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*This is the text of a talk I gave on 19 June 2009 at the National Summit of Ensemble Theaters, meeting at the University of San Francisco.*

The Secret of Survival

by Arlene Goldbard

I've just moved back to California, part of a big life-change for me. Whenever I come here, I touch down with three friends in Mendocino County, where I used to live. We have been meeting regularly—monthly when I'm in the state, less often otherwise—for fifteen years. One is a theater-maker like yourselves, another a healer, the third an environmental activist and steward of the land. We are very different, but taken together, our worldview is pretty wide: from the tiniest details of these amazing human bodies with their interlocking complex systems; to our imaginations, both personal and social; to this beautiful blue-green planet, home to an astounding variety of life-forms, including our own infinitely surprising species.

When I arrived on Sunday, the healer was getting ready to leave for a meeting to plan a memorial service for her dear friend, who had died in an accident. As she told me the story, her eyes filled in that way that evokes an ocean of sorrow, all the tears that have flowed through human history. Shaking her head, she posed a question, "How can they still have war?"

It took me a few seconds to leap across the conceptual gap between the highly personal and particular conversation we'd been having and this eternal conundrum.

"They couldn't," I told her, "if they felt the loss of each life the way you are feeling this one."

How could *that* happen? How could those who make and profit from war be given the opportunity to experience the fullness of loss created by their enterprise? How could they be drawn to reflect on their choices? You could force-march them to the frontlines, or hold their children hostage, but as we have seen in the vast quantity of blood human history has spilled trying to make the other side feel our pain, as often as not such tactics backfire, creating a thirst for more blood and further distorting the lives of those who seek vengeance.

Yet when my friend asked her question, the answer seemed obvious. I invite you to think about it all day. I doubt you will come up with a better way to create imaginative empathy—to remove the Other from the category of inconvenient object to the category of human subject—than through art.

When we play a character on stage, or seated in a darkened theater, surrender ourselves to empathy with a heart and mind remarkably different from our own, in some sense, we momentarily inhabit the other's place. Everyone in this room knows this with the absolutely certainty of having lived it. We also have ample scientific proof for those who need it. Ever since scientists have been able to capture images of the brain in action, they have told us that when we imagine or pretend, we light up the same neural pathways as when we actually have those experiences, first-person, in real life. This understanding has become so solid that athletes are now advised to train in their imaginations for the races or leaps they want to win in actual competition.

Now it's up to us to apply this knowledge to the problem of national recovery and the challenge of building a humane, sustainable civil society right here in the United States. Now is the time for a

radical re-understanding of the social role, the critical importance, the public interest in creativity, specifically artistic creativity. We can close the gap in understanding that has prevented so many people from seeing that artistic and cultural creativity is not just a nice thing to have around, and a really special amenity when you have the resources to invest in something extra, but a necessity for recovery, survival and sustainability.

How do we do that? We have to begin by enlarging our own thinking, speech and action.

I estimate that I have been in about a trillion conversations, read about a billion arguments, that end in the slogan, "support the arts." Accustomed to long-term deprivation, conventional arts advocates tend to think small, focusing on saving the tiniest government agencies, on hoping not to lose too much more this time around. Many conventional arts-support arguments are silly; for example, the "economic multiplier effect" of buying theater tickets: people who go to the theater may eat in a restaurant or pay to park their cars, they may have a drink after the performance. Each additional expenditure multiplies the economic impact of a dollar spent on tickets. That's the economic multiplier effect, and, yes, it all adds up to jobs. But so what? Going to a dog show or a football game or lady mud wrestling has the same economic impact. And that's one of the strongest conventional arts-support arguments! After decades of this stuff, conventional arts advocates have worn themselves thin stretching a point, with almost nothing to show for it. Adjusted for inflation, even the recently expanded 2009 NEA budget is worth only a bit more than half its value in 1981, the year of Ronald Reagan's first budget cuts.

In a time of economic crisis, when people are worried about surviving, when it is hard to fund schools, housing and medical care (but still not so hard to finance war, unfortunately), arts-support arguments become even more half-hearted and desperate, and therefore even less effective. You don't need me to tell you what's happening to your own organizations and your own communities right now. I am reminded of the dream of right-wing crackpot Grover Norquist, who said, "I don't want to abolish government. I simply want to reduce it to the size where I can drag it into the bathroom and drown it in the bathtub." That is what has happened over the last three decades to the arguments for arts support, which are circling the drain as I speak.

The remedy isn't more shrinkage but the opposite, to think big. Conventional arts advocates claim art enriches, beautifies, expresses and entertains. These are important social goods. But the elephant in the room right now, the large, unacknowledged truth that we had better hurry up and shout from the rooftops, is that in a uniquely powerful way, art can save us.

Does the grandiosity of that assertion make you uneasy? Just give me another ten minutes before you make up your mind whether to listen to your uneasiness or to your hopes.

The imaginative empathy that can be learned from art consists of several ingredients: imagining oneself in the place of the other; listening deeply; feeling the other's feelings; seeing the connection between one's own ideas and actions and the conditions that generated those feelings. And when the art is grounded in community, when it is collaborative and connected to people's lives, it also encourages bringing one's actions in line with this awareness.

None of these things comes naturally. Human beings either learn empathy or we don't. It must be learned through interaction with others' stories, through activities that engage us in body, mind, emotion and spirit. It cannot be acquired through cognitive processing alone.

In 1946, just after the horrors of World War II, Lewis Mumford wrote this: "If we are to create balanced human beings, capable of entering into world-wide co-operation with all other men

of good will—and that is the supreme task of our generation, and the foundation of all its other potential achievements—we must give as much weight to the arousal of the emotions and to the expression of moral and esthetic values as we now give to science, to invention, to practical organization."

Our failure to comprehend this basic truth has put us in peril I shudder to contemplate. Look around you: our cognitive processing ability is constantly accelerating because we obsessively practice it through interaction with machines. But without comparable attention to and investment in imaginative empathy, how can emotional processing keep pace? And without equivalent capacity for emotional processing, what hope have we of balance?

We are already paying dearly for our lack of balance. For example, consider how our current financial crisis could have been averted by the cultivation of imaginative empathy.

Have you done any reading about derivatives and other exotic financial instruments? They are more or less computer games played with the economy: through "forwards," "futures," "options" and "swaps," using quantitative analysis based on past market data, investors bet huge sums of money on future values. The chief international banking statistics source<sup>1</sup> estimated that worldwide, at the end of 2008, the market value of outstanding over-the-counter derivatives was \$34 trillion (almost exactly 10 times President Obama's FY 2010 budget proposal for the entire federal government). Increasingly, the public sector is called upon to make up for bad bets: the insurance corporation AIG, for example, lost nearly \$20 billion in less than a year on "credit default swaps." Countless derivatives trades were based on residential mortgages; we don't yet know what the Troubled Asset Relief Program will cost us, but in April, the Congressional Budget Office projected that we taxpayers will spend \$356 billion on it this year alone.

To an alarmingly large extent, the intense and widespread pain of our current economic crisis was created by people who sat at computers playing with their cognitive brains, finding different ways to slice and dice enormous numbers that had entirely ceased, in their own minds, to represent the actual homes, livelihoods and families whose social well-being they traded away as easily as players in Grand Theft Auto rise through the ranks of computer-simulated organized crime. Without imaginative empathy, without emotional chops equal to our cognitive chops, we lack a moral compass, we lose touch with that inner voice that says, "Wait! Consider the impact on others of the actions you are about to undertake."

One of Wall Street's jokes is that many "quants," quantitative analysts, are former scholars, most notably physicists, who decided that mathematical skills developed to understand the behavior of cosmic energies were transferable to the finance industry. A lot of them made huge fortunes before the bubble burst (and almost as many lost them after it did). I have heard it said that the certainty they brought to their numbers game resembled that of a well-fed turkey in mid-November: by then, an obliging farmer had provided grain every day for such a long time that it seemed only reasonable to assume this bounty would continue with every sunrise. A turkey quant graphing this pattern would derive a strong, straight line just begging to be extended into the future, and then start taking bets on barnyard grain futures.

Oh-oh! Thanksgiving!

I'm guessing that the only turkey who might have a chance of stepping off the chain of causality that leads to beheading would be the one who hung out with the few grizzled birds who'd managed to elude the ax, who listened to their stories of survival. Or maybe the ones who organized a theater company to bring the wisdom of the turkey generations down to the present, just as human beings have done under every extreme condition in history: clandestine orchestras in Auschwitz, poetry in SuperMax prisons, dance classes in refugee camps, created at the risk of their own lives by people who know in their bones that art holds the secret of survival.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bis.org/statistics/derstats.htm>

The ones I'm worried most about are the little turkeys whose schools are governed by No Turkey Left Behind, where all the arts programs are cut so as to concentrate on teaching to the math and reading tests. They may not know what hit them.

It isn't just survival that requires what art can bring, but sustainability and ultimately, prosperity. Just about every business leader with a forward-thinking reputation has asserted that creativity is key to this nation's ability to compete in world markets. Countless commentators have pointed out that many of the businesses that are still vital in today's economy were started by people whose chief talent was imagination. When the two Steves, Wozniak and Jobs, dropped out of college to start Apple in 1976, when Stanford students Larry Page and Sergey Brin started Google in 1998, the creative leaps that led to their success could never have been predicted or even trained for, because they were trying to do something that had not yet been imagined. That doesn't mean that imagination guarantees success—to the contrary, there have been just as many brilliantly creative failures as successes, probably more. But in the new economy, those who haven't cultivated creativity, personal and social imagination, will be at a great disadvantage.

And how do you cultivate creativity? Say it with me: art!

Now, there are all sorts of creativity. I expect designing navigational systems for guided missiles can be a creative act. The audiovisual carnage of Grand Theft Auto represents an intensive use of human creativity in the service of commercial success. Countless artists are employed by the advertising industry, or make exploitation films, or churn out elevator music and choreograph sales conventions. But while a spark of creativity, like the mustard-seed in a jawbreaker, sits at the center of these tasks, none of them offers true opportunity to learn and integrate imaginative empathy of the body, emotions, intellect and spirit. For imaginative empathy to develop, we must listen deeply to stories that are true (if not necessarily accurate), to encounter the creativity of others, to notice and examine our own assumptions, to imagine beyond any boundaries imposed by systems that exist solely for profit or propaganda. So while I'd rather see people making any kind of art than the pernicious products so much of our economy delivers, the imaginative empathy needed now is rooted in a commitment to social justice, to diversity, equality and community.

I have been devoting a lot of my time these days to promoting the message that sustainable national recovery requires cultural recovery, which is a way of translating the knowledge we all hold into the public realm. I love the way that Maribel Alvarez said it: "Far worse than the crisis of the credit and housing markets, rising unemployment, or external security threats, a crisis of imagination has already proven devastating for our national psyche, will, and spirit. Artists and cultural workers are untapped resources we cannot afford to ignore nor waste; artists' ways of innovation, improvisation, and inspiration must be the ways of us all."

Some of us here today helped to organize the White House Briefing on Art, Community, Social Justice, National Recovery that took place last month. The working group on cultural policy that was formed there is undertaking to articulate a new policy framework that can inspire, inform and attract support to the scale and intensity of arts work we so urgently need now. The framework is still in development. I hope to be able to share it with you soon. What I can share today is my personal dream of what can be accomplished if we enlarge our sense of necessity and possibility, standing for what we know art can do.

On his first day in office, President Obama issued a Memorandum on Transparency and Open Government, directing every part of government to find ways to be more "transparent,"

“participatory,” and “collaborative.” In my dream, I see an equally remarkable thing happening in the realm of cultural policy, through a five-point presidential directive which I believe could win broad, public support.

**Point one** would require every public-sector agency to accept the work of artists and cultural activists as legitimate instruments to accomplish policy goals in every area of public action, forming relationships with artists and organizations and providing training and assistance in how to infuse cultural action into national recovery and the sustainable government we hope will ensue. Instead of tiny, resource-starved arts agencies providing most of the support, artists’ roles would be recognized and supported across-the-board.

**Point two** would mandate cultural equity, recognizing that the United States’ common culture is a rich and varied tapestry of heritage and invention, and that pluralism and equity are essential to democratic cultural development. This would ensure a more equitable distribution of resources in contrast to current policies, which consistently privilege the red-carpet arts at everyone else’s expense. It would acknowledge and address the structural inequality that has deprived some groups of support on account of race, orientation, physical condition or other personal or cultural characteristics.

**Point three** would be grounded in this question: How would our cities be different today if policy-makers had brought imaginative empathy to the cultural lives of the neighborhoods emptied out to make way for new sports stadiums, performing arts complexes, freeways and downtown ghost towns? We would emulate the law that requires us to assess possible environmental impacts of regulations, interventions and projects, and begin to assess cultural impacts in hope of ensuring that decision-makers consider the well-being of communities and their cultural fabric before approving plans.

**Point four** would be a “new WPA for the arts,” a purpose-built program putting artists to work for the common good in every art form and way of working, in schools, hospitals, prisons and communities in every region. Seventy-five years ago, the WPA—the Works Progress Administration—supported five massive arts programs as part of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal, aimed at recovery from the Great Depression. Today’s conditions would demand different means and ends but a similar level of investment. I’ve put my own ideas for a “new WPA” out in two essays on [Communityarts.net](http://Communityarts.net).<sup>2</sup> I invite you to put your ideas forward too.

**Point five** would mandate policies to de-monopolize and re-regulate the cultural industries, correcting for the massive corporate media consolidation that threatens localism and free expression. The goal would be multidirectional media democracy in the place of mega-media broadcasting messages from the center to the margins, and this in turn would multiply creative opportunity for artists who care about democracy.

I hope all of us can burst out of the too-small cocoon of conventional arts advocacy to spread ideas like these, ideas worthy of our collective public interest in art as key to recovery and sustainability. This is an extraordinary moment of transition between a dying civilization that prizes high profits and high test scores regardless of the human cost and an emergent civilization that cultivates imaginative empathy as if our lives depended on it. And the truth is, they do.

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<sup>2</sup> “The New New Deal 2009: Public Service Jobs for Artists?” December 2008.  
[http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archivefiles/2008/12/the\\_newnew\\_deal.php](http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archivefiles/2008/12/the_newnew_deal.php)

“The New New Deal, Part 2—A New WPA for Artists: How and Why,” January 2009.  
[http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archivefiles/2009/01/the\\_new\\_new\\_dea.php](http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archivefiles/2009/01/the_new_new_dea.php)

In the old reality, only certain types of information matter, whatever can be weighed, counted and measured. In the emergent reality, all our senses can be wide-open to receive much-needed information from body, emotion, intellect and spirit.

We can help the new reality emerge by challenging ourselves in our personal practice, making every act a demonstration of the possibility we perceive: to simultaneously make our work equally valid and powerful as art, as political action and as spiritual practice. Many of you are already holding yourselves to this high standard, leading the way, which makes me especially grateful for the gift of your attention.

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