

# A LOOK BEHIND CILIVE! 2020

A vision of our world through coffins, spacecraft and motorcycle strategy

BY KATE HAYDEN

*A sci-fi screenwriter and director, an Egyptologist and a motorcycle rider with a knack for million-dollar business communications -- these are only three of the 15 individuals preparing to take center stage at the West Des Moines Area Community College's annual Celebrate! Innovation Live speaking festival (known as ciLive!).*

*Kara Cooney, Jeffrey Morris and Ken Schmidt gave the Business Record a behind-the-scenes peek at the big ideas informing their most recent work. (Schedules for these speakers and others at ciLive!, March 9-13, are available online at [www.dmac.edu/ciweek](http://www.dmac.edu/ciweek).)*



**KARA COONEY**

*Egyptologist, author, producer  
Professor of Egyptian art and architecture, University of California-Los Angeles  
Home: Los Angeles*

## “THESE WOMEN HAVE BEEN WHISPERING TO ME FROM THOUSANDS OF YEARS IN THE PAST FOR A GOOD AMOUNT OF TIME NOW.”

**What will your focus be when you present at ciLive?**

I like to make history about systems rather than individuals. That doesn't sound very sexy, but I like to make history around how we work as one big organic human thing, rather than "this one great man did this and then this one great man did that." History so often has been a history of individuals, and I think most people in the audience realize that they don't get to do whatever they want, whenever they want -- they're the cog in the wheel. ... We're much more beholden to these systems than we like to believe.

Particularly in the United States, where we have these mythologies of individual agency that I think need to be busted. They're being busted before our eyes. ... If I can do that through the lens of ancient Egypt, talking about women in power, then that's great because it can be applied to anything -- it can be applied to economic systems, it can be applied to racist systems, it can be applied to the social inequality we deal with.

**Your original specialty was in Egyptian craftsmanship. How did you turn to women in Egyptian leadership?**

I didn't necessarily do it of my own free will. These opportunities came to me to work on these women. The first time such an opportunity came to me was to do a documentary on Hatshepsut back in 2005 -- I remember thinking "Oh, my God, I know nothing about this person. They only want me to talk about her because I'm a woman and she's a woman, but OK, fine, I'll do it."

It's still playing on Discovery Channel -- "Egypt's Lost Queen." Then I was associated because of this documentary with Hatshepsut, so then a literary agent approached me and

said, "I really want you to write a book" ... and I told him no. That's not what my research is, I do this other stuff.

He's like, "I think that people would be interested in what you have to say about women in power." Because of the way he framed it, as a larger discussion of women in power as opposed to a biography, I was able to approach the work in a way that makes the ancient world relevant.

Once I jumped down that rabbit hole I seem not to look back, because then the second book also just broadened it. I have a class at UCLA called Women in Power in the Ancient World that I developed while I was writing these books. These women have been whispering to me from thousands of years in the past for a good amount of time now.

**How is the study of ancient culture and ancient economic systems relevant to today's society?**

Human beings haven't changed our social systems as much as we think. For those of us that think, "Oh, we live in a democracy," they would be surprised to see how many of the same social issues are quite relevant in the ancient world to today. We still don't give women power. ... It's interesting and intriguing to look at an Egypt that allowed female power more regularly and systematically than we do, and to ask why that was, and what we could learn from Egypt.

Egypt allows me to see how slowly human systems shift -- how you can turn the wheel, but it takes the system a long way to go in that direction, or it just pops right back to where it was before. In Egypt, you see things popping back to authoritarian systems again and again and again. I would argue that the United States keeps popping back to extreme social inequality, again and again.

**What would you say to those who see that comparison but say we have more technology and information to act differently?**

Data is being gathered to sell things, to make very few people rich. It's not being gathered for the betterment of all, it's being gathered to make politicians win elections and to influence those elections. ... Why should we expect anything different? That's the way human beings tend to work when there's no regulation, and when no one's paying attention and there's no pushback.

Some ancient Egyptian is going to do anything he needs to do to get a coffin to show how wealthy his family is so he can bury his father with pomp and circumstance. Today, even though we see that we're cutting down the rainforest, we're still going to take our date out for a steak dinner. ... We have to show our social competition and our social value.

We have all of this technology, but that's not going to stop failure or collapse. Collapse is inevitable. ... Resurgence from collapse and resilience thereafter is also a part of the human story. If we put policies in place and systems in place that are learning from history, then we will be in a much better place.

**Why weren't female leaders in Egypt able to lift other women into a better status?**

If you live in a social, economic system in which women are excluded from running the world, then rarely, every now and then, a woman occupies a place in power, that doesn't mean she can change the system. It doesn't mean she can make everything feminist.

The system in its entirety needs to change, rather than

CONTINUED ON PAGE 18 >>

expecting one woman here or there to change things. I don't want to give you the idea that there's no hope here -- what I'm saying is that in an ancient Egyptian authoritarian system, when a woman is able to have leadership ... that's an extraordinary thing, and we should look at how and why that happened.

The ancient Egyptians put those women into those positions because they enjoyed the status quo. ... As we look forward to our history and we place more women into posi-

tions of leadership, then eventually the scales will tip and we will see the system being changed from the inside out. But it's going to take a lot more than 4% of CEOs in our economic systems worldwide who are women.

We are going through a fire -- everything is changing in our social system that was what we understood: the stay-at-home mom, the dad taking care of the family, the woman doing things as she's told. This is a new reality that is changing everyone.

We've never had an economy that relied so little on human labor that women didn't need to produce babies in the numbers they have previously. ... The more technology we have for a different kind of economy, the more power women are going to gain.

The entire system right now is up for grabs, and that's where people are feeling, I think, extraordinary anxiety.



**KEN SCHMIDT**

*Former director of communications at Harley Davidson Motor Co.  
Independent keynote speaker, marketing consultant, motorcycle rider  
Home: Milwaukee*

## “IN WHAT UNIVERSE DO YOU WANT TO BE DESCRIBED AS THE SAME AS ONE OF YOUR COMPETITORS?”

**What's the coldest weather you've ever ridden a motorcycle in?**

Oh, probably about 15 degrees riding home from work in Milwaukee. I had been traveling and I flew back -- it was one of many bad decisions made in my life.

**What will your focus be when you present at cLive?**

Mostly improving competitiveness, which, oddly enough, is something that most businesses do not focus on, because they're more focused on marketing and sales and product development. They think that competing is a given, or they think that is a task assigned to sales and marketing departments. The argument I'm going to make is that competing to be dominant, which is a much higher-level view of competition, is not a sales/marketing function, it is a corporate strategy that has to be directed by the top leadership of the business.

Leveraging basic drivers of human behavior for competitive advantage -- what that means is taking a very humanistic look at who we are and what we do, and who we do it for. Understanding where we sit, where we ultimately can fit in the lives of the people we service certainly matter, no matter what our purpose for business is.

We all share the same basic and largely unmet human needs, in particular needs for validation and need to be made to feel important and necessary, visible. This is something that most businesses overlook, because we view the customer retention as -- if not a number -- just someone to sell to. ... If we as a business or representative of a business say and do things for a customer, a potential customer ... that they don't

expect us to do that in some way delights them or gives them a momentary blush of happiness because they've been made to feel good about themselves. Somebody pays attention to me. What it does is it actually releases dopamine in our brains when someone does that for us. ... Anytime we even have the shortest dopamine rush, we will continue to go back to that source of our joy until it fails to delight us. What I just defined is loyalty, because we're not loyal to things, we're loyal to the people behind things.

**During your time at Harley Davidson, how did you learn this lesson?**

Communication comes down to three questions I literally taped to the front of my typewriter. ... What are people saying about us, what do we want them to say about us, and what are we doing to make them say it? Instead of saying, "What do we want to say about ourselves?" -- most of the world doesn't put a whole lot of belief in what businesses say about themselves. What we needed to focus on as a business is how can we marshal the Harley community out there, which was at that time a small community of riders and dealers and supporters. How can we convert these folks from simply customers to vocal advocates?

The business [was] struggling. Even then, it was a highly commoditized marketplace. It's very difficult to tell products apart by looking at them. ... So we needed customer advocacy, and we need to create opportunities for that to happen and also shape our message around the notion that we want people to describe us and talk about us the way we would talk about ourselves if we were there, which means we need to be

really, really consistent with the language that we use in front of people we want to have spreading our word.

Most businesses have not crafted any specific vocabulary for language architecture; they simply go to market the way they always have, and use ridiculous language like "quality," "customer satisfaction" as a competitive lever. That's what all their competitors are saying, too. In what universe do you want to be described as the same as one of your competitors? Let the other guys sell hardware. We sell freedom.

**When you left Harley Davidson, what did your next moves look like?**

When I left Harley, it was kind of crazy how quickly a lot of really huge businesses started reaching out to me to give consultancy to their executive leadership. What they were kind of looking for was a little Harley black magic, like "Gee, what was that magic little switch that flipped?" ... It was a great opportunity to build a consulting business, which had never really been a dream of mine.

It was a great way to get a lot of very deep, very informed looks behind the curtain of very big, very famous companies. ... They just think, "We're here to make people stop and give them good service." Those conversations were always really needy, and at least for a while were fun for me until things started to get really repetitive after a while. You start to see, whether it's a car company, a beer company, a computer company, everyone's problems are the same.

The lessons are always the same. You have to focus on people. Human behavior is really easy to understand and leverage. Most people aren't really focusing on it.



**JEFFREY MORRIS**

Screenwriter, director, science educator  
CEO/chief creative officer, FutureDude Entertainment  
Home: Minneapolis

## “SPACE IS SPACE. ... THERE ARE ALL KINDS OF THINGS OUT THERE ALREADY TRYING TO KILL YOU WITHOUT YOU HAVING TO RUN FROM MONSTERS AND VILLAINS, AND IT’S LITERALLY AN ENVIRONMENT WE’RE NOT EVOLVED TO LIVE IN AND EXPLORE.”

**What will your focus be when you present at ciLive?**

I’m an entrepreneur, but I’m also a science enthusiast. I’m an education enthusiast ... all of those things are kind of unified in my work. Getting a chance to speak and talk about what I’m doing gives a chance to illuminate all those different aspects.

In the 1990s I did a lot of film and television production, music videos and documentaries, commercials, things like that. But in the early 2000s I worked more with NASA and the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, and also clients like Buzz Aldrin. That was a really neat phase of my career, and then around 2010 I switched back and decided to unify my film production with my science work, and launch my new company [FutureDude Entertainment].

**What was your work with NASA?**

I worked in education and public outreach with the Jet Propulsion Laboratory. I had a nonprofit organization called Project Universe, and Project Universe was a subcontractor of JPL. I worked on the outer planets program with Pluto mission. ... I did graphics and websites, even constructed some miniature models of different things ... just to help JPL spread their message to everyday people.

**Why did you return to film after a career working with NASA?**

I have always been a storyteller. The most important thing for me is telling great stories and using stories to motivate people. Science fiction, for example, has been incredibly inspirational in terms of driving culture forward, in terms of technology research. It’s inspired people to ask questions, it’s inspired people to try new things, it’s inspired people to take up careers. The idea for me was to create science fiction stories that are realistic and plausible, that can get people to ask questions.

**What makes a good, plausible sci-fi story?**

People kind of lump a lot of different genres together in terms of sci-fi or science fiction. ... There actually have been

very few films that are true science fiction -- something like “Star Wars” is more what I call space fantasy. It takes place in space and it does have some technology and futuristic-looking things, but virtually none of it would work in real life. There’s no physical or technological places for it; it just looks cool. Whereas a film like “The Martian” is very much rooted in trying to be plausible. They take some liberties, but it’s far, far more realistic than a “Star Trek” or “Star Wars.”

In the motion picture [“Persephone”] that I’m directing later this year, it’s set on a real planet that was discovered four years ago, and is the nearest Earth-like planet outside of our solar system. I was able to work with a lot of scientists about what would really happen, how would it work, what would this planet look like. ... We’re trying to get it as close as I can, while still telling a story.

**There is a great tradition in the U.S. of sci-fi books and movies. What are the challenges in developing a truly original story?**

What makes this really interesting is I’m trying to stick to reality. We’re not trying to have monsters and aliens and light-sabers, space battles, things like that. It’s more like I’m saying, if you took the NASA technology and the kinds of ideas that are there right now and you projected it 100, 150 years in the future, what would it be like? I don’t think that most filmmakers have the background to tell those kinds of stories.

A film like “Gravity,” people might think that’s realistic, but with the science, that just wouldn’t happen. “Gravity” is more realistic [in that] it uses real technology -- they’re really at the International Space Station, they’re really in a space shuttle, they’re really in spacesuits and stuff, but the things that they do in the story couldn’t happen. So that was very frustrating to science people like me. A lot of people I know didn’t like “Gravity” because we were like, “What are they doing?” But I think the layperson was like, “Wow, that was really cool. What a ride.”

Part of what’s going to make my work fresh and new is the fact that we are coming from what I call the 85% rule

-- 85% plausible and realism. We aren’t running into creatures like Yoda and Chewbacca. ... If in real life we discover a microbe on Mars, that’ll be a great discovery in the history of science. Now the problem is when you have a public used to seeing Chewbacca -- if we say we found an organism on another planet, most of the populace will be like, “Is it a Vulcan or a Klingon?” That’s where the guys like me have to come in to try to explain why it is so monumental.

[By] not having monsters, not having space fights, the question is what are you going to do that’s exciting? I think the thing is that space is space. ... There are all kinds of things out there already trying to kill you without you having to run from monsters and villains, and it’s literally an environment we’re not evolved to live in and explore. The very fact that we’re building technology and putting ourselves in these little capsules and these little suits and things, all the challenges to our health, challenges to our psyche, those are all aspects that are very, very serious. I think it hasn’t been well explored yet, so that’s the fertile ground that I see.

**What is sci-fi’s role in helping audiences parse out very big problems like climate change?**

It can project forward. If you start working with climatologists and say, here we are in 2020, what will this be like in 2050, 2060 or 2080? In our story we have humans leaving around 2100, 2110, something like that. What would that world be like?

You start to look at those projects and then you say, all right, what kind of imagery would you have, what would the characters say or do or feel. Those are things that you start to wrestle with when you create this backdrop. It’s not about giving people a science lesson. It’s more like the background to an adventure. ■

**KATE HAYDEN** is a staff writer at *Business Record*. She covers tech and innovation.

**E:** katehayden@bpcdm.com | **P:** (515) 288-3478