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## **America's Cultural Recovery**

By Arlene Goldberg

*Note: This essay is adapted from a talk I gave on May 20th in Philadelphia, PA, part of a speakers' series to mark the 25th Anniversary of that city's Mural Arts Program ([www.muralarts.org](http://www.muralarts.org)).*

On May 12th, I co-led a delegation of more than sixty community artists and creative activists to a White House briefing where we heard about the administration's openness to collaborating with artists on our great collective project of national recovery. We held a pre-briefing meeting not far from the White House, a gathering that included, among others, writers, filmmakers, dancers, hip-hop activists, muralists, educators, organizers, people who—like myself—are first-generation Americans; people descended from slaves; people whose parents worked on farms or in factories or had trouble finding work at all. We were so excited about being there that most people arrived early. We got confused and started the meeting half an hour early: we had to stop and start again!

Such an unprecedented opportunity is only one indication that is a liminal moment in American history. All that is certain is that things are changing, that something big is happening. We are living through a period of extreme disequilibrium, the bleeding edge where the crusts of an old way of understanding crash into the tectonic plates of an emergent reality. Economies, governments and all aspects of social organization are struggling for a foothold as the very ground of life trembles beneath us.

To characterize this moment, I am tempted to quote Karl Marx's language of 1848: "All that is solid melts into air," Marx wrote, "all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind."<sup>1</sup>

Marx's lushly romantic language conveys the intoxicating mixture of confusion and hope we now breathe every day. But the anachronisms so evident in this passage speak volumes about how our response to radical social imbalances must be very different from his prescription. One hundred and sixty-one years later, we no longer talk of *man*, but of *humankind*; we no longer think only of our own kind, but of the many interrelated forms life takes on this small planet. And despite the vast portion of our commonwealth now being poured into the banking system, few of us any longer believe that changes in the means and relations of production will alone suffice to fix the mess we have made.

Yet we have something in common with Marx. He saw that in a period of seismic social movement, real and significant change is possible. And so do we. Those who fear such change advocate pulling our wagons into a circle, continuing to do what we have been doing all along—

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, 1848

only more so. And those like myself, who hope to bring our actions in line with newly emerging possibilities, prescribe the opposite: an embrace of the opportunity this moment reveals.

The same story can be told with reference to almost any social sector—health care, environmental protection, economic development, education, and so on. But my subject is culture, because it cuts across all those realms.

What is culture? Gaze around you, skipping over everything that comes under the heading of “nature”—the sky overhead, the sun-dappled trees, the symphony of birds. Everything else is culture, the collective stock of signs and symbols, ways of communicating, customs, values, ideas of beauty and meaning, environments, objects and stories created by human beings—and also culture’s purest expression, art.

Culture is a collective creation, animated by our desire to communicate and connect, to see and be seen, to know and be known. It exists everywhere human beings have emerged from the defensive isolation to which our spirits are prey and entered into communion. As Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker movement, put it so beautifully, “We have all known the long loneliness and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community.”<sup>2</sup> To which I add only that community arises from culture, precisely as rain arises from our watery planet.

One of the most grotesque ideas of the modern period is that all of this is somehow superfluous to the human project, nice but not necessary—and Mr. Marx deserves some of the blame for that. In fact, the opposite is true. Culture is the secret of survival. As my friend Dudley Cocke of Roadside Theater in Appalachia likes to say, “We are the storytelling animal, and language and story have been our selective advantage.”

Surely he is right. Lived experience is a hodgepodge: someone is born, someone wins the lottery, someone loses a job, someone laughs till tears come, someone sorts the recycling, someone dies. There’s a war, a mortgage meltdown, an election, a surprise party, an epidemic, a parade. Our lives are a string of incidents until we craft the narrative that gives them meaning. Individually and collectively, the way we tell our stories shapes our lives.

Consider how many stories have been written and chanted and whispered and drawn and danced and projected and imagined since humans appeared on this planet. If each story were a butterfly, the earth would be carpeted in brilliant iridescence. If each story were a particle or wave of energy, the planet would be encased in a story field, a web or matrix of tales that binds and sustains our collective existence.

Can you see the planet spinning and glittering in your mind’s eye? Take a moment to explore it in your imagination. Bring to mind a time when someone taught you a song, read you a poem, pointed to an obscure corner of some complicated image, drawing your attention to a detail that had previously escaped notice, showed you a dance step that filled your body with delight.

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<sup>2</sup> Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness*, Harper & Brothers, 1952

Concentrate on that moment. Try to remember the sights, sounds and scents of that moment. Try to remember how it felt to receive and discover.

Now focus on the face of your benefactor, the infectious delight, the caring and generosity that attach to the gift of culture. And when you have that image in mind, pull back and imagine the person who gave it to the one who taught you. And the person who gave it to your benefactor's teacher, and to that teacher's teacher, as far into the past as you can imagine.

Each of those individuals occupies a single point—a single particle or wave of energy—in the story field. And so do you.

Now hold that image and at the same time, move your attention in the other direction. With whom will you share the teaching you received from your benefactor? Perhaps you've already taught someone else the song or read aloud the poem or screened the film for your beneficiary in this great cycle of cultural transmission. Perhaps you want to imagine a future moment when you will first tell a story or sing a song and watch your friend's face light up. When you have the moment in mind, picture your student teaching this same thing to someone else, and that person teaching it to someone else, as far into the future as you can imagine.

What are seeing is vast, yet it is only a glimpse of a single corner of the story field, a network of human creativity emanating from each and every person who has ever lived—or will ever live—on this planet.

"Holy! Holy! Holy!" wrote Allen Ginsberg, "The typewriter is holy the poem is holy the voice is holy the hearers are holy the ecstasy is holy!"<sup>3</sup>

I have a name for the emergent paradigm, the unfolding reality that recognizes the holiness of stories, and that name is "Storyland." In Storyland, artists work with communities to capture and use the stories that support resilience, connection and possibility. Today in Storyland, as in every past moment of crisis, artists and cultural activists are once again ready to place their gifts at the service of democratic public purpose.

During the New Deal of the 1930s, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's response to the Great Depression included programs to employ artists. The longest-lived were grouped under the heading "WPA," for Works Progress Administration, a huge employment relief program started in 1935 at the beginning of FDR's "Second New Deal." They made up Federal Project Number One, comprising five divisions: the Federal Art Project, the Federal Music Project, the Federal Theatre Project, the Federal Writers Project and the Historical Records Survey, together employing more than 40,000 artists by the end of its first year, when the U.S. population was about a third of today's.

The New Deal included programs addressing unemployment and development in many sectors, from agricultural price supports to infrastructure projects, raising both personal expenditures and

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<sup>3</sup> Allen Ginsberg, "Footnote to Howl" in *Howl and Other Poems*, City Lights Books 1956

Gross Domestic Product every year. Nearly 75 years later, the federal arts programs of that period are the most familiar and beloved part of FDR's legacy, persisting in memory as symbols of the entire New Deal, because they generated images and stories embodying the spirit of the times. As the nation moved toward economic recovery, these arts projects helped to bring about cultural recovery, reframing the moment from one of isolation and despair to one of partnership and possibility.

Since World War II, more and more artists have worked in community cultural development, in participatory projects wherein artists collaborate with others to express concerns and aspirations, recovering histories, beautifying communities, teaching, expressing cultural creativity as a universal birthright and a bottomless source of resilience. In Storyland, arts-based approaches help communities realize their fullest potential and make the most of their resources, creating large impacts in proportion to costs. Because it is driven not by market considerations but by the desire for cultural connection, for expressive opportunities and recognition for our contributions to local and national history, this practice constitutes a social good, like public education, not a market-driven commodity. It has flourished most in times of public investment.

In the 1970s, community artists and arts organizations took advantage of public service employment programs through the Department of Labor, notably CETA (the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act). At its height, CETA invested approximately \$200 million per year (over \$700 million in 2009 dollars) in jobs for artists teaching, performing, creating public art and administering arts programs in the public interest. Until Ronald Reagan abolished them, these programs were a mainstay of the community arts field; almost every community artist active in those days either had a CETA job or was close with someone who did. Many of today's most accomplished practitioners and most-admired organizations were helped by CETA to pursue the democratic interest in cultural life, promoting vibrant cultural citizenship rich with cross-cultural sharing, creating sites of public memory commemorating community history and pride, making works of dance and theater that deepen and refresh understanding, stories that heal, opportunities for young people to express themselves and learn through artistic practice.

Then and now, sustainable recovery is rooted in communities' own awareness of challenges and our own knowledge of everything that supports resilience and healing. Artists are uniquely able to stimulate social imagination, working with people to cultivate creativity, connection and strength. Today, as always, sustainable national recovery demands cultural recovery.

For instance, In *Community, Culture and Globalization*<sup>4</sup>, an international anthology I co-edited with Don Adams, muralist Judy Baca tells the back-story of "The Great Wall of Los Angeles," the world's largest mural, painted by crews drawn from youth gangs. It portrays the buried history of California and its people, the stories that seldom make it into the official version:

The site was a concrete flood-control channel built by the Army Corps of Engineers. Once an arroyo (a dirt ravine cut by river water), the Tujunga Wash flood-control channel was an ugly concrete dividing line within the community with a belt of arid dirt running along either side. The Wash is in Studio City, a few miles north of Hollywood in the San Fernando Valley....

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<sup>4</sup> Judith F. Baca, "Birth of A Movement," in Don Adams and Arlene Goldbard, *Community, Culture and Globalization*, The Rockefeller Foundation, 2002.

The concreted rivers divided the land and left ugly eyesores, carrying the water too swiftly to the ocean, bearing pollution from city streets, affecting Santa Monica Bay and depriving the aquifer of water replenishment through normal ground seepage. In a sense the concreting of the river represented the hardening of the arteries of the land. If the river overflowing its banks regularly destroyed opportunities for the real-estate expansion that fast became the chief commodity of the fledgling city of the 1920s, then the river would simply have to be tamed. These first decisions about the river made it easier to displace historic indigenous and Mexican communities in the name of city development....

The concrete river invaded my dreams, its significance becoming clearer to me as the correlation between the scars on a human body and those on the land took shape in my mind. Fernando, a charismatic leader from the original Las Vistas Nuevas team, was brutally stabbed in his own neighborhood's local store the summer of the painting of *Mi Abuelita*. He suffered 13 wounds to his torso and one to his face. We were devastated by the attack, but Fernando recovered and returned for the dedication ceremony, continuing his work against violence through the murals for many years until he was killed in his neighborhood park in the 1980s, 12 years after he had abandoned "the life." I asked him after he had healed how he was doing with the psychological scars left by such an attack and he responded, "The worst thing is that every time I remove my shirt my body is a map of violence." It was for this reason that I proposed and designed a series of tattooed images to cover and transform the scars on his body.

Standing at the river on that first day, dreaming of what it could become, I saw the concrete as a scar where the river once ran and our work in the channel producing the narrative mural, as a tattoo on the scar. The defining metaphor of what came to be known as the *Great Wall of Los Angeles*...became "a tattoo on the scar where the river once ran."

Cultural recovery means recognizing that the capacity for renewal that sustains communities in times of crisis is rooted in culture, in the stories of survival and social imagination that inspire people to hope and possibility even in dark times. Sharing our stories as song, drama, literature or image shows people how those who came before them met similar challenges, survived and prospered. Each panel of The Great Wall tells the story of another decade in California's history, the World War II struggle against fascism eliding into the Red Scare of the 1950s into the 1960s freedom rides.

Cultural recovery means cultivating social imagination, envisioning the transformations we hope to bring about, stimulating our thoughts and feelings toward the new attitudes and ideas that will drive recovery.

Consider the work of Marty Pottenger. Under the auspices of the Arts & Equity Initiative, she and other artists have been working with city employees in Portland, Maine, including the Police Department, where "the project was designed to address two key challenges that PPD had identified last year—their relationship with the public, and low department morale." Overall, the goal of the initiative is "to make the arts and artmaking everyday tools for municipal governments to come up with better solutions in challenging times." Here, in its entirety, is a poem by Officer Alissa Poisson of the Portland Police Department that seems to contain everything we want from keepers of the peace: empathy, humility, awareness of power, the wish to help:

## I Do Hate The Hat

Talking to a child  
Or a victim, someone harmed,  
I take it off.

Cultural recovery means cultivating social and personal creativity. As the nature of work changes, culture becomes more and more key to social and community development. The “knowledge economy” is actually a cultural economy. It’s not just bits and bytes of data that are supporting jobs these days: without the imagination and artistry to devise and convey the words, sounds and images that fill our hard disks and iPods, Web 2.0 would be dead in the water. The skills of imagination, improvisation and problem-solving learned through artistic creativity are applicable, even essential, to countless new jobs that will be created as the economy morphs through its current fundamental restructuring. These are the most valuable skills society can pass on to people who will be doing work that cannot be prepared for in conventional ways because it cannot even be accurately imagined now.

Cultural recovery means recognizing that making significant headway on a social problem or opportunity requires engaging with people’s feelings and attitudes about it. We hear every day that no financial intervention will save the economy unless confidence is restored. Promoting safer sex, reducing the incidence of diabetes, treating addictions, spreading green consumer habits—these and countless other public aims are advanced by artists’ skill at engaging people in expressing their own views and communicating freely with others.

In my book *New Creative Community: The Art of Cultural Development*<sup>5</sup>, you can read about El Teatro Lucha de Salud del Barrio in Texas, using theater to help families learn what they need to act on their very real health concerns, the epidemics of asthma and diabetes swamping our most economically distressed communities. Imagine what could happen if every agency of government collaborated with community artists to tell the important stories in ways that bring policy goals home, showing people what they could do locally to improve their children’s education, reduce environmental damage and create jobs.

I was with Judy Baca last fall in Los Angeles, when she gave the keynote at a conference of universities engaged in collaborations with artists and communities. She told this same story of “the tattoo on the scar where the river once ran,” along with other multi-dimensional stories about her experiences, including one in which the design of a mural was altered at the last moment to accommodate a dream that a key person had a few days before it was to be unveiled.

Judy and I have known each other for 35 years. She is brilliant, gifted and brave. At dinner afterwards, she confided that she’d been hesitant to share these stories of dreams and nightmares, bodies and scars with such an audience. Like many artists, she’d often sanded some of the rough edges off her stories so as not to excite the ridicule that sometimes attaches to bringing body and spirit into realms normally reserved for disembodied data.

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<sup>5</sup> Arlene Goldbard, *New Creative Community: The Art of Cultural Development*, New Village Press, 2006

But she'd decided she wasn't going to do that anymore, ever. Many of us are ignoring the conventional embargo on full expression of body, emotion, mind and spirit—to bringing all we are and all we know into our interactions. A little ridicule is a small price to pay for the pleasure of living as if Storyland were all around us every day—which it is.

Of course, the old paradigm is all around us every day too, the counterforce that co-creates our disequilibrium. My name for its way of seeing is "Datastan," and it's a flatland nightmare of an old paradigm that worships hyper-efficiency, hyper-rationality, hyper-materialism and domination.

Datastan is conditioned on the scientism that was one of the most bizarrely reductive features of twentieth-century culture, 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 gases by measuring them, this line of thinking goes, you should also be able to reduce human stories to quantitative data, and this should enable you to understand and control them. Scientism is not science, which entails as many creative leaps as measurements. It is another thing altogether, the misguided and distorted view that human beings in our infinite complexity ought to behave just like computers, or at least allow our behavior to be controlled by computers.

Scientism is the No Child Left Behind Act, where the phrase "scientifically based research" appears 111 times, premised on the idea that the quality of education can be measured best by control-group research that yields quantifiable data. Scientism is arguing that babies should be exposed to Mozart because it makes them grow up to score higher on I.Q. tests. Scientism is the mountain of money that has been wasted by public and private agencies in the U.S., trying to come up with "hard" justifications for public arts subsidy, such as the "economic multiplier effect" of arts expenditure, which means that when people buy theater tickets, they also spend money eating and parking, multiplying the flow of capital. The trouble is, exactly the same economic benefits adhere to football tickets or lady mud wrestling or a trip to the zoo.

In the artworld region of Datastan, something is especially rotten. Many arts advocates live in the grip of a persistent obsession: to convey art's value through "hard evidence" such as numbers, graphs and charts. Mountains of flimsy research have been underwritten to support this aim. One staple of Datastan is the study purporting to show that higher test scores and lower dropout rates are achieved by students who participate in "the arts." Almost all of these are biased toward elite arts, so what they really mean is those who take drama classes or play in the school orchestra are more likely than their peers to excel by standard measurements. It's impossible to know if the research measures causes or effects. Formal education is consistently the best predictor of participation in nonprofit professional arts institutions; there's no control group in which the children of educated parents are denied entrance to drama class so that the educational effects can be measured for comparison. And if such studies were to include garage-band players, spray-can artists and hip-hop dancers, the results wouldn't necessarily measure up.

When you ask arts advocates why they continue to prize such questionable—if quantifiable—research, they say that effective advocacy demands it. “Legislators love these charts,” the director of a national arts research program told me. “Gotta speak their language.”

Is that so? Has it worked? Let’s see. The National Endowment for the Arts’ budget was \$159 million in 1981, just after Ronald Reagan took office. Correcting for inflation, it would take \$372 million in 2008 dollars to equal that allocation. What is the 2009 NEA budget? \$155 million. Throw in the \$50 million supplement that was part of the Recovery Act, and we discover that all those decades of “speaking their language” have yielded a net loss in real value of nearly 45 percent!

Datastan is blinded by scientism. Its passionate belief in the persuasive power of quantification resembles a modern-day cargo cult. In the classic example, Melanesians built airstrips from coconuts and straw, hoping that supernatural forces would deliver the richly stocked cargo planes that Europeans seemed to attract to their own airstrips. That worked about as well as today’s arts advocacy, but the news trickled down faster. After more than three decades, many arts advocates remain steadfast in their devotion to a ritualized strategy that consistently fails.

If you’ve ever fundraised for a not-for-profit arts organization, you’ve experienced other irrational Datastan orthodoxies. For the last forty years, funders have cajoled and commanded arts organizations to shape themselves after the corporate model, as if that were the only legitimate form of social organization. One result has been that even small, barely funded groups must generate endless reports and projections of organizational finances, plans and programs modeled on the reporting practices of for-profits, only a lot more strenuously vetted. These take tremendous amounts of time from creative and community work, often without adding any demonstrable value to that work.

Charlie Humphrey, the Executive Director of Pittsburgh Filmmakers, the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts and the Pittsburgh Glass Center, published a furious screed in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* back in February. Here’s some of his message:

After sitting through countless speeches delivered by the high priests of capitalism about the need for the public sector to grow up and start acting like real entrepreneurs, it’s fascinating to watch billionaires grovel for a share of taxpayer money. Hell, I’ve been doing that for years, sans the corporate jet and multimillion dollar bonus.

Meanwhile, no business in America, large or small, receives the level of scrutiny that nonprofits get. It comes in three fundamental forms. Trustees who review financial data on a monthly or quarterly basis, publicly available annual audits that have become increasingly onerous and heavy handed, thanks to new federal regulations designed to create greater transparency in the for-profit world, and close scrutiny from public and private funding sources.

Every proposal submitted by a nonprofit, to either a government agency or a private foundation, is subject to rigorous review and follow-up. Private foundations, in particular, have become very good at analyzing and assessing the relative health of nonprofits. They hire experts in specific fields and often use outside consultants to further study a potential grantee. Government agencies often employ peer panels to review and rank proposals. The process actually strengthens organizations and goes a long way to protecting public investment.



Nonprofits should be held to a very high standard because they serve the public good and operate with tax-exempt money. So, move over. Now we have key industries in the for-profit world also floating on public money. And yet there does not seem to be the same sort of oversight that has been present for nonprofits for years.

Witness the speed with which the federal government came to the rescue of lenders and the auto industry. Billions in TARP money have been handed over with fewer conditions than a \$5,000 Pennsylvania Council on the Arts grant made to a struggling puppet troupe.<sup>6</sup>

Regard the dead and damaged corporate carcasses currently littering our commercial sector. An alarming amount of what purported to be economically—scientifically—sound turned out to be Ponzi schemes of unprecedented proportions. When Charlie Humphrey wrote in February, the cost of the Troubled Asset Relief Program was estimated at under \$200 billion. In April, the Congressional Budget Office projected that we taxpayers will spend \$356 billion on TARP this year making up for corporate mistakes and malfeasance. This figure equals more than 1,700 NEAs.

In Datastan, arts groups are asked to produce confident-seeming multi-year plans projecting income, expenses and programs—even though the economy is in such disarray that it would be mad for anyone to imagine such predictions are worth the paper they are printed on. The rational approach to planning now is to cultivate readiness, improvisational ability and responsiveness, not to draw up blueprints for castles in the air. But the requirements haven't changed.

For decades, Datastan urged arts groups to amass endowments. Large chunks of foundation and corporate giving were tied up in endowment campaigns, in serene confidence that those managing the economy were wise and capable, so investments would always grow. The current result is that philanthropic money that could be sustaining real-time, essential cultural interventions is sitting in the bank without accruing value.

Has this gone beyond a cargo cult into a suicide pact?

Thank goodness things are changing. Something big is happening, and to have the greatest possible impact in influencing its direction, artists, arts advocates, funders, public agencies and everyone else who cares about the future will reconsider old assumptions and embrace this opportunity to create cultural recovery.

Are you doubtful? Consider a few signs and portents, such as the fact that Jeremy Nowack, President and CEO of The Reinvestment Fund and a Board member of the Philadelphia Federal

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<sup>6</sup> Charlie Humphrey, "Hold us accountable but keep us alive," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, February 11, 2009

Reserve Bank, has emerged as a community arts advocate. This is from his report on culture's intrinsic and powerful role in community development, based on a review of the findings of Mark Stern's and Susan Seifert's Social Impact of the Arts Project at the University of Pennsylvania:

“Community arts and cultural activities,” wrote Nowack, “through their intrinsic expressive and exploratory processes and products, have the capacity to catalyze or reinforce place-making through each component of the architecture of community: through the coalescing of social and civic relationships around creative activity; through the creation and reinforcement of quality public assets that incubate or nurture art and culture; through market demand for commercial and residential space used by artists and the creative sector in general; and through networked enterprises of cultural institutions, artist/entrepreneurs and community collaborations.”<sup>7</sup>

Another indicator is that science is showing us the critical role creativity plays in personal and social development. For our brains to serve the future, we would be wise to develop our creative imagination and empathic capacities through arts participation. Antonio and Hanna Damasio of the Brain and Creativity Institute and the Cognitive Neuroscience Imaging Center at USC are leading brain scientists who have become advocates for arts education. “[M]ath and science alone do not make citizens,” they said in a speech at the 2006 UNESCO World Conference on Arts Education. “And, given that the development of citizenship is already under siege, math and science alone are not sufficient.”<sup>8</sup>

The Damasios point out that cognitive processing is constantly speeding up as we exercise it through interaction with machines, but that emotional processing cannot keep pace, with the result that young minds are emotionally underdeveloped, leading to a loss of moral compass, of the emotional sense and imagination that guide a well-rounded human being. Through stories, theater, songs and visual imagery, we can build comparable emotional and moral capacity. Without art, our schools are treading a deeply dangerous path.

Culture is the remedy that can begin to heal social injury, allowing us to face each other across every barrier that creates distance and objectification. Scientists who study how our brains process trauma say it can be healing for a traumatized person to tell his or her story in fullness and in detail, so long as the telling is received with respect, presence and caring. The same is true in healing social trauma. There are many sore spots in the global cultural matrix, old bruises where people have been told they are less than full citizens of the world, even less than fully human. One of the tasks and unique strengths of cultural development is to help heal those injuries through the telling and receiving of stories. Around the world, the work of community artists has addressed social trauma with remarkable results.

Often, cultural action creates the container that enables people to face each other and to enter into dialogue even about the most polarized, heated issues. In the body politic as portrayed by the commercial media, most issues are reduced to a simple pro and con. But issues are complex.

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<sup>7</sup> Download Jeremy Nowack's report on “Creativity and Neighborhood Development: Strategies for Community Investment” and many other interesting reports from the Social Impact of the Arts Project: <http://www.sp2.upenn.edu/SIAP/trfrock.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Download Dr. Antonio Damasio's speech from Unesco's Web site: [http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=2916&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=2916&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html).

For civil society to flourish, we must create genuine meeting-places and promote genuine dialogue instead of this angry tennis match.

Artists are doing this better than anyone else. Check out Thousand Kites<sup>9</sup>, a national dialogue project addressing criminal justice. A collaboration between two groups based at Appalshop in eastern Kentucky, Roadside Theater and Holler to the Hood, Thousand Kites has created a film, a dialogue-driven play, an interactive website and other initiatives to involve everyone, from guards to prisoner families to policy-makers, in considering what it means to be Incarceration Nation, a major public issue that hasn't been able to get a full hearing otherwise.

The fact that Datasen persists even as Storyland emerges is just the way things are: anyone who has ever tried to kick a habit knows that resistance is as much a part of the change process as are will and desire. Resistance will arise, even within ourselves. The cure is to receive information from multiple senses and sources, including those devalued in Datastan. The most powerful way to remain open to the widest spectrum of information from body, intellect, emotion and spirit is making art. In the flow of creativity, we are resourceful, imaginative, playful, embodied, empathetic, excited, alive. When we make art, we inhabit ourselves fully, we are at once most godlike and most human in experiencing the pure possibility of creation.

In times of great disequilibrium, offering a gateway to this state of being is an incredible gift and intrinsically, a spiritual practice. I like to remember what the great 18th century teacher Rebbe Nachman of Bratslov said: "The antidote to despair is to remember the world to come." We can't remember what has not yet occurred, but I think he meant that despair yields to a glimpse of a perfected world in the experiences that remind us what it is to feel entirely alive. When we transcend the specific circumstances of our lives, diving headlong into the stream of creativity, we learn that even mundane things—even the focus, diligence and practice of craft that sometimes feel like drudgery—can be lifted into pleasure by remaining aware of their higher meanings.

Cultural creativity develops our capacity to envision, dream and shape the future we desire. The January 19th issue of *Newsweek* carried Jeremy McCarter's piece, "Will Act for Food," arguing that the very election of Barack Obama—let alone the hope that our new president urges us to cultivate—was made possible by the work of artists. He wrote:

"Cultural issues, which aren't a top priority for new administrations even in the best of times, will have trouble climbing very high on the Obama agenda. But in light of what this election has helped us to understand about the potency of the arts in our national life, the new president would be wasting a glorious opportunity if he failed to give them his attention. Partly it's because the overlapping crises we face at the moment give him a rare chance to dream big. Partly, too, his singular story gives him a unique ability to make connections among people that might change the way we think about culture. But it's also a question of his larger vision for society, which the arts could help him to realize. If he treats them wisely, he might foster a climate for creativity as unprecedented as his election."

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<sup>9</sup> <http://thousandkites.org>

No one can predict the future with accuracy, but we can pay attention to what is emerging. I don't think artists are better or smarter than other people. But many of us have developed skills of observation acute enough to read subtle signs. When I wrote the introduction to *New Creative Community*, I thought of the riots that had overtaken 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."

So let's imagine for a moment that Storyland's emergence is a very real possibility, not merely a projection of my own hopes. What does that moment call forth? When I ask myself that question, three answers heave themselves out of my gray matter, waving their arms for attention:

First, we need to use this moment of disequilibrium and change to promote the truth that sustainable recovery requires cultural recovery. The opportunity is wonderfully described by Maribel Alvarez, Assistant Research Social Scientist and Research Professor in The Southwest Center & English Department at the University of Arizona in Tucson: "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."

Second, we need to create a national conversation about cultural policy as serious and broad as our debates over educational, health or energy policy. Focusing only on narrowly conceived arts funding apparatus such as the NEA relegates cultural development to a special interest defended primarily by its direct beneficiaries, and that keeps it minuscule and vulnerable. If we want special-purpose arts agencies to balance marketplace forces by underwriting innovative or otherwise challenging arts work, that's a great and laudable thing. But the fundamental basis for cultural policy needs to shift to an integration or infusion strategy that touches all agencies and issues.

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." I want to see an equally remarkable thing happen in the realm of cultural policy, through another three-point 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.

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.

Point three would be to introduce a "Cultural Impact Report" parallel to the Environmental Impact Statement originated in 1970. Just as the law mandates assessing possible impacts on the environment of regulations, interventions and projects, the CIR would assess cultural impacts in hope of ensuring that decision-makers consider the well-being of communities and their cultural fabric before approving plans. How would the vast mistakes of what is sometimes called "urban removal" have been mitigated if the cultural lives of the neighborhoods emptied out to make way for new sports stadiums, performing arts complexes, freeways and downtown ghost towns had been taken into consideration?

After our White House Briefing last week, we adjourned to working groups to discuss how best to respond to what we'd learned. Some people focused on immigration, education, health or green jobs, issues that are central to social justice. But the largest group convened around cultural issues, which covers all the others. We hope to adopt a cultural policy framework that can be supported by and supportive of a huge diversity of efforts at cultural recovery. That will take some time to craft, but in addition to the three points I have described, our discussion thus far focused on calling for a "new WPA," a purpose-built program putting artists to work for the common good, and on policies to de-monopolize and re-regulate the cultural industries, correcting for the massive corporate consolidation that threatens localism and free expression.

Individuals can advocate for such initiatives, spreading awareness and taking part in campaigns to secure them. But the third task that keeps jumping up in my mind's eye, demanding attention, is something each and every one of us can accomplish all by ourselves.

We can challenge ourselves to ensure that whatever we do as artists and citizens embodies the truth of Storyland, which is that every aspect of our humanity has a place in the true discourse of citizenship. In the past, with fragmented identities shaped by Datastan, we may have been tempted to say that politics has nothing to do with spirit or art, or that merely to dash something off and blast it out suffices as political action, or even to swallow that moldy chestnut of Datastan philosophy, that art and politics don't mix.

But now, in the service of cultural recovery, we are being called to a higher standard. It is time to demand of ourselves that our creations simultaneously achieve equal beauty and power as art, as political action and as spiritual practice.

No matter what you do, no matter who you are, the choice between Datastan and Storyland is yours to make every day. If you've been facing into the dim light of Datastan, you need only pivot, a tiny turn in place, reorienting yourself toward Storyland. We are never too far, it is never too late, there is no wrong reason to turn, breaking the chain of causality that binds us to what no longer serves us.

Holy, holy, holy is social imagination. Holy is the act of cultural creation. Holy is the great opportunity we are afforded in this moment, to risk being thought foolish, to risk declaring ourselves, to risk holding ourselves to the powerful truth of sparkling, unbreakable connection we glimpsed earlier in our visit to the story field—to support each other in standing up wherever a door is opened, from the White House to every corner of Philadelphia that has taken part over twenty-five years in creating the nearly 3000 sites of public memory under the auspices of the

Mural Arts Program—even as the ground quakes beneath us with the spasms of Storyland, being born.

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