



Dear Sponsors & Friends -

Last year at this time, I designated 2008 as the Year of the Signal, the signal being the pilot bumpspark, our first example of what could be accomplished if we simply gave our most passionate individuals a time and a place to converse in an open forum. We imagined our dream episode and received every element we requested, the players, the location, the enthusiasm - we just needed the funding.

The year started off well, bringing both private and public grants, but 2008 was no year for speculation. The world's financial system became gridlocked. Non-profits closed across the country. Our fiscal sponsor in Manhattan, Film Video Arts, shut its doors after forty years of service to the arts community.

To me, this only meant our signal on the horizon was in even greater need.

We immediately found another sponsor, Fractured Atlas, an innovative, young arts organization in New York, advancing five thousand projects, now including ours. On a personal note, I finished my thesis for a Masters in Fine Arts. While this took time from Bumpspark*, I believe my creative pursuits always serve the project. Let me explain.

Back in the Roaring Twenties, my great aunt unwittingly married into a family of Wall Street con men and my grandmother, her sister, preserved the entire story in four eleven-by-fourteen scrapbooks. For my entire writing life, those dusty chronicles beckoned. This year I finally opened them, investigated the details, and discovered a moving, extraordinary, unique and uniquely American tale.

Was it coincidence that I immersed myself in the study of the 1929 crash as similar events began to occur in the headlines around me?

I also spent much of my time working on my thesis in local Starbucks cafes. They became my office - a needed destination away from diversions. Conversation surrounded me. The Starbucks Corporation fostered its meeting house identity all year, with a social networking site, a wi-fi talk show, and newsletters that broke down timely topics to inspire informed discussion between their patrons. Carbon Emissions, Immigration, and the Election were three topics I picked up over the past weeks.

Was it coincidence that I found myself in this modern salon as I considered how to proceed with Bumpspark*?

I offer you this. There are no coincidences; there are only bumpsparks.

Starbucks reminded me how thirsty we are for dialogue and how unprepared we are for that thirst. In spite of Starbucks' efforts, customers remained with their friends, laptops, study groups and book clubs, with their own ideas. They stuck with what was comfortable.

My thesis, meanwhile, immersing me in the personalities of 1929, taught me that the Great Depression was as much a beginning as an ending. American strength and ingenuity was forged, not in the cause of World War II, but in those breadlines.

We are once again in the middle of such a winter. And we should realize the seeds, the grass roots, are already bursting underground.

We have seen it in the historical election of our President-elect, who is now trying to quench that thirst for dialogue with the House Meetings his campaign manager is promoting through their famous emails. But it will not be easy. The most genuine conversation I heard in Starbucks all year was between two sets of parents meeting to discuss their sons' bully-victim relationship, lips pursed, words avoided, and both parties leaving having only listened to their own voices.

Conversation is difficult. It is not fireside cozy. It is not good PR. It is work. The British author Rebecca West once stated conversation did not even exist. It was an illusion. "There are intersecting monologues, that is all."

Ninety-nine percent of the time, I think she is right. How often are we comfortable enough with someone to entertain foreign thoughts, to admit we don't know, to surmise and take flights of fancy together? Did we ever believe those who said there were no foolish questions? Maybe in college?

Oh, but that one percent - four ears open and two minds working together. When we went from point A to C, from A to Z, without even looking up. Suddenly, the sun was rising - we had talked all night. Some of us even did it sober. Some of us ended up with a rock band, a start-up, or DNA.

To capture and study that, the real thing, the great winding conversation, with all its fruitful tangents, in order to foster it, in order to foster our coming together; this is the goal. To capture it not like a trap gets a mouse, but like an actor or painter gets hold of a bit of life; this is our crazy idea.

Writing my thesis also reminded me how much it takes to finish a creative task, one letter at a time. How one must believe in the vision of a stack of pages until it is there, heavy in one's hands.

So we rededicate ourselves.

This past year was one of setbacks, but also one of perseverance. Every year is the best and worst of times. Creativity flourishes where structures collapse. Green grows from the fallen husks. Phoenixes do rise from ashes. When things are upside down, one gets that different perspective.

It is up to those of us who can see the hope, to water it, to kindle it.

We are not giving up on the dream of the pilot; we are just going to pursue it in a different way. We are not going to wait any longer for something complete to fall in our lap. Funding is not so tight that Bumpspark* couldn't garner some state of the art production equipment before the year was over.

With that generous gift, we are going to converse and record until we find what we seek.

There is much to do in this country, financially, structurally, socially, politically. The Bumpspark* Project still feels our greatest strength comes from the collision of immigrants and ideas. The unexpected connection is our cause. Financial crashes and cafes. Seeds and sparks.

We are a seed. We are just a spark. Let us begin by acting like one.

Let it grow and catch fire if we are right.

Every good wish,
Robert Kalm

www.bumpspark.org

