

# *On Life and Meaning*

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## **Episode 95 – Ken Lambla – Interdisciplinary Design**

### *A Life Revealed in One Scene*

And now a personal word,

On the morning of December 1, 2017, I read an obituary that made the front page of the *New York Times* that I marveled reading. It reported the death of Vincent Scully, Sterling Professor Emeritus of the Arts at Yale University. I had read a book Scully had written, and I knew he was a legendary lecturer of architecture and urbanism, so I was immediately drawn into the story of his life.

The obituary noted Professor Scully's many works of scholarship, his influence on generations of undergraduates at Yale, the issues of design he spoke out on and his changing public views, but here is the paragraph that captured me most written by art critic Richard Woodward:

[Scully's] lectures were theatrical pieces that commonly left his audience transported, and the performer, in his Ivy League uniform of tie and tweed jacket, drained. He did not speak from notes, and students were not expected to take them. Multiple projectors flashed images on the screen in the darkened hall while he wielded a long pointer, the butt of which he would slam on the wooden floor to signal the operator (a coveted job among art history majors) to move to the next glass slide.

There it is—a life revealed in one scene—the breadth of his knowledge, the precision of his lectures, the command of the room, the attention he expected, the images of constructed forms on the screen, the celebrity of his work, and the curiosity he stirred for what would come next. I suspect Professor Scully would have approved. What a way to make an imprint. What a way to live a life.

I wonder what one scene would capture me. If I were to write it, I would also be in the classroom: working the board, striding the room, debating students, provoking thought, and eliciting feeling, clicker in hand. On the screen would be philosophers of old and ethical issues of the day. Or another scene in solitude, reading and writing in my loft at home with a view of the city. Or a third scene of my wife and I hosting friends around our dinner table. If others were to write the scene, of course, they might envision something entirely different.

Every storyteller knows the one scene that captures the story in full, when everything comes together, when all lessons are learned, when everything is crystallized and revealed. In a teacher's life there is this moment of completion when the student and teacher each become someone new. I think of Lulu singing "To Sir, With Love" to Sidney Poitier, and Ethan Hawke saying, "O Captain! My Captain!" to Robin Williams in Dead Poet's Society. I can barely watch those scenes without being moved to tears.

I receive cards at the end of each term from students who thank me for our time together in class. They say the most wonderful things: how the class was not what they expected, how they were challenged, and how they were changed. A few of them talk about difficulties in their lives and deep personal emotions. I read the notes once and put them away. I do my best with their feelings and my own. I send them a note of wonder in return.

When Professor Scully died, President Peter Salovey of Yale University said, "No faculty member in Yale's long history has had greater influence or been more loved. Because of Vince, generations of Yale graduates have learned not just to look, but to see." I cannot imagine a greater reward or more meaningful epitaph.

Ken Lambla talked about how the arts have informed his life. He mentioned his high school geometry teacher who introduced him to architecture, the writers and poets and artists who became his friends in Belfast, the visual art and career and partnership of his wife, the musicians and sculptors and designers who have inspired him, and the educators who have taught beside him. The interdisciplinary design of his life became the interdisciplinary design of the college he led as founding dean.

We share ideas. Audiences carry us. We build something true along the way.

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