such a young field, babes in the woods. There is no path before us but the one we'll cut. We are, though, holding a ball of thread or, maybe, a ball of wire to help us through. There's current in the wire. Hold tight.