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Pulling The Wool From Our Eyes

I'm working on a community arts project that involves a diverse group of artists from all over the country. It started in Appalachia, where local economic development agencies' solution to unemployment was to build new "Supermax" prisons, on spec, to create jobs and income by importing prisoners from urban states with overcrowded prisons. Many others have had the same idea: in this country, we're building fifty new prisons each year to house the largest prison population on the planet, more than seven million souls inside, on parole and on probation. So theater makers, filmmakers, musicians and writers have come together to gather the testimonies of prisoners and their families, guards and their families, policy makers, victims of crime and others whose communities are affected, using art to surface what feels like an important story that has gone largely unnoticed.

I'm writing several essays about the project based on interviews of my own. Last week, I talked with Maurice Turner, one project artist who lives outside of Jackson, Mississippi. I called him in Vermont, where he was doing a residency with a high school set up by the state Department of Corrections to provide an encouraging, enabling environment for kids who are in state custody, a rare sort of institution. Maurice told me about an experience he'd had a couple of years ago, at the beginning of his work in Vermont. He and his brother had offered a concert as a way to get to know people. It ended with a song that had this refrain: "Don't settle for no less than greatness and you'll be blessed."

An audience member stood up after the show. Weeping openly, he headed straight for Maurice, who couldn't quite believe his eyes. Maurice said the man "looked like some kind of a logger, you know, with a plaid shirt and a logger cap, big as a bear, tears running down his face." The logger said that his father had been a Wizard in the Ku Klux Klan and a harsh disciplinarian to boot. As a soldier in Vietnam, the logger had a close black friend, a man he described as "having my back." His father disapproved mightily. "That song brought me back to the day my father almost disowned me," he told Maurice.

"I realized that if I don't treat people with greatness in my heart, that holds both of us back."

"It's the same with a lot of kids," Maurice told me. "You can see that spark coming into their eyes. Pulling the wool *away from* someone's eyes," he said. "That's what I live for."

I'm pretty sure everyone in this room knows what he was talking about. And I'm pretty sure that most of us have had the frustrating experience of trying to convey the power and importance of that moment to someone who works in an educational or social service agency or a foundation and spends every day running as fast as possible just to keep from losing ground. So that's my subject today, the challenge of keeping art—and heart—at the center of our work and our awareness in a society that is busy making a lot of things worse while trying very hard to make them better.

I think we are in one of those liminal times in human history, where an old way of thinking, one that seems secure in its dominance, is actually weakening, beginning to let some delicious fresh air into the stuffy rooms of our culture. I see artists, especially those who choose to work in community, standing at the frontier between old and new paradigms. Stationed on the ridgetop, despite a great deal of fog and dust obscuring the view, we can glimpse the possibilities that lie just over the mountain. But sometimes we don't believe our own eyes. As philosopher Ken Wilber said, when paradigms shift—when the way society understands and organizes reality changes—it can be lonely and uncertain for people who clearly see the emergent reality. Describing them, Wilber used this phrase: "More depth, less span." We may not be a majority, but despite much social pressure to keep quiet about it, we know deeply just what it is we know—and what we don't know.

So what do we know, exactly? I'm going to focus especially on three things: the value of learning by creating, the fact that creativity is key to a healthy society, and the path of happy accidents.

We know from lived experience that deep, embodied learning by doing is the most powerful and lasting type of knowledge, and that nowhere is it stronger than in the partnership between artists and community members of any age and social condition. Whether we see our work as teaching or collaborating, it reveals certain undeniable truths.

Engaging in acts of creative self-expression and communication, people are able to bring their whole selves into the moment, to bring all that they are. As we make art, our memories, ancestors, dreams and fears trail behind us in what my tradition calls the

shelshelot neshamot, the chain of souls that embraces all histories and all futures. Singing and dancing enliven the entire human organism, flooding our brains and bodies with oxygen and enabling us to enter more fully into life, which is one reason why song and chant and physical movements or postures are part of so many spiritual practices. Telling our stories through words and actions draws both body and mind into the sacred act of crafting a personal narrative, the tale that gives shape and meaning to each person's experience and direction to each life. In drawing and painting, sculpting and writing, making photography and film, our hands give concrete form to our thoughts and feelings, opening the possibility of connecting with each other, of joining to describe and enrich our world. For many people, such creative experience offers the chance to feel fully alive and fully present in a way that is rare in the workaday world. In and of itself, this experience is healing, which in part explains why those who have had it want to have it again and again.

Art is also a path to freedom. For most of us, life offers many opportunities to be used for someone else's ends. We have duties and obligations, requirements and imposed limitations. But in collective creative expression, choice is ours. Making art is perfect preparation for the citizenship of a free people. Each participant in a community arts project is one equal among many whose contributions are recognized and valued equally. Together, they open their hearts and minds to discover what lives there. They share their hopes and doubts. They declare what is most important to themselves and to others in their families and communities. They give and receive full, active attention and the pleasure that comes with seeing and being seen. This involvement nurtures healthy autonomy and fellowship, the building-blocks of citizenship, which is why so many people who take part demonstrate a heightened disposition to step again into the social arena, into another arts project or some other form of social action—or both.

East of here in North Philadelphia you'll find one of the projects mentioned in *New Creative Community*, the Village of Arts and Humanities, which over two decades transformed 260 square blocks of blighted landscape into an astoundingly vivid assertion of human creativity and the healing power of art. The artists, organizers and other community members who built the Village imagined a world of beauty, color and connection. This inspiring project embodies the goal of cultural democracy as described by French human rights activist Francis Jeanson:

> [I]ts aim is to arrange things in such a way that culture becomes today for everybody what culture was for a small number of privileged people at every stage of history where it succeeded in reinventing for the benefit of the living the legacy inherited from the dead.[1]

Here's how intention was expressed in the Village leaders' own statement of purpose from 1995,

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[1] From Francis Jeanson's "On the Notion of 'Non-public,'" quoted in *Cultural Democracy* Number 19, February 1982.

> "All the gardens, parks, and buildings constructed by the Village must reveal our philosophy, sensitivity, and values. Their look should bring people joy, peace, and comfort. There should be a mystery to them, for their appearance is rooted in the depth of different cultural traditions, some of which are of distant and ancient origins. These constructions should warm people's hearts for they honor the humble, the human, and the forgotten."

We know that beauty and pleasure are deep human cravings, thwarted at our peril. Try to remember the first time you made something all by yourself, the thrill you felt at the blossoming of your own creative power, the way the little annoyances of life faded into the background, pushed there by the deep satisfaction of your own creative act. Now remember the most recent time. For me, the delight was the same. I would guess many of you could say that too.

No matter how reduced the circumstances of their lives, people make art—even in war zones, in prison, in concentration camps. As the great Czech writer Milan Kundera said, "Without realizing it, the individual composes his life according to the laws of beauty even in times of greatest distress." Remember the prison project I told you about when I started? It's called "Thousand Kites," because "kite" is prisoner slang for a letter or message and the project has received far more than a thousand of these from inmates who listen to the radio program that is part of its work. Many report on conditions in the prison or human rights abuses, but just as many are personal poems, stories and drawings. Most are in ballpoint pen on lined notebook paper, often composed with a youthful sweetness and care that evokes school days, laboring surreptitiously over drawings during class, carefully folding and passing a note across the rows. Here are a couple of stanzas from Tobin Jones, a prisoner at one of the rural "Supermax" facilities I mentioned, who managed to find beauty even in razor wire:

"Ribbon of wire with tiny teeth
Carefully designed to cut cloth and flesh
Now catches sparks of sun
A scintillation, a moment's hesitation
Helices bejeweled with diamonds

"I seek the treasure in the trap
The joy in the despair
The peace of a simple life
The beauty that was not intended
But can be seen and kept as
A gift."

We know in our bones that creativity is key to a healthy society and to individual well-being, but that news has been slow to trickle up to policy- and decision-makers.

Some of you have been doing this work for quite a while, so you've seen the rise of what the philosopher Friedrich Hayek sixty years ago termed "scientism." Scientism means taking methods and ways of thinking that work very well in the physical sciences and misapplying them to highly complex human endeavors, where they don't work at all. If you can arrive at solid truth about the behavior of minerals or fluids by weighing and measuring them, this thinking goes, you should also be able to reduce social systems or circumstances to quantitative data, and this should enable you to understand and intervene in them with equal success.

As Hayek and others have pointed out, this is a huge and unscientific mistake. Unlike working with a box of rocks, you will only be able to get quantifiable data on a few aspects of human events or situations. You can administer tests and grade them, you can tabulate how much time or money is spent in a certain endeavor, you can construct other indicators and assign value to them. But the data you obtain this way will always be limited, and it won't necessarily reveal the most important aspects of whatever you are studying. Everyone who works on the ground in schools and communities knows that all kinds of unquantifiable factors affect the quality and worth of the experience: feelings, ideas, relationships, beliefs and more. But often, such things are disregarded or underrated precisely because they can't be adequately demonstrated by quantitative measurement. Before long, the idea takes hold that only the factors that can be quantified are relevant and the rest—indeed, the heart and soul of the work—is just some soft stuff that has to be scraped away to get at the facts.

This error is easily compounded when, based on the woefully inadequate information that comes from measuring just a few quantifiable things, people form a hypothesis about what constitutes success, such as a high score on a mathematical scale. When the magic number is reached, we call it success. Being human, we easily accept whatever confirms our own ideas; it takes extra effort to investigate further, to learn that numerical scores don't necessarily translate into lived feelings of satisfaction, into something we can see and feel in the texture of real life.

In this way, scientism has distorted our understanding of value. The phrase "scientifically based research" appears 111 times in the No Child Left Behind Act, where it is defined at length, stressing control-group research that yields quantifiable data. The Act's mandated student testing focuses on math, reading and science, and many schools have made significant changes in the style and content of curriculum to improve these test scores. According to the Council for Basic Education, a conservative group that generally supports No Child Left Behind, school principals have reported significant

increases in class time in reading, writing, science and math, with corresponding decreases in foreign languages, the arts, and elementary school social studies.[2]

No one sets out to harm children. The people who created this approach to education believed that national standards and test-oriented curriculum would reduce inequities so that everyone could obtain a good education. But they succumbed to the typical pitfall of such grand schemes, which is that they pull energy away from the intended beneficiaries—the children—and toward serving the plan itself. No Child Left Behind is only one example of this approach. Many arts advocates have tackled the impossible task of trying to justify arts funding on the basis of economic multiplier effects or the community economic development impact of what is sometimes called "the creative class." Meanwhile, the real value of public arts funding and the arts' share of private funding have both steadily declined. The scientistic model contradicts the way we actually experience the arts. Imposing its orthodoxies on our creativity isn't improving our ability to understand or intervene in the world. All it really accomplishes is keeping us busy trying to spin straw into gold. When our ways of describing reality are as inadequate to the task as these, no matter how firmly rooted they seem, the winds of change will eventually blow them away.

As artists, we know all about serendipity, and in a society that has taken the notion of *making* things happen just about as far as it will go, that is incredibly useful knowledge. Indeed, we know that just about everything positive that happens in our own work and in any creative realm is a happy accident. It has to be, because when it comes to human endeavor, we can never know enough to manipulate the infinite possible variables to guarantee an intended outcome. Much of the time, we can't even get the people we know best to do what we want. How often do we find ourselves surprised by the words or actions of someone we know extremely well? Could you ever imagine giving enough data about that person to a complete stranger—even some sort of certified expert in human behavior—so that stranger would be better able than you are to predict your friend's next move? When two or three or a million unfathomable humans collide with the complex circumstances of life in the modern world, how can we call the results anything but accidental?

This is certainly evident in art. How many novelists, when asked why a certain character did thus-and-so, reply that they don't know, that the character seemed to take on a life of his or her own? How many visual arts effects are the result of releasing intention and surrendering to chance? In dance, in drama and in storytelling, improvisation and interpretation ensure that no work is ever the same twice, that its

[2] "Academic Atrophy: The Condition of the Liberal Arts in America's Public Schools," Council for Basic Education, March 2004.

message always morphs to bridge the ever-changing gap between giver and receiver. Even in science, it is the same. The mathematician, financier and writer Nassim Taleb, who calls himself "an epistemologist of chance events," has pointed out that in scientific research, "most of what people were looking for, they did not find. Most of what they found they were not looking for." Penicillin was just some mold inhibiting the growth of another lab culture; lasers at first had no application but were thought to be useful as a form of radar; the Internet was conceived as a military network; and despite massive National Cancer Institute-funded cancer research, the most potent treatment—chemotherapy—was discovered as a side-effect of mustard gas in warfare (people who were exposed to it had very low white blood cell counts). Look at today's biggest medical moneymakers: the top-selling drugs treat cholesterol. Statins were discovered by Akira Endo, who grew up on a farm where he developed an interest in fungi. After agricultural school and a biochemistry degree, he worked on fungal enzymes for processing fruit juice. Something he discovered there led him to think fungi might produce chemicals that inhibit cholesterol synthesis. Even that TV star Viagra was devised for another purpose, to treat heart disease and high blood pressure, and by the way, exhibiting a highly lucrative side-effect.

When we work with people in communities, one accurate way to describe what we are trying to do is to maximize the possibility of positive accidents. If those determined to *make* things happen their way can be compared to builders, measuring out lumber and pounding nails to construct something to their exact specifications, community artists can be compared to farmers: preparing the soil, adding food and water, placing the seeds in their earthy nests, then letting the sun, air and microscopic life forms do their miraculous thing. Our hope is to help create the conditions, the environment in which people's creativity can flourish and grow, each according to his or her own nature. Half a century ago, the great Welsh writer and educator Raymond Williams defined education's purpose as "society's confirmation of its common meanings, and of the human skills for their amendment."[3] He was saying that culture, this amazing thing we all co-create, is the matrix for all social and individual development, and that knowing as much as we can of it is important, but it is equally important to experience ourselves as able to change it.

As artists, we know this. We enact it every day. And slowly, slowly, the larger society is catching on, because as it happens, this is more and more what everyone today needs to know how to do. So many of today's big winners in the markets of social influence and personal achievement are where they are precisely because they pursued their own curiosity and desire through a world of accidents, always on the lookout for opportunity. The people who have become fabulously wealthy by creating Microsoft, Apple, Google, eBay and MySpace could never have set out to *make* it happen. There was no possible way to plan or train for enterprises that were not even imagined when they started down their life paths. All they could do was stay true to what they knew, remain aware of what they didn't know, and keep alert for happy accidents.

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[3] Raymond Williams, "Culture is Ordinary," *The Raymond Williams Reader*, Blackwell, 2001, p. 21.

So where does this leave us? Right up on that ridgetop I mentioned earlier. Gazing one way, into our own experience, we see the incredible value of artistic creativity in cultivating citizenship and liberty, in cultivating the whole person, in providing the consolations of beauty and meaning that are as necessary to survival as water and air. Gazing the other way, into the old scientistic paradigm, we see good and sincere people misapplying tools that are perfectly useful in one realm to another where they are entirely inappropriate, and we see the pernicious effects of that mistake.

Lucky us! Because of all the groups in our society, artists committed to working in community are the most qualified and best-positioned to begin reminding people that we know what we know, and deep down inside, they know it too.

We human beings love stories, especially stories that purport to explain things. What could be sweeter than being asked by a willing, compassionate listener to tell your life story, which almost always unfurls in the form of a path leading seamlessly from birth to the present? If we accept the role of accident in determining the course of events, then the meaning of such narratives shifts. Instead of reportage, they are art, constructions devised to give shape and meaning to what is often discontinuous experience. A lot of what we say about ourselves—"I did this and then I decided to do that"—turns out to be creative writing, retrofitted to serve our present ideas of ourselves. This is everyone's major art project, right? As long as we draw breath, we keep working on it, tweaking and embellishing, reframing and revising our life stories. Multiply this by the number of people on earth and you have that collective art project that some people have called The Great Conversation, and which, to hark back to my friend Maurice, is pretty much what I live for.

Art is sacred play. To me, the best community arts projects aspire to the condition of play, where people engage fully of their own volition, aligned in a wholehearted state. We know this. In *Community, Culture and Globalization*, an anthology I co-edited with Don Adams, my friend Maribel Legarda, artistic director of the Philippine Educational Theater Association, wrote these few paragraphs about one of her group's projects:

> Smokey Mountain sits on a mountain of garbage at the outskirts of Manila. Most of the children who live there work as scavengers, often rather than going to school. In this project, 20 children were gathered for a two-month workshop introducing theater performance skills through games, movement, action songs, storytelling and improvisation. Its aim was to build the child-participants' sense of self and community. PETA artist–teachers guided the children toward mounting a production about what it is like to be a child at Smokey Mountain.

> The challenge was increased by the circumstances surrounding these children. Firstly, they had uneven educational backgrounds. Some were full-time students, others went to school on a part-time basis because of their scavenging work, while others dropped out of school to become full-time scavengers in order to increase their contribution to family income. Their lack of education was exacerbated by the fact that the children lived under the shadow of malnutrition, breathing the poisonous fumes that decomposing garbage emits. Even simple instructions such as stepping right and stepping left were difficult for children to execute after years of exposure to this social and physical decay.
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> Playful use of what PETA calls the "Basic Integrated Arts Approach" to theater transformed the workshop venue into a virtual play space. The Integrated Arts Workshop is a systematic and cumulative weaving together of creative drama, creative sound and music, body movement, creative writing, visual arts and group dynamics. In essence, it is creative drama experienced and understood through various art disciplines. Exercises focusing on these different components are geared toward stimulating the participants to discover their creative potential for self- and collective expression. The process of creation and discovery is experiential and improvisational. The key to creation is spontaneity and the belief that we each contain a gold mine of riches, waiting to be discovered, brought into the light, polished and honed.
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> After months of challenging workshops and rehearsals, it was amazing to watch the children sing and dance and move and laugh as other children do. For that one moment, they were able not only to reclaim themselves but to reclaim their space. The children of Smokey Mountain realized a most fervent wish—to have a playground. For me, this is what the pedagogy of PETA's children's theater is all about: to create playgrounds in seemingly impossible environments—if not playgrounds in physical spaces, then those that grow out of the imagination.

Every person in this room knows that even though it can't be measured by scientistic methods, Maribel's story conveys deep and urgently important truth. That truth will out. Standing here on the ridgetop, we have the challenge of keeping what we know at the center while the paradigm shifts and scientistic certainties make way for much fuller, truer means of depicting human experience. We know what we know: that learning by creating is the most powerful mode, that creativity is key to a healthy society, and that the path of art is full of happy accidents.

In the meantime, we may have to do some more translating, pouring the new wine of what we know into the old bottles supplied by regulators. But that can be just one dance we do. To support our spirits and shed our light into the world, we need only keep remembering what we know from our practice as artists, accepting life's deep uncertainty and maximizing our exposure to serendipity, feeding our own spirits by putting ourselves

in the way of new people and new ideas, remaining aware in the present of what we are doing, and refraining as far as possible from imposing mechanistic models or theories on our experience.

We can live for sacred play.

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