Emory University Creativity Conversations

Steven Tepper and Rosemary Magee

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Magee: Maybe we should start by introducing ourselves. I’m Rosemary Magee, Vice President and Secretary of Emory University. And we have a Creativity and Arts Initiative, which is part of our strategic plan. This conversation and visit is being sponsored by that organization.

Tepper: I’m Steven Tepper. I am the associate director of the Curb Center for Art, Enterprise, and Public Policy and assistant professor of sociology. I study creativity and I teach about it looking at the social conditions for creative work in art and science and business. And I had been involved for the last -- since 2004 -- with what’s been known as the Creative Campus Initiative in Higher Education, so I’ll be talking about that work later today.

Magee: That’s great and I’ll ask you some questions about that, but first I want to talk a little bit about you. Do you consider yourself to be a creative person?

Tepper: I do now. I haven’t always. And a story that I tell my class on the first day of my creativity class is about myself as a person growing up and learning and training as an artist. I had been involved in an intensive art school during the summers in Maryland, and I remember very distinctly a time in class when we were told to draw or paint a still life. It was a classic still life with a vase and a shoe and a book. Everybody started on their own pieces, and you walk around to see what other people are doing. I was painting a vase and a shoe and a book the way I saw them there. Another person painted his self-portrait in the reflection of the vase. Someone else had, like a Salvador Dali, the book with the words running off the page and down the table. And I thought to myself, what’s wrong with me? I don’t see those things. I must not be creative. I mean I’m perfectly technically skilled at doing this -- I can represent something. And I more or less made a decision at that time that I wouldn’t pursue an artistic career even though I had trained for quite a while as a young person because I was influenced, I think by our social categories for what we think creativity needs to be. And so, I thought creativity needed to be eccentric -- it needed to be someone who had a vision, visionary in a way that others weren’t -- this sort of extraordinary notion of some creative spirit.

Now I don’t think that’s true, and I think it’s important to recognize the larger cultural understandings of creativity that influence our own work and lives and our own self-identity as creative or not. I’ve gone into a different profession. I’ve been involved in scholarship and academics and management within universities,
and I’m sure that my creativity comes out in that work. So, I feel like I’m probably creative. But it’s not in the way in which I had once thought creativity was supposed to be defined.

Magee: So, it sounds like your definition of creativity has shifted over time.

Tepper: Well, it certainly shifted just personally, but it shifted also intellectually as I’ve read and studied people who have written about creativity. I mean one thinks about indicators in your own personality or approaches that might signal that you’re creative in certain domains of your life, and one of the things that I came to a realization of recently, as I was sitting in a faculty workshop on how to pitch your book to publishers and to university presses. They had an editor from the University of Minnesota and the room was filled with 25 people, and he was going through the ABCs of submitting a manuscript. It has to be exactly like this, and you have to do it this way, and if you don’t do it that way…. And I was thinking to myself that’s just not how I work. I never have.

I just got on a plane and when I got to town I called the editor and said I have an interesting project I’d like to talk to you about. And I think when I look back at my life and how I make decisions, it’s always been about trying to stand slightly adjacent to where everybody else is. I think that’s probably an indication that there’s some creative spirit that wants to be distinctive. I did the same thing when I was a student. I always picked topics that were not right down the middle. They were off to the side a little bit, and whether that’s because I didn’t want to be compared with other people or because I really wanted to stake out some kind of unique approach or voice, I’m not sure.

Magee: Or maybe you had a different vision.

Tepper: Or I had a different vision.

Magee: I actually have a colleague, a psychologist, who refers to orthogonal thinking and that he thinks the most interesting ideas come out of looking at things from a different angle. So, there are lots of different metaphors or analogies. Do you think creativity can be taught?

Tepper: I absolutely do. I mean I think you need to distinguish between extraordinary creativity, the stuff that wins the Nobel Prize -- it gets written in the history books -- and sort of everyday creativity. I think extraordinary creativity is often unteachable and also unpredictable, so you probably couldn’t look at the biographies of a hundred people and say, okay, these are the ones that are going to produce the great idea, because that great idea has to connect with society in just the right way for it to take hold. But I think creativity requires habits of thinking, and those habits certainly can be taught. Whether it’s how to be generative, how do you brainstorm, what are the hundred ways you can use a pencil. That exercise generates the capacity to learn how to be generative or how to think by metaphor,
which is something that creative people, whether they’re in science or whether they write fiction, have used to make many breakthroughs by metaphorically linking an idea with something else. And that’s a habit.

How do you think by metaphor, or how do you ask what-if questions? Not how, but just the process of doing it, feeling comfortable doing it? What if this had been different? How might that have evolved differently? Or at the end of every article or every story, say, think of five scenarios that could take this in a different direction? All those things are habits of thinking, which people just need to practice, and they need to learn. They need some coaching. Some of the best takes place through close mentorship. I mean in an ideal world you wouldn’t be teaching creativity in a class of 25. You’d be learning it with a mentor, but that’s not feasible. And so, even in larger formats I think there are ways to help students get in touch with that habit.

Magee: Well, your discipline is sociology, although you have degrees and training in other areas, and many people associate sociology with having a lot of structures and rules and jargon, if you will. And so, this is an interesting example of something that may be perceived by people a certain way and may be enacted in that way by large groups, but you’ve chosen to take it in a different direction, the study of creativity itself. So, what obstacles have you encountered in that, or if not obstacles, then maybe impediments or difficulties?

Tepper: Well, there’s many. I won’t talk about all of them, but one thing that scholars of creativity have shown is that creative people have networks of enterprise. This is an idea that Howard Gruber has put forward. And that means that they tend to be engaged in lots of different activities of differential relatedness, some more closely related than others. And they move between them. And it’s important because when something comes to a dead end, they have another enterprise that they can redirect their energies, and there’ll be things that spark ideas that get sparked from one activity to the other. That often can look, especially in the short term, like a lack of focus. But over the long term, many of those enterprises come together in a real strong stream of work. So, certainly as a younger faculty member who is getting mentored to define himself very narrowly and to be able to say here’s my intellectual trajectory -- it all fits nice and snug within that arc -- is hard to do because I have a lot of interests and they all revolve around sociology of art and culture or creativity, but I didn’t construct my projects so that they would fit together in a narrative arc. And so, that’s a challenge. That’s probably true for most disciplines, not just sociology.

I actually think sociology is a more eclectic discipline than a lot, so it does provide a fair amount of variation in the kinds of things you can study and how you can study them, whether you want to use qualitative methods, ethnographic methods, survey research or observations of organizations. So, it’s actually not a bad place for someone who doesn’t want to be constrained -- I think economics is much more narrow. The models and the tools that are appropriate in that field
have become more rigid over the last few decades, and that’s always a tension because as fields develop they end up developing hierarchies of knowledge and methods so that they can advance because those become conventions and common ways of speaking and working together. But at the same time when you start creating the boundaries I think it limits the places and the ways in which scholars can be creative. So, there’s always that tension between a field that’s growing and maturing, and the need for it to remain open and flexible.

Magee: Well, some people say it’s out of the tension itself frequently where creativity emerges. What do you think is the responsibilities of colleges and universities to identify, nurture, support creativity largely, but also the arts?

Tepper: Well, I think it’s their key. And if you take the arts perspective, and you’re looking at it from the point of view of someone who cares about the cultural health of a nation or society, there’s no question in the 21st century that universities are the single greatest patron of the arts, in the U.S. at least. If you take all of the ways in which they invest in facilities and salaries for artists who teach on campus, for commissions, for presenting and touring, and if you look at our arts collections in our museums, our rare artifacts that we have in our libraries, the whole collections are -- it’s just huge. And so, there’s one argument that would say universities, just as they do in health, where they recognize that they are stewards of health in this country, that if it wasn’t for universities our whole health enterprise would be diminished. Universities need to also recognize that responsibility they have to our larger culture. So, that would be one argument.

Magee: So, one is a cultural argument and a university’s place and that whole large enterprise?

Tepper: Yes, exactly. The other is thinking about the reforms necessary in higher education and understanding that the arts and creativity can be a key to improving the mission of universities. To put it simply, I think what you have now in higher education is a rising generation of digitally savvy, expressive, creative kids. Now, they’re that way in spite of their parents. In spite of all the pressures and the hoops…

Magee: -- Everything we’ve done to drum that out of them.

Tepper: -- And they arrive on our campuses that way. They’re going to go out into a world that increasingly demands those skills, what Daniel Pink calls high-touch and high-concept skills; the ability to craft compelling narrative, to make things aesthetically pleasing, to add that extra value to our economic products.

Magee: Also pull people into the experience.

Tepper: Pull people into the experience. More and more jobs are in that, especially in the U.S., as our old information jobs are getting shipped to India and China,
accounting and the data management and processing. It’s the ability to create and craft compelling stories and images, and new kinds of products that makes America distinctive. So, students are coming in actually quite predisposed towards careers, which they’ll find on the other end of college. And in the four years we have them, or the five years or the two years depending on what kind institution you are, we simply don’t take advantage of any of those talents that they come to school with. We don’t prepare them for that economy they’re going into. We teach the same way we’ve taught for 50 years: the information downloading mentality where professors have the information knowledge, and they give it to the students. We don’t give the students the opportunity to be creative actors in their own education, which is what they want to do. They want to get under the hood. They want to tinker. They want to be expressive. And so, I think higher education absolutely has to recognize this disconnect and reform itself to better connect with these students and to the world that the students are going into. I do believe media and the arts are key platforms for doing that. So, it’s not only about the arts, it’s really about how do we improve our colleges.

Magee: I want to follow up on that with some questions for you, but first I want to ask you this one. Do you have any theories why students who have been raised in a certain way in this country and are pretty structured in an overscheduled environment and coming to one like that, why this kind of underground, if you will, or off-the-record or between-the-lines behavior is so pronounced and so important in their lives?

Tepper: Well, I mean you could think about things in cycles, and we’re coming out of the ‘80s and the ‘90s. They’ve been very conformist decades. And so, you might be seeing the ‘60s and ‘70s being reenacted in a different medium.

Magee: As the children of people of that era are stepping into that role, but in a different way and a different path.

Tepper: And I think in the ‘60s and ‘70s, though, there was real risk taking in the sense that one’s position against authority or against the conforming tendencies of society was very public. The way you dressed, where you played your guitar…

Magee: -- Hairstyles…

Tepper: -- Hairstyles. And this is a different -- a very careful balancing act students are doing where they’re maintaining their identity in the mainstream as sort of good, straight, solid citizens that are jumping through hoops, and who aren’t giving up the prospect of a professional life. But at the same time in private, electronically or with small groups of others, they’re finding each other online. They’re rebelling. They’re being satirical. They’re embracing parody.

Magee: --They’re avatars.
Tepper: So, I think in part it’s a push back against their parent’s generation, but doing so in a slightly more conservative way than possibly we saw in generations past.

Magee: Seems like technology has played a huge role in that, which has been so much a part of their lives since the moment they were born and the access technology gives them to one another in ways that previous generations didn’t have.

Tepper: I would guess that there’s some kind of meeting of -- it’s not simply technological determinism that you can image technology being used differently, being used in non-creative ways, but it certainly provides the tool. And I think the combination of that with some other larger kind of cultural zeitgeist that they’re experiencing in their lives looking for meaning and purpose and some sense of rebellion. Those combinations have created I think a really quite powerful moment.

Magee: And so, colleges and universities are well placed because that’s where so many of these very successful and interesting, disciplined, ambitious people end up. And so, you’re part of -- you’ve been participating in something called The Creative Campus initiative or movement and I’d like you to talk a little bit about what that is and what its goals and attributes are.

Tepper: Sure. Well, it began squarely in the -- we had talked about the two ways to think about the arts and higher education. One was the role of universities as stewards and patrons the arts, and the other was the arts as assets to the mission of higher education. The Creative Campus began squarely in the former. Arts advocates, former head of the arts and culture for Rockefeller Foundation, the head of the largest association of presenting arts organizations in the country came together and said we need to raise awareness of this critical role that universities play in America’s arts life. And they got together an incredibly rich range of scholars and artists and arts leaders and university presidents, deans, provosts to meet at an American Assembly meeting. And the American Assembly is a convening instrument of Columbia that’s been around since President Eisenhower to convene people around important topics of the day. And that convening was called The Creative Campus. It was in 2004. And it really was quite inspiring. I think it was kind of a tent revival. People in the room were like wowed, of course. These two great institutions have existed together in the same places for a hundred years, but we haven’t ever actually investigated whether they are serving each other the way they need to. So, a lot of energy and enthusiasm came out of that meeting.

Magee: Seems like some of it was revelatory, too. It was like, oh, we know this, but I hadn’t actually thought of it in this way before.

Tepper: Hadn’t articulated it. So, now I felt somewhat uncomfortable with that agenda because I thought it was a little bit too narrow, that there was a bigger statement that needed to be made. And so, I wrote this article for the Chronicle of Higher Education called, Creative Campus: Who’s No. 1?, provocatively suggesting that
maybe we should rank our campuses by how creative they are and not just by all the other ways we rank them. But more importantly, suggesting that there are social conditions, structural conditions that are conducive to creative work, not only in the arts, but more broadly across the campus and that what The Creative Campus really needed to be about was an examination, a thoughtful examination, a reflection about whether our campuses were truly creative places to learn and study and teach and do scholarship. And in doing that I clearly wanted the arts still to play a center role, to be at the center of that conversation, because I do believe that when we think about the broader creative goals of the campus that the arts are one of the best assets we have to deploy, whether it’s to make faculty more creative, to recruit creative faculty to our campuses, to provide the environment where people feel stimulated, to create a community of creative people; in lots of ways the arts are central. So, I broadened the conversation, but also kept the arts as a core piece of it. And so, now The Creative Campus is in lots of different places, in different pockets and it means different things to different people. There’s been a set of grants that have been made by the Doris Duke Foundation to campus presenters, people who are responsible for presenting the arts on their campuses to try to do something innovative and new that connects the arts with the academic mission of the campus. So, there’s about ten of those programs that are three-year grants that are now happening in a number of universities. There was an effort by a number of major universities to commission some research around building audiences for major arts presentations. Those are called the MUPS, the major university presenters, have worked together with support of their provosts. The higher education associations like The American Association of Universities and The American Association of Colleges and Universities have shown interest in developing a way to survey their member to at least get an initial sense of the scope of arts activity happening, the amount of money spent, the range of facilities; some comparative data that could be looked at across campuses. There are universities that have hired arts czars to have senior position in the campus administration overseeing the arts on campus. There are campuses that have created less visible positions, arts engagement coordinators, who are responsible for kind of facilitating existing arts activity, working and coaching student groups, connecting student groups to faculty; those programs have expanded in recent time. There’s been efforts by some consortium to look at assessing creativity in the classroom, so there are the Ohio Five Colleges with a grant from the Toigo Foundation are exploring how can you actually assess whether students are creative or not, can it be done. A set of schools have gotten together to add questions to the National Survey of Student Engagement, which has really never had any good questions about arts engagement. There have been one or two questions that have been kind of get at it along the margins, but they have experimented with ten universities now to actually put five or six questions about arts engagement on this national survey that goes out to thousands and thousands of students on college campuses every year. And then there’s the work that we’re trying to do at Vanderbilt, which is to design a national research collaborative to really investigate in a serious and rigorous way what works and what doesn’t work on college campuses as it relates to the arts and understanding
the impact that arts engagement has on student learning and the development of citizens; the creation of a tolerant campus, the creation of a community, to what extent do the arts contribute to that. There are lots of very, very rich questions informed by good theory and hypotheses that we can be asking to get a better sense of how the arts work and for whom and when and how. And we haven’t done that work and I think with the right coalition we can spend the next three or four years grounding all this talk about The Creative Campus in some real research.

Magee: One thing I’ve read a bit about is that you have identified sort of creative hot spots on campus and sometimes the areas that we think of as being the creative hot spot or kind of formally designated that way like a center for the arts or concert hall or a museum is not necessarily where students identify as the creative hot spot.

Tepper: Well, that’s absolutely right. I mean the one thing we know about creativity is that it’s very hard to put in a cage, even if it’s a gilded cage, beautiful facility. At Vanderbilt we did this mapping project to see where students felt creativity was happening and we found this dorm that we didn’t know about. Maybe the students knew about it, but we certainly didn’t in the administration. Whereas the student life center, which was a big, beautiful building was not -- didn’t show up at all on the map. Open spaces and public spaces turn out to be places where students feel creative or feel that there’s a lot of creative energy, certain kinds of classrooms that you might not have expected. So, I think it is really important to kind of have an agnostic view of creativity and to sort of inductively figure out where it happens. Now, whether or not you can support that, I mean it’s one argument is well it happens in spite of you. It happens often below the radar screen and that’s what’s so wonderful about it. And if you get involved in mucking around with all that wonderful stuff you’ll just destroy it.

Magee: Over determine it and it will be -- we’ll lose it.

Tepper: And I think there’s some -- it’s a valid position, but there’s no question that there are ways to catalyze and support and facilitate without controlling. And I think one of the things universities have to do is really do this kind of mapping project and figure out where it is, who’s involved, who’s engaged, where’s the low hanging fruit, the people who are currently -- have committed and passionate artistic vocations and who don’t know each other or haven’t been involved or designated as arts ambassadors on campuses. I mean let’s get those people first and then let it kind of spread out and figure out all the other interesting places art happens or things happen that may not look like art to us, but really would fit that category by any other measure.

Magee: So, in five to ten years from now what would you -- if The Creative Campus initiative, that the research projects that you’re involved with are successful, what would you expect? What would it look like? How might it look? How might a college or university campus look different than the way it looks today? Or maybe
you wouldn’t notice it so much just wandering around, but if you were immersed in that community you would experience it.

Tepper: Well, you would hope it would -- that it would emerge as a key priority for universities the same way residential living. I mean that there’s a strong case to be made that if you don’t live on campus you are not getting a certain kind of experience. Now, not all American students can live on campus, but I think there’s consensus and agreement that that if you can that that provides a certain kind of elevated engagement with intellectual growth. I think we have made certain commitments to athletics on our campuses, whether they’re division one or whether they’re intermural that that is part of a healthy development for college students to feel like they had those opportunities and we spend a lot of money on those facilities and we’ve supported that with policy, NCAA scholarships. So, I would like the arts and creativity to be seen as an essential part of what universities see as their approach to educating citizens. I mean general education, again, diversity. It’s important for students to be able to see the multiple ways that people know about the world. Well, I think creativity and expressive life should be elevated to those categories of residential living, general college, physical fitness. I mean service learning has now become for many colleges…

Magee: Study abroad.

Tepper: Study abroad. That these are all seen as key areas of life. And the advantage -- I’m not sure it’s the -- I’m not sure that the arts can claim this uniquely, but the arts are not only a way of knowing, they’re a way of connecting. And so, by emphasizing the arts and creativity you’re not de-emphasizing service because much service is done through the arts. You’re not de-emphasizing ways of knowing because the arts are used in many disciplines as a way to know. You’re not de-emphasizing teamwork because many of the arts involve the same kind of teamwork that athletics do.

Magee: Collaboration.

Tepper: So, the arts are kind of this interesting, very versatile, cultural and social putty that we can mold and shape and stick in other places so it shapes to the contours of many other areas of the campus life. And I think that’s what makes it such a powerful place to invest. And my guess is that if we only broaden our definitions just a little we would find that it is certainly not elitist and that those students and faculty that are invested in cultural and creative pursuits represent the majority of our community.

Magee: And so, these ideas, of course, seem very natural and strong and reasonable and powerful to me, but I’m imagining there are people who are skeptical about it and just curious about where the areas of resistance to this concept and this vision.
Tepper: Well, I think there’s a lot of mistrust between both the arts and the general society. So, our categories of what artists are and what the arts are, either that they’re not serious or that they’re too confrontational or that they’re too individualistic or whatever they are, the people who are not already committed who are not…

Magee: Too fluffy.

Tepper: Too fluffy, too much just about fun. If you’re not in the tent already, in the arts tent, you are skeptical that these investments are real. I’ll have this conversation and a provost will scratch his head and say yeah I kind of get it, but I have this science laboratory I need to invest in and it’s a real building and there’s going to be results and there’s going to be patents and there’s going to be…

Magee: Indirect cost recovery.

Tepper: Indirect cost recovery and that all makes much more rational sense. And from the arts perspective -- but it’s not society’s fault that they view the arts that way because the arts over the course of the 20th century have positioned themselves that way. They’ve wanted to be seen as exclusive, as elite, as privileged.

Magee: But also sometimes as the underdog.

Tepper: And as the underdog. And I think -- so it requires the arts to also embrace their role as public servants, as community members, as engaged citizens. To think of themselves as not in that precious space, which society affords to them because of their brilliance, but in that collective space where they have a responsibility to building community, to communicating. So, I think the pushback is both from the arts side in some cases because this agenda is suggesting that the arts aren’t supposed to be exclusive, they’re supposed to be integrated in everything, in daily life. So, some artists are pushing back against that saying we’re already -- we don’t have enough resources to do our work as is. We need more space. We need more time. We need to be more precious, not less. And then the other side saying we don’t get them, we don’t see how this is real research or how this is real -- that the skills that you learn as an artist are no different than the skills you learn in the laboratory. I mean they’re different, but complementary.

Magee: And so, the vision that can kind of bring those different perspectives together is one that talks about our collective enterprise.

Tepper: I think the vision is one that talks about -- there’s a number of ways to express it. One is the creation of community and the arts is central to that. One is the creation of global citizens who are culturally aware and the arts are central to that. They’re critical to how we bridge difference and how we learn about the stories of other people. I think another important narrative is the creative economy and the arts are central to that. And the last one I would say is quality of life and there’s a
whole field now that studies positive psychology and happiness. And what we know is that money does not make people happy. And the kind of things that the arts provide for people, a sense of identity, personal voice, efficacy, connection, all of those things are related to high quality of life. And by the way, most arts activities, unless you expect to be a dancer in a professional dance troop, are things you can do for your whole life, as opposed to other kinds of – a football player is going to play football and then stop playing football. But the arts are a lifelong engagement and they deliver happiness and quality of life. And it seems to me that it’s another thing universities should care about is whether they’re producing citizens whose lives are rich and fulfilling. And if the arts can be a key way to do that and maintain that over the course of a lifetime, that’s another I think pretty strong and persuasive argument.

Magee: You’re also interested in, beyond college campuses, arts in our American life and American culture and you’ve recently coedited a book with Bill Ivey on the cultural engagement of the arts, and you want to talk just a little bit about what that book includes.

Tepper: Well, that book is called, *Engaging Art: The Next Great Transformation of America’s Cultural Life*, and *Engaging Art* is really a double entendre because arts policy for the last many decades has been about engaging art, meaning producing and presenting art, which is engaging, which is the best we can present. And then having decided we want to do that in our nonprofit theaters and our museums and symphony halls, then our challenge has been how do we build audiences. So, arts participation has always been about building audiences, at least in its most current incarnation. This book is suggesting the other -- that we need to pay more attention to the other meaning of engagement, which is not engaging art, but engaging audiences in ways that are as deep and meaningful to them and allowing those audience members to play an active role in the creation and meaning around art.

Magee: It sound like even the term audience is being kind of redefined.

Tepper: Audience does not mean someone who sits in the dark and waits to applaud on cue. An audience – an engaged, cultural citizen is someone who makes art, who critiques art, who gets in conversations with others around art, who has lots of choice, and they think reflectively about choosing and putting together the right, kind of curating their own artistic lives. They’re people who want to interact with audiences to question and to challenge, to rewrite the ending of stories, to redesign video games, to be truly engaged. And I think the book is arguing that we’re witnessing a renaissance partly because of new technology and the capacity for that kind of engagement. Our nonprofit arts institutions are still over here on the side demanding more for what they do. Now, these are noble institutions that do great work and we support them, but we think there’s an opportunity to increase their relevance in American life by recognizing this renaissance in this participatory art making, which by the way is more like what it was like in the
19th century. I mean if you wanted to listen to music you played the piano in your parlor or played the guitar. If you wanted to have a likeness of a loved one you had to draw it yourself. I mean…

Magee: You’re personalizing things.

Tepper: It’s personalized. It was local. It was vernacular. And the 20th century was an aberration because it became very massified and professionalized and commodified and presented to audiences rather than engaging them in their own creative capacity. So, we see this as kind of a return to a kind of a folk culture of the 19th century and that many institutions won’t need to embrace this new engagement because they have huge endowments and they have patrons who like what they do and they’re going to be fine. But there’s a lot of small and midsize organizations that are struggling for relevance and trying to figure out why they’re not central to the community and we’re saying wake up, stop complaining, look out at this sea of activity, and figure out how you can connect to it.

Magee: Well, I liked very much some of the language you use around an arts renaissance and engagement. And I think that we’re very eager to consider, argue, debate, and embrace many of the ideas that you are representing, so we’re looking forward to spending time with you for the next two days. So, thank you very much.

Tepper: It’s great to be here. Thanks.