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A New WPA: Why a Sustainable Future Demands Cultural Recovery

You know how a song can get stuck in your mind, how for an hour or a day you may find yourself moving through your errands and tasks and meals to a mental sound-track no one else can hear? Sometimes the same thing happens to me with stories. I get stuck on an anecdote and it hiccups along my train of thought, throwing off sparks. Lately, whenever I board that train, the same two-line anecdote plops down beside me. And now, I am going to share it with you.

It's about the great evolutionary biologist J. B. S. Haldane. He was once asked what a study of creation could teach us about the nature of God. The question suggests a great many replies about multiplicity or beauty, cruelty or mercy, all the ultimate attributes typically evoked in theological discussions. But Haldane took the question head-on. His answer was this: "An inordinate fondness for beetles."

Since the 350,000 beetle species make up a quarter of all known life-forms, Haldane's reply has the special charm of being both inarguable and revelatory. I think it has gotten stuck in my mind because in a time as marked as ours by spin and public prevarication, I am hungry for observation that isn't driven first and foremost by an agenda. That hunger reminds me how easy it is to ignore the evidence of our own senses—what is clearly true if only we open our eyes to see it—in favor of imposed notions that express some sort of conventional wisdom.

I am here today to talk to you about what it is we can deduce about art's centrality to social well-being from an open-eyed study of human beings in our many personal and public pursuits. What I have to say may sound like an echo of your own thoughts, or you may find a good deal to disagree with; either way, I ask only that you listen before you make up your mind.

The human proclivity to make art is intrinsic to our species. We do it in marble halls and ramshackle huts, at every moment of history, every time the unfolding of our lives asks to be marked. Even in SuperMax prisons and concentration camps, people hoard crumbs or scrape up mud to make sculptures, scratch on walls with rocks and lumps of charcoal. Herbert Zipper, the founding director of the National Guild of Community Schools of the Arts, led a clandestine orchestra in Dachau. At the dawn of human history, we sat around cave fires, the darkness at our backs, sharing stories of the hunt, the trek, the storm and their meaning for ourselves. Today we sit in darkened multiplexes, warming ourselves by the light of stories clothed in infinitely busier and more complex images. But underneath, they are the same.

Philosopher Denis Dutton has argued that our artistic creativity is rooted in our species' development during the Pleistocene era, rather than emerging later as an artifact of culture. In essence, the big brains that create pleasure, enable a remarkable and intense range of emotions, permit tremendous feats of imagination, link storytelling to problem-solving, and enable us to create beauty in so many forms are also a favored trait for sexual selection. When seeking mates, our ancestors valued innovation, dexterity, grace, and other forms of skillfulness associated with art, which may be why there seem to be more and more artists with each generation. This is also good news for countless starving artists looking for love in a time that otherwise values earning capacity.

But for all it says about art as fundamental to our humanity, this view still understates a truth I find as self-evident as the abundance of beetles. Until we craft the narrative that shapes them, our lives are nothing more than a string of experiences—someone laughs, someone dies, someone goes out for a cup of coffee, someone blows out the birthday candles, someone knits a sweater, someone loses a job.... By converting incidents to stories and sharing those stories, we learn empathy and resilience; we establish a sense of connection with our own past and with others; we align the compass-arrow that will allow us to navigate life's challenges. We work out the shared meanings that enable us to find a *modus vivendi*, a way of living together despite our differences.

Our creativity, the art that embodies our stories, continues to determine our survival, individually and collectively, here and now. What's more, it determines whether it will be our lot merely to exist, or to live to our full capacities as individuals and communities, attaining the moral grandeur of which human beings are capable. We have all seen this with our own eyes, how two people emerge from the same experience with entirely different stories: one says of her ordeal, "Everything bad happens to me!" and the other says, "I am so lucky to have survived!" The story each chooses makes all the difference in what happens next. So it is with communities and societies. More than anything else, the way we shape our stories determines our future.

The resilience that sustains communities in times of crisis is rooted in culture, in the tales of persistence and social imagination that inspire people to a sense of hope and possibility even in dark times. Through art, people prepare for life's challenges in the safe space of imagination, strengthening their creative judgment before it is tested. Artists can expand social imagination, helping us envision the transformations we hope to bring about, stimulating our thoughts and feelings toward the new attitudes and ideas that will drive recovery and animate a sustainable society.

Viewed through this lens, art is nothing less than the secret of survival. And if this is true, if our resilience, creativity and future sustainability are riding on the stories that shape us, if there can be no sustainable national recovery without cultural recovery, without finding and nurturing the stories that can fuel positive change, restoring faith and creating possibility—well, then, we had better invest in our collective capacity to create and share stories.

But which stories? This nation is challenged right now in so many ways: how will we emerge from what feels like perpetual war? How will we together educate children, care for the ill, create meaningful, sustaining work for the legions of unemployed, provide shelter, ensure clean air and water, promote equal rights? What stories do we need to support our creative capacities in this crucial moment?

We certainly need stories that draw the connections between personal and public policy choices and their impact on actual human lives. This disconnect has been growing: our ability to process information is constantly accelerating because we practice it constantly with computers, video games, smart phones and other devices. But without comparable attention to and investment in cultivating imagination and empathy, how will our hearts keep pace with our minds? To an alarming extent, the pain of our current economic crisis was created by people sitting at computers playing with numbers, forgetting that actual homes, livelihoods and families were at stake. Without imagination and empathy to balance ambition, we lose touch with the inner voice that says, "Wait! Consider the impact on others of the actions you are about to take."

Empathy cannot be acquired through intellect alone. It is through experience and imagination, through film, theater, dance, music, literature and visual art, through sharing our stories of

resourcefulness and resilience, through sharing our own creativity, that we learn to know and care for each other, to strengthen our families and communities and to face down challenges.

To pick just one example, in the U.S., we need a counter-narrative to the dominant saga of crime and punishment. There are currently 2.4 million people in prisons and jails here. While U.S. population has increased by a little over a third since 1972, the prison population has grown by 600%. We have by far the highest incarceration rate and the largest prison population on the planet. Since 1980, more than 400 new prisons have been built in rural communities across the country. The number of people serving life sentences has quadrupled since 1984, to more than 140,000. Half those people are African American. The number of people in prisons and jails for drug offenses has increased more than 1100% since 1980, and 60% of those in state prisons for these offenses have no history of violence or major sales. The United States has become Incarceration Nation.

Our criminal justice system is voracious, despite a steady diet of taxpayer funds; it is choked with prisoners, often in conditions that beggar imagination; and it is a breeding-ground for illness, violence and the type of resentment that never goes away. Increasingly, the prison system is abandoning the idea of rehabilitation in favor of pure punishment. In many of the new SuperMax prisons, inmates spend 23 hours a day in their cells, constantly watched by an armed guard. Increasingly, prisoners are shipped to faraway places their families cannot afford to visit. Increasingly, prisons are becoming big business, making millions while overcharging families and inmates for phone time and such necessities as soap. Increasingly, prisons are being privatized, taken over by corporations with no public accountability. It was announced just last week that the state of Arizona is seeking competitive bids to put its entire prison system, including death row, under private control. The stated reason is to trim as much as \$100 million from the current \$2 billion budget shortfall.

Even those who have no direct personal connection to inmates are connected to this system, living in a rural community that's being sold on prison as the new growth industry; acquainted with someone who builds prisons or supplies them with food or services; or someone who works as a prosecutor or a defense attorney, or who teaches classes to inmates. We support prisons through our taxes. Yet so far, despite widely publicized statistics, a raft of newspaper articles and television documentaries, ballot initiatives and organizing campaigns, very few people see themselves as implicated in or able to do anything about a cruel and ineffective system that squanders our commonwealth and the lives of so many young men who could contribute to their own families and communities.

In my book *New Creative Community*, I wrote about the Thousand Kites project (www.thousandkites.org), a collaboration between community artists and people across the country who are affected by the United States' burgeoning prison industry. The project was started by community artists at Appalshop, a multi-arts and education center based in Eastern Kentucky coalmining country, where local well-being has been sacrificed to the national appetite for energy, where coal companies have strip-mined the earth to the point that they are now blasting whole mountaintops to rubble so as to claim the remaining coal far beneath the surface.

The Thousand Kites project has grown over several years to include a call-in hip-hop show on Appalshop's community radio station, which has become a national communications nexus for prisoners and their loved ones. They produce an annual "Calls from Home" radio special which is distributed nationally. They have made a documentary film, *Up The Ridge*, and a play, *Thousand Kites*, both being used and adapted by communities across the country. They have built a Web portal to provide a connecting-point and a toolbox for people who care about this issue. Every element of the project is grounded in songs, poems, pictures and stories contributed by a wide range of people whose lives have been touched by the prison system, including prisoners, guards, local officials, builders and others who work on prisons, the families of all these people and victims of crime.

As a foundation for the *Thousand Kites* play, these artists use the story circle, a simple, accessible cultural development technology. People come together in a circle. Guided by a facilitator, each person has the same amount of time to share any story—in this case, about prisons and their personal impact—while everyone else gives total attention, recognizing that person's right to speak his or her own words in his or her own way. When everyone has spoken, the group talks about what has been learned from the layering of stories. The story circle is a kind of stem cell, yielding tales that can be shared in many ways, becoming the material of both art and activism. Through this creative activity, people remember what it is to be fully awake and fully present to each other. Instead of the overwhelming sense of powerlessness our conventional treatment of social challenges inculcates, they begin to see, even on a small scale, how their own actions and choices can make a difference.

Consider other social challenges: supporting health, improving education, creating employment, building sustainable community, making peace, and others. How do we ensure that this same skill at eliciting and using stories to expand our collective awareness permeates every sector of society? Those who have a depth of experience working in community will corroborate the answer I offer: we need to give people direct, first-person experiences to shatter the spin that keeps us from seeing ourselves and the world with clarity, which is to say experiences that engage us fully in all dimensions of our humanity: body, emotion, mind and spirit.

There is no better way to achieve this than through the creative process; specifically, through making art. In this effort, the act of creativity and the moment of presence are paramount, not the particular mode in which creativity is expressed. Whether we are playing sonatas or sambas, performing *Hamlet* or a piece crafted from our own stories, dancing hip-hop, ballet or Kathakali, reading Cavafy's poems or writing our own is incidental to the fact that we are experiencing artistic creativity, a life-embracing, non-polluting, spiritually enlarging activity that helps to heal the world and the human heart.

No other means is more powerful than this in cultivating the full citizenship of meaningful belonging, participation and mutual responsibility for society's choices. And the most potent and exciting way to give people these experiences is to support artists in placing their gifts at the service of public purpose. One dedicated artist working in collaboration with other community members makes the argument for investment in creativity more powerfully than a hundred cost-benefit analyses or a thousand charts of the economic multiplier effect. To bring about cultural recovery, there is no superior investment of public funds.

The usual argument against making an investment in arts' public purpose is cost. We currently have over seven million people in prison, on parole or probation, with total state spending of around \$52 billion.¹ The National Priorities Project² calculates that we have spent over \$915 billion on wars since 2001, an average cost of \$315 million a day—that's two annual National Endowment for the Arts budgets daily, seven days a week.

When future generations look back on this period and deduce who we were from the ways we chose to invest our commonwealth, what will they conclude? Just as sure as God loves beetles, with respect to the United States, it will be evident that above all, in the early 21st century, we prioritized punishment. This is not the story for which I wish to be remembered, and I have a hunch many of you feel the same. This is not the story that will enable a vibrant, creative society that prizes social well-being.

How can we change the story?

¹ Pew Center on the States, *One in 31: The Long Reach of American Corrections* (Washington, DC: The Pew Charitable Trusts, March 2009), 11.

² <http://www.costofwar.com/>

Let's turn the clock back seventy-five years, to the first administration of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, to explore our own history of national and cultural recovery, seeking the stories that can contribute to the change we desire now.

When FDR accepted his party's nomination as president in 1932, he made a promise to the American people:

Throughout the nation men and women, forgotten in the political philosophy of the Government, look to us here for guidance and for more equitable opportunity to share in the distribution of national wealth... I pledge you, I pledge myself to a new deal for the American people... This is more than a political campaign. It is a call to arms.

The New Deal FDR initiated to address the worst depression in history was a massive compendium of regulations, new agencies and initiatives, budget cuts, appointments and legislation. When he took office in 1933, unemployment had reached nearly twenty-five percent—right now, it's about ten percent. Prices kept dropping, so that goods were cheap, but still, few could afford to buy them and even fewer were willing to risk the capital they retained. It's estimated that two million, out of a total population of 127 million, were homeless (the homeless population today is estimated at about three million, out of a total of 307 million).

Roosevelt took unprecedented measures to repair broken social institutions and create new opportunity: he closed the banks and created the FDIC (Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation) to restore confidence when they reopened. He set up the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Agricultural Adjustment Administration. The National Industrial Recovery Act regulated competition to prevent corporate abuse, although the Supreme Court ruled that unconstitutional. The Securities and Exchange Commission was created. The Public Works Administration invested in dams, power stations and other infrastructure. Social Security was introduced as part of the New Deal. The Works Progress Administration was established to provide millions of jobs in many sectors. And those I've just mentioned constitute only a fraction of New Deal initiatives. It is hard to derive an accurate estimate of the cost, but some historians put it at around \$32 billion, which translates into just under \$550 billion in today's money, substantially less than the \$700 billion committed to the bank bailout through TARP, the Troubled Asset Relief Program.

All of this and more was done, and yet, when a mental association is evoked by the phrase "New Deal," for most people, what comes to mind is art: murals in post offices and other public buildings, performances of the Living Newspaper, posters encouraging alignment with the great public purpose of national recovery. It isn't just the New Deal that evokes images of art. Search your own memory banks for the Great Depression and its aftermath. What do you hear? "Brother, Can You Spare A Dime?" "Happy Days Are Here Again?" What do you see? An image by Dorothea Lange? A scene from *Sullivan's Travels*? A page from *The Grapes of Wrath*?

Why?

FDR himself alluded to the answer when in his first inaugural address he said, "We have nothing to fear but fear itself." He was pointing to universal truths: that how we feel about events has as much impact on our actions as the events themselves; that feelings—and sensations and images they attach to—linger even when facts try to chase them away. He meant that the Depression was worsened by people's fear of spending whatever money they retained; as more businesses closed and jobs were lost, fear's impact spread. People's feelings aren't addressed by the mere recitation of facts and figures, as all who are following the current health care debate can see for themselves. To address fear, it is necessary to engage emotions, bodies and spirits as well as intellects, and as I have already pointed out, the best ways to do that—the experiences that

engage us most fully in all those dimensions—are experiences of art, which is why they shape and color memory.

Do we really need convincing that anyone who wishes to make significant headway on a social problem or opportunity must engage with people's feelings about it? No financial intervention will save the economy unless confidence is restored. Challenges to social well-being can only be addressed by cultural as well as practical means: promoting safer sex, reducing the incidence of diabetes, treating addictions, spreading green consumer habits—the only way to achieve these and countless other aims for the public good is to engage people's feelings, to engage them experientially, so that they can identify and examine both the attractions that draw them to possible solutions and the fears of loss that stand in the way of positive change. When we apply this understanding, we can help people learn to inhabit a full sense of citizenship, reducing their susceptibility to demagogues. We can bring about cultural recovery. Without it, we are helpless.

Many artists understood this in FDR's time, as they do in our own. Today, everywhere I go, I meet artists who care deeply about being part of national recovery, of practicing democracy and building sustainable community.

I do not think artists are better or smarter than other people. But clearly, many of us have developed skills of observation acute enough to know what time it is. In the introduction to my book *New Creative Community*, I described the riots that raced through the French suburbs in 2005—violent clashes between young immigrants and the police. The *New York Times* carried an article by Alan Riding entitled, "In France, Artists Have Sounded the Warning Bells for Years." Riding pointed out that musicians and other artists had consistently predicted this conflict, whereas newspapers and politicians had "variously expressed shock and surprise, as if the riots were as unpredictable as a natural disaster."

Were you listening to the radio before our most recent Wall Street meltdown?

At every moment of crisis in U.S. history, artists and cultural activists have understood the real depth of our challenges before others have fully apprehended them, and at every moment, they have been ready to place their gifts at the service of democratic public purpose. Let me read you one artist's words:

In order to withstand the severe shock of the crisis, artists have had to seek a new grip on reality. Around the pros and cons of "social content," a dominant issue in discussions of present day American art, we are witnessing determined efforts by artists to find a meaningful direction. Increasing expression of social problems of the day in the new American art makes it clear that in times such as we are living in, few artists can honestly remain aloof, wrapped up in studio problems.³

Fresh from the headlines? No, these are the words of painter Stuart Davis, addressing the American Artists' Congress in 1936.

Many New Deal programs offered artists the meaningful direction Davis cited. The longest-lived were grouped under the WPA, the huge employment relief program started in 1935 at the beginning of FDR's "Second New Deal." These arts projects made up Federal Project Number One, generally known as "Federal One," comprising five divisions: the Federal Art Project, the Federal Music Project, the Federal Theatre Project, the Federal Writers Project and the much smaller Historical Records Survey, together employing more than 40,000 artists by the end of its first year. (At its height in 1938, including all types of workers, the WPA employed 3.3 million of the estimated twenty million souls on relief).

³ From Davis's address "Why an American Artists' Congress?" delivered in New York in February 1936, as recorded in *Artists Against War and Fascism: Papers of the First American Artists' Congress*, edited by Matthew Baigell and Julia Williams, Rutgers University Press, 1986.

The WPA employed writers such as Ralph Ellison, Dorothy West and Richard Wright; visual artists such as Lucienne Bloch, a photographer, muralist and sculptor who took the only surviving photograph of Diego Rivera's censored Rockefeller Center murals; and theater artists such as Burt Lancaster (who was then a circus performer). It supported projects such as the Milwaukee Handicraft Project, masterminded by Mary Kellogg Rice, who assembled a team of designer-foremen, jobless art education graduates, to train women to make hand-crafted furnishings, textiles and toys for schools, hospitals, orphanages and public buildings. The Theatre Project's "Living Newspaper" productions treated such controversial and urgent topics as poverty and exploitation (*One-Third of A Nation*) and the spread of syphilis (*Spirochete*). WPA projects documented cultural expressions threatened by the Depression, collecting folk music, compiling almost all of the remaining slave narratives, and preserving local history. It reached every part of the country and touched countless lives.

If the decision had to be made today, the chances of a new WPA coming into being would be roughly zero. Here's how Nobel Prize-winning economist Paul Krugman responded recently in his *New York Times* blog to a reader's assertion that it is time for a new WPA:

I think such a program would make sense—the WPA and CCC provided a lot of jobs at relatively low budget cost, because they paid fairly low wages and didn't go through middlemen. But I also understand why the Obama administration didn't include that kind of program in its plans—it's the politics. Not only would it have been denounced as "socialism"; anything like that would be condemned as waste. Remember, the idea of spending \$200 million cleaning up the National Mall was denounced as total waste and fraud, even though that's America's front yard. So the times aren't ready for another WPA.

Everything I have told you about the centrality of story, the universality of artistic creativity and its roles in human and social development, is demonstrably true. No doubt, many of us have experienced this truth directly, with our own bodies, emotions, minds and spirits. Yet, our policy-makers and those who shape public opinion are still laboring under the social superstition that says art is nice but not necessary, that it has nothing to do with the serious problems we face, that creative work is trivial and negligible, meaningful only for its commodity-value. Open the arts section of any major U.S. daily: if you eliminate the reviews, ads and announcements, you will discover the main focus: which TV shows drew the most viewers and sponsors, which movies and plays earned the largest box-office revenues, which songs sold the most copies, which performers made the largest fees. If all you have is a cash register, everything looks like a sale.

Many people would agree that the times aren't ready for any significant new investment in culture, which some commentators have characterized as a "toxic amenity," because art is so magnetically attractive to attack from the right. Today, a few extreme-right commentators and activists are trying to drum up what some people are calling a new culture war. This indirect attack on President Obama began in other realms, forcing Van Jones to step down as Green Jobs Advisor in response to smears by Fox News' deranged commentator, Glenn Beck. Emboldened by victory, Beck and his ilk fixed their sights on activist artists and on public arts agencies such as the National Endowment for the Arts. They forced the resignation of a staff member who had been involved in promoting President Obama's United We Serve volunteer campaign, denouncing it as an attempt to politicize arts funding. They are milking every recent arts-related meeting and memo for ammunition, and they are persisting, even though they haven't found all that much they can use.

I wish I could say their focus on the arts was a surprise. But in truth, when the ideologues of the right want to bash a liberal administration, they almost always pick up the same club, the National Endowment for the Arts, a minuscule federal agency with a budget amounting to a few cents per person. Why?

The answer is the other side of the point I have been making. Whether through intuition or analysis, they understand that the way we craft our stories shapes our lives and collectively, our society. While (to my continuing frustration) Democrats and progressives in the U.S. tend to see artists as nice but unnecessary to real democracy, the right sees artists clearly, as in possession of powerful skills of expression and communication, almost always in the service of freedom, equity, diversity and inclusion. They understand that creativity and public purpose are a potent combination. They want their story—that the United States belongs to white Americans who think as they do, and that their ownership confers the right to exclude, discredit and scapegoat others by any means necessary—to predominate, and so they are willing to do anything to disrupt the counter-narrative of art and public purpose. Racism is clearly one animating force behind this new round of scapegoating; another is the invidious prejudice against artists as exemplars of freedom in action. In media blowhards' arsenal, artists have been a weapon of choice for far too long.

This situation creates countless opportunities to be defensive, as artists have done for far too long: hiding out, running away, hoping those who attack us will tire of it and relent, fighting fire with fire. What all these responses have in common is allowing the other side to set the agenda.

The time has come to switch strategies, to work with comparable energy to bring about what we desire. What if we dedicated ourselves to putting artists to work for art's public purpose, mending our social fabric, promoting freedom of expression and a vibrant, inclusive national dialogue, and revitalizing both education and commerce with the creativity that has always been the wellspring of energy and success? It would take diligence and patience to shift the balance toward the public interest in culture and creativity, but I have no doubt that it is well worth trying, if for no other reason than the fact that after more than three decades of defensiveness by mainstream arts advocates, the real value of the NEA budget—to pick the best-known exemplar of our cultural policy—has declined by nearly forty-five percent. The mainstream advocacy approach ignores what we know to be true about cultural recovery, instead wagering with the regularity of a lottery addict on weak and tired secondary arguments for conventional arts subvention, with just about as much chance of success.

Yet people are so attached to the conventional wisdom, even its perpetual failure hasn't persuaded them to switch courses. Indeed, you may be listening to me right now on one channel, and on the other, generating dozens of reasons why what I am saying can't be true. Just put them off to the side for a second while you consider this: *What if what I am saying is actually right?* What if investing in artists is the best available lever to change our course as a society? What if the cultivation of personal and social imagination that is possible through the work of artists actually turns out to be precisely the right medicine to save us now?

It is worth wagering on this new possibility. In a time of social upheaval, the future is up for grabs. Things come about in mysterious ways. One person can start a trickle that becomes a flood, for good or ill. No one masterminded the WPA arts programs into being, for instance. Like almost everything that happens, serendipity and individual actions had a lot to do with it. I like to follow the chain of accidents and associations, because it reminds me that when luck plays such a large role in shaping the course of events, any coin-flip may change things. Perhaps you or I know someone who, with a word in the right place at the right time, will be instrumental in starting the new WPA.

After all, if George Biddle hadn't traveled in Mexico with Diego Rivera, if FDR hadn't gone to the elite Groton School with George Biddle, and thus been disposed to read Biddle's letters and take his ideas for a federal art project seriously; if WPA head Harry Hopkins hadn't known Hallie Flanagan, if Elmer Rice hadn't already formulated ideas for a federal theater and been the only

theater person who responded to Flanagan's plea to accompany her to Washington to meet with Harry Hopkins' assistant Jacob Baker; if Baker hadn't irritated Eleanor Roosevelt so much that Ellen Woodward's and Hallie Flanagan's ideas of a decentralized Federal Theater Project won out over his notion of a centralized national theater....

If all of these ifs, each one tied to individual circumstance and personality, had played out differently, we would probably be looking back at a very different New Deal history today.

The first New Deal programs for artists began as part of general job creation, in response to skyrocketing unemployment, with the arts treated simply as a sector of the work force, like farm or factory labor, giving jobs to artists who could not hope to make a living in the private economy under prevailing conditions. As Harry Hopkins said to FDR when questioned about why arts projects were included: "Artists have to eat too." Then as now, jobs were the engine of prosperity. You give a person a salary, and that person pays the rent and buys groceries. That puts money into circulation, starting the flow that can restore the economy. It doesn't really matter what the jobs are: a nurse, a teacher and construction worker or somebody who works in green energy or an artist—it all helps.

But once the arts programs started, it became evident that artists' jobs are a particularly good public investment, because they can help all objectives for recovery to be actualized. Visionary leaders such as Hallie Flanagan comprehended the potential for social change inherent in these programs. "In an age of terrific implications as to wealth and poverty," Flanagan said, "as to the function of government, as to peace and war, as to the relation of the artist to all these forces, the theatre must grow up. The theatre must become conscious of the implications of the changing social order or the changing social order will ignore and rightly, the implications of the theatre."⁴

Forty years later, when I worked as a community artist in San Francisco, I observed a similar, serendipitous chain-reaction. If John Kreidler hadn't been employed during the Nixon administration at the U.S. Office of Management and Budget where he was responsible for a portfolio of Federal programs involving youth employment and occupational health, if he hadn't interned in 1974 at the San Francisco Neighborhood Arts Program, if he hadn't found receptivity there from people like Eric Reuther, son of a United Auto Workers co-founder, for seeking support for artists from newly created public service employment programs—mainly through CETA, the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act—then we may never have known how many artists were passionately eager in the 1970s to work in public service.

In those days, I worked on the *Bicentennial Arts Biweekly*, a newsletter published by community artists in the lead-up to the 1976 Bicentennial of the American Revolution. Instead of the whitewashed official history that was being dished up for the occasion, we offered a rainbow of historic and contemporary activism. The issue of December 18, 1974, featured an article describing "a queue of 300 unemployed artists—each hoping to get one of 24 new art positions recently made available by the Emergency Employment Act" (a CETA forerunner). An article in the January 9, 1975, edition began, "Unemployed artists are being hired with federal funds in San Francisco in a program reminiscent of the WPA during the '30s Depression." At that time, twenty-three artists had just begun work at the San Francisco Art Commission's Neighborhood Arts Program and the de Young Museum Art School at the subsistence salary of US\$600 a month. Due to open any day were applications for ninety additional jobs for muralists to work in schools and housing projects, performing artists to fill residencies with community organizations and writers to work on oral histories of San Francisco's neighborhoods.

By June of 1977, many CETA-funded artists were employed not just by city agencies and institutions, but through private nonprofit organizations. The June 1, 1977, issue of the

⁴ Hallie Flanagan, address to first national meeting of the regional directors of the Federal Theatre Project, October 5, 1935: <http://newdeal.feri.org/ftp/ftp001.htm>. Reprinted in *Arena*, Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1940, pp. 45–46.

Bicentennial Arts Biweekly noted that 899 proposals had been made by nonprofits to use the 1,500 CETA jobs then available to nongovernmental organizations, many from arts and community organizations. The story was repeated across the country. At its height in Fiscal Year 1979, the Department of Labor estimated that US\$200 million had been invested in CETA arts jobs in that year alone; that would be the equivalent of nearly \$800 million in today's dollars.

Neither the WPA nor CETA was even close to perfect. There were bureaucratic excesses, incidents of censorship, bad art along with the good. There has been quite a brisk industry in churning out critiques of these programs, but that is more reflective of academic culture, in which tearing down is a surer route to success than proposing or celebrating. I don't romanticize these experiments in art and public purpose, but I do side with Voltaire in believing that the perfect is the enemy of the good. It isn't as if we are comparing the WPA with some free-market arcadia in which bureaucracy has no role, censorship never happens, and the market provides for all. Given the choice between relying entirely on the commercial cultural industries and red-carpet arts institutions to fulfill the national need for stories of resilience and images of inclusion, and augmenting these structures with public investment in community cultural development, despite the potential pitfalls, the choice seems a no-brainer to me.

But because we have these two experiments to draw on, we can proceed with intentionality to create a new program putting artists to work for cultural recovery today. I am speaking on this topic around the country, and I am happy to tell you that everywhere I go, there are people who want to use the 75th anniversary of the WPA in 2010 to shine a light on the long history of artists working for public purpose. I hope to see scholars, artists, activists and other community members in Chicago taking the opportunity next year to raise the questions and open the conversations that will stimulate passion and receptivity for something like a new WPA.

Now, a new WPA is only one piece of the new cultural policy I want to see us adopt. But it is the pivotal piece, because when people are given the opportunity to discover and express their own personal creativity and social imagination, they become instant advocates. Hands-on experience of working with artists in community is the best and most powerful means of showing people why culture matters, and why cultural recovery is intrinsic and essential to sustainable national recovery.

But more than a new WPA is needed to embody a policy recognizing that culture holds the key to a future we can believe in. Since May, I have been working with a group of artists and organizers who first came together as part of a White House Briefing on Art, Community, Social Justice, National Recovery. After our conversation with administration officials, we adjourned to another location to hold working group sessions about what to do next. I convened a working group on cultural policy. Group members gave ourselves a challenge we have been working on ever since. We knew that hearing the word "policy" makes many people want to lie down for a little nap. It conjures endless boring documents in which every detail is spelled out, like the boilerplate in a contract. But our goal was to wake people out of that somnolence. We challenged ourselves to use plain language to concisely convey the compelling necessity of a bold new investment in culture and community.

We asked ourselves this: what if instead of following the defensive strategy that has kept art and artists marginalized for so long—instead of making ourselves smaller or trying to camouflage ourselves as a way to improve tax revenues and test scores—we spoke and acted as if art were the secret of survival and sustainable community? As if the cultivation of personal and social creativity were an absolute necessity for any healthy society? As if art were the essential way to

teach the imaginative empathy and social imagination that underlie cultural recovery, without which no lasting economic recovery is possible?

Our collaboration produced a new policy proposal entitled “Art & The Public Purpose: A New Framework,” which includes a new WPA as one of the five key concepts that hold the key to cultural recovery and its role in national recovery. The Website promoting it launched only a few days ago at www.newculturalpolicy.org. By gathering individual and organizational endorsements, circulating the Framework for discussion, and encouraging people to place the topic of art’s public purpose front and center, we hope to call attention to a story that needs telling now: that art is the secret of survival, and that our own creative actions may be precisely what’s needed to save democracy now.

What of our nature may be deduced from the things we human beings have created? Consider how many stories have been written and chanted and whispered and drawn and danced and projected in the sweep of human history. Close your eyes for a second and try to give those stories form. I think of the blooming tulips I once saw in Washington’s Skagit Valley: if each story were a flower, we could gaze out over a field stretching all the way to the horizon, red flower-heads floating above a sea of green, then pivot in place and fill our eyes and hearts with yellow. If each story were a particle of energy, our entire planet would be encased in a story field, a web or matrix of tales that binds and sustains our collective existence.

From the long sweep of history we can deduce that humankind loves stories, loves exercising our inbuilt capacity for imaginative empathy. We are living every day in the midst of the story field, but none of us can see and grasp all the stories simultaneously. So we seek meta-stories, the narratives that transcend clutter and incident, helping us see that we are part of something much larger.

Together, we have the power to craft the narrative that defines this moment, to choose whether those who look back on this time will see us running scared or standing for all we know is true. We have seen so many examples even in our own lifetimes of people making this choice on the side of possibility, and succeeding against all odds. Just a few years before the fall of apartheid, the dismantling of the Berlin Wall, the Velvet Revolution, the oppressive official structures toppled by those democratic movements appeared to most commentators to be more or less permanent. A few years before Barack Obama’s election, you would have been laughed out of most smoke-filled rooms for predicting his presidency.

The possible outpaces our imagination of it, time after time. And if your own social imagination still can’t stretch quite far enough to shift the story from toxic amenity to the secret of survival, I know some artists who are ready, willing and eager to help.

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