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Arden Now

Converging Worlds: Art, Politics and Community

Tyler College of Art, Temple University
4:30 to 6 p.m., Anderson Hall, Lecture Hall 14
Berks Mall & 12th St., Main Campus

I've been traveling around the country a lot over the last few months, speaking with people about culture and democracy, about the ideas and stories in my new book, *New Creative Community: The Art of Cultural Development*. Think of cultural development as analogous to economic development. Economic development aims to stimulate the flow of capital and goods within a community and between that community and others, connecting people with sources of prosperity. Cultural development aims to stimulate the flow of cultural information and resources, of human connection and cultural vitality.

As in economic development, funding, policy, regulation, training and other initiatives play a role. But uniquely, community cultural development uses methods that are pleasurable, creative and engaging in and of themselves, as artists place their gifts at the service of a community's emancipation and self-guided development, in partnership with other community members. It can be a geographic community, a community of affinity, or even a virtual community, as you'll hear in the examples I share.

I like to learn a little bit about each place I will be speaking, so I was delighted to happen on a famous statement of the values and intentions of Temple University's founder, Russell H. Conwell. The text of Conwell's "Acres of Diamonds" speech can be found on the university's Web site, and it is well worth reading. Scrape away the images and language that seem retrograde today, peer through the nominal subject matter to the speech's deep message, and what you'll find is this: Conwell tells a long string of stories about our common tendency to overlook rich resources lying close to hand, ignoring what could be the source and wellspring of tremendous success while we pursue distant fantasies. He comes down hard on a single point: Look and listen deeply, he says; the answers we need are all around us:

“[F]ind out what the people need, and then apply yourself to that need, and this leads to invention on the part of people you would not dream of before.”

In the past few years, institutions of higher education have been discovering community cultural development—or arts in community or community arts, to use the terms employed by Temple’s promising new program headed by Billy Yalowitz and Pepón Osorio. There are new courses springing up around the country. But unlike Billy and Pepón, many people—even some of these programs’ founders—are unaware of the scale of the social need and opportunity they are tapping into. So I am going to follow Russell Conwell’s advice and invite you on a tour of what lies everywhere around us, what is plain to see if only we open our eyes, what the great Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, a thinker I greatly admire, called our “thematic universe.” Every epoch, he wrote, is characterized by “a complex of ideas, concepts, hopes, doubts, values and challenges in dialectical interaction with their opposites,” and it is this complex (rather than a specific idea or position within it) that reflects the zeitgeist, the spirit of the times.

Today, our thematic universe is all about convergence. In many forms and languages, from many different fields, the same messages are emerging, interlocking stories of connection, social imagination and possibility. It can be difficult to see this clearly through the fog of social conditioning. So I invite you to take a deep breath and blow away the fog, accompanying me as I gaze into our thematic universe through windows opening on worlds as different as science, spirituality, culture and commerce. Afterwards, I hope you will want to talk about what you have seen and what it might mean for each and every one of us.

Let’s start like Conwell with the ground under our feet, with a window on some of the things we are learning from the natural world. A few weeks ago I spoke at the University of Oregon. That beautiful state is home to the world’s largest organism: in the Blue Mountains of eastern Oregon, scientists with the Department of Agriculture have discovered an *Armillaria* fungus that covers 2,200 acres.

Researchers used to think this species consisted of disparate clusters of fruiting bodies commonly called honey mushrooms. But when they systematically collected and tested samples from widely spaced clusters, they found that all were part of a single organism. This giant fungus puts out an underground network of string-like rhizomorphs, which send up fruiting bodies here and there. Some outcroppings are 3 and 1/2 miles apart.

When we gaze through the window of nature, whether we see the *Armillaria* fungus or the vast panorama of James Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis, which posits that the earth and all it supports make up a complex interacting system that should be understood as a single organism, the learning is the same. Everything is connected. What affects any part affects the whole.

And so it is with culture.

Human beings everywhere grapple with the opportunities and challenges of being alive in these amazingly capable bodies with—proportionally speaking—the world’s largest brains. Making use of our big brains, we constantly seek meaning in our experience. Indeed, you could say that people exist to make meaning, because beyond the things necessary to sustain life, what we human beings do most is tell stories, and they have a great deal in common.

All human communities, everywhere, reject the notion of the purely instinctive or unconscious life, of acting without awareness of connection or consequences. All human communities, everywhere, presuppose that we are capable of living with intentionality. They tell stories that lift the ordinary actions of life into a kind of sacred space, endowing them with higher meaning. We humans don’t just drop our offspring in a field; we have rituals to welcome them into the human community, declaring our hopes and blessings so that they will thrive. We don’t just heap dirt over our departed; we have countless rituals to recognize the meaning of a life and comfort those bereaved by its ending. With all the significant moments between birth and death, it is the same. The common experiences of humanity are the material basis for all culture: art, language, systems of belief, values, customs, dress, food, the built environment and more.

What we call culture, then, is the sum total of all the astoundingly rich and disparate ways human communities have devised to lubricate, beautify and give meaning to our journey through life. Culture is a single organism that holds the entire planet in an embrace of meaning, and our many distinct cultural traditions are clusters of fruiting bodies popping up out of that matrix. What we call art is the highest manifestation of this global meaning matrix, the most purely emblematic of culture, the brightest mushroom in the cluster.

The Armillaria sends its silent message underground. Up here, artists and organizers are telling their own stories of our deep connection and the unbreakable bond between commonality and diversity.

Consider the Thousand Kites project, which I described in *New Creative Community*. In 1999, Nick Szuberla and Amelia Kirby were volunteer disc jockeys at WMMT-FM, “Listener-Supported, Consumer-Run Mountain Public Radio,” the radio station of Appalshop, a multidisciplinary arts and education center based in Whitesburg, Kentucky. As co-hosts of the Appalachian region’s only hip-hop radio program, Holler to the Hood, Szuberla and Kirby received hundreds of letters from inmates recently transferred into nearby Wallens Ridge, a new “Supermax” prison built as part of one of the United States’ remaining growth industries, installing prisons in regions facing economic decline (in this case, new prisons and prison jobs were proposed as an antidote to Appalachia’s shrinking coal economy).

Mostly African American and Latino prisoners were shipped into Wallens Ridge and its sister Supermax, Red Onion, from overcrowded prisons elsewhere, bringing millions of dollars to the state’s general fund. The prisoners were far from home and family, guarded by former coal miners and National Guard members for whom the jobs were a

simultaneously desired and resented last resort, and a double-edged opportunity to re-enact rituals of domination in which they had previously played the part of victim. Thus what was proposed as an economic development scheme for Appalachia wound up as the bleeding edge of a culture clash, affecting families and communities close to home and thousands of miles away.

Holler to the Hood became a meeting-place for countless prisoner families, broadcasting heartbreaking messages from families too distant to visit and letters from prisoners reporting human rights violations and racial conflicts between prison staff and inmates, inspiring H2H's founders to investigate. The result, Szuberla's and Kirby's documentary film, *Up the Ridge: A U.S. Prison Story*, explores the domestic prison industry, particularly the social impact of moving large numbers of inner-city prisoners to distant rural settings.

From response to the radio program and film, Szuberla and Kirby and their colleagues at Appalshop realized there was a much bigger task here, to surface all the facets and layers of this incredibly complicated story to a larger society unaware of the effects of having become incarceration nation, with the globe's largest prison population. The project, *Thousand Kites* (in prison jargon, to "fly a kite" is to send a message), is a multiyear partnership between H2H and Appalshop's Roadside Theater, collaborating with prisoners and prison employees, their families and their communities. Roadside has a long track record of participatory play creation and presentation, grounded in story circles with those directly involved: the *Thousand Kites* play, based on the highly specific stories of two Appalachian prisons, will be adapted by and for countless communities, urban and rural, that have been touched by the prison-industrial complex. Through a Web portal, organizers and participants around the world will be able to link up, share stories and access a huge array of tools and artworks.

Let's move to another window. The richness of our thematic universe lies, as Freire taught, in the dialectical interaction of opposites. We are learning the same lessons of emergent reality from the political world. Gaze with me through the window of macro-political change. When the United Nations was formed in 1945, there were 51 member nations; today there are 192, nearly 50 of which have joined in the last 30 years. This growth is almost entirely due to former colonies and sub-national groupings taking their place in the family of independent nations, from Viet Nam in 1977 to Eritrea and Macedonia in 1993, Tonga in 1999, and Montenegro last year. They may not all be models of civil society (who is?), but their existence is solidly grounded in the right to culture enshrined in the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Even as globalization—with both its positive and negative effects—is shrinking our world, the flowering of our differences is enriching it beyond imagining. This idea was

expressed so beautifully by the novelist Carlos Fuentes twenty years ago that his lines have become a sort of prayer for me. I can't resist quoting them whenever I get a chance, as you will hear. Fuentes said that ours is an era of "the emergence of cultures as protagonists of history," necessitating

a re-elaboration of our civilizations in agreement with our deeper, not our more ephemeral, traditions. Dreams and nightmares, different songs, different laws, different rhythms, long-deferred hopes, different shapes of beauty, ethnicity and diversity, a different sense of time, multiple identities rising from the depths of the polycultural and multiracial worlds of Africa, Asia and Latin America. ...

This new reality, this new totality of humankind, presents enormous new problems, vast challenges to our imaginations. They open up the two-way avenue of all cultural reality: giving and receiving, selecting, refusing, recognizing, acting in the world: not being merely subjected to the world.¹

In *New Creative Community*, I quoted the World Commission on Culture and Development saying, "people turn to culture as a means of self-definition and mobilization and assert their local cultural values. For the poorest among them, their own values are often the only thing that they can assert."² Let me read you an excerpt from my section on "Recognition of Cultural Minorities":

This is a confusing time, offering enough contradictory evidence to feed almost any theory about cultural identity. The embrace of particularism is widening: in the developed world, many people have sought fresh connection with cultural roots that previous generations tried to prune. Johns and Janes are giving birth to Juans and Juanitas, Kwames and Imanis, Yaacovs and Yaels. In developing countries, indigenous voices are claiming their ways of life, even attaining the highest offices, as with the 2005 election of Aymara coca farmer Evo Morales as president of Bolivia. Increasingly, cultural rights are deemed essential to human rights, a trend that shows no signs of stopping.

Yet even as immigration increases diversity in the global North, it heightens the anxiety of those who wish to preserve the dominance of their own groups. For example, in 2004 and 2005, some American retailers replaced the traditional December greeting of "Merry Christmas" with the more neutral "Happy Holidays" so as not to offend non-Christian shoppers. They became the target of Reverend Jerry Falwell's "Friend or Foe Christmas Campaign" and the American Family Association's parallel

¹ Carlos Fuentes, *Latin America: At War With The Past*, Massey Lectures, 23rd Series, CBC Enterprises, 1985, pp. 71–72.

² *Our Creative Diversity: Report of the World Commission on Culture and Development*, Second Edition, UNESCO Publishing, 1996, p. 28.

retail boycott. As William Donohue, president of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, said (citing highly questionable statistics), “Ninety-six percent of Americans celebrate Christmas. Spare me the diversity lecture.”

Growing recognition of cultural minorities is a chief characteristic of these times. Indeed, ours has been an era of cultural particularization, marked by what the Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes has called “the emergence of cultures as protagonists of history.” The question of whether they are protagonists in a tragedy or triumph is not settled.³

Every person in this room, with our aesthetic and social imaginations, with the potential to understand culture’s role in bringing about pluralism, participation and equity—the goals of cultural democracy—has a role to play in settling that question on the side of triumph.

But how? From social sciences and cultural studies, we are learning to recognize the sticky web of social discouragement and prohibition that has trapped so many of us. Once we see it, it becomes much easier to extricate ourselves and move on. Let’s gaze together through the zeitgeist window, observing the spirit of our times, the culture of fear. The early years of the 21st century are awash in anxiety. We are all up to our necks in it, and for even the bravest, it is hard to avoid wondering whether we will drown.

As a culture, how scared are we? Go back to 9/11, the fearmongers’ touchstone. Recall that few of us—except artists—remarked on the bit of theater of the absurd performed by New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani when, within 24 hours of the attacks, he gave this advice to his constituents: “Show you’re not afraid. Go to restaurants. Go shopping.” And this advice about how people who lived outside New York could help: “Come here and spend money.” We are so scared that many of us have our faces pressed up against the tiny window of the TV screen, blaring the bad news 24/7, interspersed with exhortations to buy things that promise to make us feel better—and many of us have been persuaded to believe that scaring ourselves witless by training our attention almost exclusively on threats and dangers (real and imagined) is “realistic.”

This pervasive fear is the co-creation of those who wish to harm us and those who have other reasons to want us trembling and compliant. But whatever the motive, the results are the same. We humans are born with brains programmed to respond to a state of terror, the legacy of our ancestors’ encounters with four-legged predators. The regions of the brain called amygdalae stand alert for danger. When activated by fear, they pump

³ *New Creative Community: The Art of Cultural Development*, New Village Press, 2006, p. 32

out epinephrine. With brains flooded by fear chemicals, our choices seem constrained: it's either belligerence or cowering under cover. The neocortex tends to step aside, deferring to the reptile brain, site of rage and xenophobia. If this fear response is repeated to the point of over-stimulation, our brains normalize it. We become like the returning veterans who jump whenever a door slams or a car backfires. Our fears become our expectations. Under these conditions, rational thought requires tremendous awareness, self-command and wisdom. Unfortunately, many of us lack the training or intention to muster these forces. We just stay scared.

When I wrote the introduction to *New Creative Community*, I found myself thinking 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.”

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 resist the official sources trying to steer our attention away from the damaging consequences of their own policies and conduct and toward the compliant consumerism that has become our image of citizenship. There is no doubt that artists, especially artists whose work is grounded in connection to community, are adept at pulling back the curtain of official denial to expose what's wrong. For a long, fear-ridden, harrowing time, many have trained our attention on social crimes and their consequences, often believing that if we point to a problem with enough energy and power, people will be moved to respond. One question I hear all the time from activists is this: “How bad does it have to get before people do something about it?”

This question doesn't consider what seems to me increasingly obvious, that it is not pain that mobilizes people so much as the prospect of a remedy. Even when intentions are good and the crimes being denounced are real, which is so often the case, the effect can be paradoxical. Over time, a tight focus on wrongdoing in high places creates the impression that those who are in positions of power are practically omnipotent: they steer the course of events, and we can only watch and marvel at their might, their stupidity and greed are endless, things are getting more and more dire, and—Ohmigod! I think there's a pint of ice cream in the freezer, I wonder what's on TV? The times call for something more: using our gifts to defuse the fear, calling attention instead to our individual and collective power to create something better in its place.

If we look through another window, the one scientists use to study the human brain, we will learn something enormously important about how this might be possible.

As we discover more about our brains, our understanding of the role of cultural expression deepens. From observing the brain in action, we have learned that when we remember or imagine experience, our brains act very much as they do when we enact the

same experience with our bodies. Athletes have made good use of this information, training in their imaginations for the feats of physical prowess they will perform in actual competition. Artists know this too: when we weep at the death or rejoice at the triumph of a character in a book, play or film, it's not because we've developed a deep attachment to that fictional person. It's that by allowing ourselves to enter imaginatively into the story, our capacity for empathy and compassion activates the same neurological impulses as when we experience a real loss or gain in our own lives.

If our higher purpose is to develop societies grounded in possibility, compassion, and connection, we need to deepen our ability to imagine these things, and there is no more powerful way to do that than by making art that rehearses the future we wish to help into being.

You have an excellent example in North Philadelphia in 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. Everything created must first be imagined. 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.⁴

Here's how their purpose was expressed in the Village leaders' own words from 1995,

“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.”

⁴ From Francis Jeanson's "On the Notion of 'Non-public,'" quoted in *Cultural Democracy* Number 19, February 1982

Scientists are also learning how our brains process trauma, how we do or don't recover from psychic injuries. Let's move to that window. Lately, my thinking about the healing role of culture has been stimulated by reading the work of John Briere, a specialist in the treatment of psychological trauma who teaches in the medical school at USC. He writes that 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 in a way that's in strong disparity to the original trauma. Traumatic abuse insults every aspect of one's personhood: the traumatized person is disrespected, used, harmed, shamed, blamed, made to feel worthless and dispensable. If in retelling the story, anything evoking those insults is again experienced, the result is more likely to be a repetition of the injury than its healing. For healing to begin, the story must be received with respect, presence and caring.

From my experience, 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 of cultural development in this time is to help heal those injuries. In recent decades, we've see more and more people trying, sometimes skillfully, sometimes ineptly, to do this work. I've seen people squirm with discomfort while listening to tales of oppression that reflect in even the remotest way on the oppressors in their own family trees. I have seen stories of suffering rooted in racism and other invidious, dehumanizing prejudices used to fuel a competition of oppressions. I have heard African Americans tell Jews to shut up about the Holocaust; and Latinos tell African Americans they have heard enough about slavery. I have experienced this tendency in my own mind, observed myself listening to a tale of collective suffering or exile while a nasty voice in my own head interrupts to whisper, "What are they whining about? Look what happened to us!"

Whether in my own mind or out loud in a group setting, this has always seemed petty and repellent. But now, having learned something of the science, I know why: if such sharing is coerced under the wrong conditions, if it falls on a hardened heart and closed ears, if it is merely endured or used to generate a guilty resentment, it reinforces injury rather than healing it.

I am inspired by work such as the Documentary Project for Refugee Youth, mentioned in *New Creative Community*. It was designed as a collaboration among young refugees, the Global Action Project, the International Rescue Committee and other community organizations and artists in New York City. The 12 young refugees comprising the project's core group were from Sierra Leone, Bosnia, Burundi and Serbia. In September 2001, the group began working together to share and understand their own experiences, collect testimonies from others, learn photography, write and create powerful short films. Here's how one participant described the healing and empowering impact of this work on her own life:

I felt like there is no person who suffered more than me. But then, talking to other people and finding out that it's not just me, that it's half the world. Before I didn't know there were so many conflicts and wars, and now that

I know, and have the opportunity to do something about it, I want to let other people know.

In *Community, Culture and Globalization*, an international anthology I co-edited with Don Adams, oral historian Mary Marshall Clark described an experiment in “theater of witness”:

[T]he group Theater Arts Against Political Violence brought artists and survivors of political torture together to explore dramatic uses of testimony. Oral histories were conducted with torture survivors as a way for others to enter into the experiences of remembered torture, but in a broader landscape than one-to-one therapy (or oral history) could provide.

The actors modeled the experience of torture through their bodies, symbolically transferring the words into a lived experience that would be witnessed by the public to break down the conspiracy of silence that often confines the survivor in a world of isolation... The project developed in close collaboration with those who lived through political torture. The project included three testimony sessions held in a group setting to avoid re-creating isolation. In between, the theater company met to develop and rehearse scenes from the stories. The goal of the production was to give the torture survivors the ability to stand outside their own experiences and to witness the transformation of their suffering on stage in the company of friends and fellow survivors. The survivors became the critics, and ultimately the authors, of the transformation.⁵

One of the most surprising expressions of this age of convergence is the way that spiritual teachings are reinforcing what we learn from nature, from cultural diversity, from science and from politics. Look through this window at our thematic universe.

On the healing of social trauma, the Vietnamese Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh has said something that echoes John Briere’s research findings:

When you have compassion in your heart, you suffer much less, and you are in a situation to be and to do something to help others to suffer less. This is true. So to practice in such a way that brings compassion into your heart is very important... [C]ompassion is something that is possible only when you have understanding... Understanding is compassion itself.

⁵ Mary Marshall Clark, “Oral History: Art and Praxis,” in Adams and Goldbard, *Community, Culture and Globalization*, p. 102.

When you understand the difficulties, the suffering, the despair of the other person, you don't hate him, you don't hate her anymore.

Thus both science and spirituality point to one of our tasks as artists and cultural activists: to help generate the conditions for deep social healing, to use our aesthetic and social creativity to create containers of loving witness, to promote understanding and compassion so the traumas that divide us can be shared and healed.

What then can spiritual traditions teach us about healing the culture of fear? Rebbe Nachman of Bratslov, the great 18th century teacher, said, "The antidote to despair is to remember the world to come." This is a paradox: how can we remember what has not yet happened? He meant it this way: that the antidote to despair is a taste of a perfected world, imagining the experiences that remind us what it is to feel entirely alive and connected. This can happen in those peak moments that evoke our sense of "radical amazement," in Abraham Joshua Heschel's wonderful phrase: standing at the edge of the ocean or Grand Canyon, holding a newborn, staring into the heart of a rose or the eyes of the beloved. It can also happen whenever we are at once most human and most godlike: in the flow of creativity, when—as Paulo Freire said—we speak our own words in our own voice, when we name the world, when we proclaim our desires and visions. When we make art.

When we make art ourselves, and when we teach, support and invite others to dive into the ocean of creativity, we administer an antidote to the epidemic fear and despair we can catch from the daily news. We are helping our fellow human beings to imagine, rehearse and prepare for the world of beauty, connection and meaning we all wish to inhabit.

What higher work is there?

This is the work of community cultural development. In *New Creative Community*, you'll read about dozens of artists and groups whose task is to reveal connectedness and ignite possibility, such as Cornerstone Theater's Faith-Based Cycle of 21 plays mounted in collaboration with diverse spiritual communities in Los Angeles. Let me read you just a bit about it:

The project kicked off with a festival of 21 original plays at Hsi Lai Buddhist Temple; the Los Angeles Baha'i Center; the Faith United Methodist Church; Temple Emmanuel, a Jewish synagogue; and New Horizons School, a private Islamic school. Among the many plays developed and performed in the five-year cycle of story circles and collaborations were *Beyond the Jordan*, a collaboration with Arab Catholics; *As Vishnu Dreams*, a Hindu community collaboration; *Center of the Star*, a Jewish community collaboration; *Body of Faith*, involving the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community members of many faiths; *Order My Steps*, a collaboration with African-American clergy and African-Americans affected by HIV and AIDS; and *You Can't Take It*

With You: An American Muslim Remix, a Muslim community collaboration. The project surfaced many deeply controversial issues, such as acceptance of gay men and lesbians within conservative faith communities, fostering countless hours of community dialogue.⁶

Community cultural development work is many things: activism, art, community-building, enterprise, and much more. Lately, I have been thinking more and more of community arts work as a form of spiritual practice, regardless of subject matter. Art and spirit both focus on meaning, which makes them extremely compatible. Exercising our creativity magnifies our sense of connection, just as when we engage with spirit to declare the holiness of life. When we make art together, we collectively create sacred space, generating feelings also evoked in worship. We breathe deeply, we see more, we feel more alive and less alone. When we understand our practice as spiritually enlarging, as helping to heal the world—whether we are creating a play or a mural or making a film together or collecting oral histories to disseminate through a Web site—then the practice itself reminds us of our connection, our power and the beauty of our voices despite all the forces telling us to sit down and shut up.

One last stop before we complete our tour, to look through the window of commerce. From the dot-com revolution, we are discovering that the age of convergence has changed the character of learning itself. Here's how Christopher Caldwell put it in a recent *New York Times* piece on the perceived value of a college education:

In recent decades, the biggest rewards have gone to those whose intelligence is deployable in new directions on short notice, not to those who are locked into a single marketable skill, however thoroughly learned and accredited. Most of the employees who built up, say, Google in its early stages could never have been trained to do so, because neither the company nor the idea of it existed when they were getting their educations.⁷

Google's founders and others like them grew enormously rich following Russell Conwell's advice to open their eyes, find a need and fill it. Now we need social and cultural innovators, entrepreneurs of meaning who know how to look deeply, understanding, as Dr. Martin Luther King said, that "Everything that we see is a shadow cast by that which we do not see." My favorite philosopher, Isaiah Berlin, had the perfect

⁶ *New Creative Community: The Art of Cultural Development*, New Village Press, 2006, pp. 134-136.

⁷ Christopher Caldwell, "The Way We Live Now: 2-25-07: What a College Education Buys," *New York Times Magazine*, February 25, 2007

name for the keen perception and eye for possibility, the direct knowledge and human connection this work requires. He called it “the sense of reality,” and as he described this gift, it

...entails, above all, a capacity for integrating a vast amalgam of constantly changing, multicolored, evanescent, perpetually overlapping data, too many, too swift, too intermingled to be caught and pinned down and labeled like so many individual butterflies. To integrate in this sense is to see the data (those identified by scientific knowledge as well as by direct perception) as elements in a single pattern, with their implications, to see them as symptoms of past and future possibilities, to see them pragmatically—that is, in terms of what you or others can or will do to them, and what they can or will do to others or to you. To seize a situation in this sense one needs to see, to be given a kind of direct, almost sensuous contact with the relevant data, and not merely to recognize their general characteristics, to classify them or reason about them, or analyze them, or reach conclusions and formulate theories about them.⁸

Those with the type of foresight Conwell described will recognize the necessity for this form of training, because no matter which window we look through, the same message is inscribed in our thematic universe: We are part of the world’s largest organism, the totality of human culture, and we have an urgent, common interest in spreading that knowledge of unity in diversity and clearing away the fog of social conditioning that obscures it. Most of the examples I have given you express that intention through ground-level work on the scale of a neighborhood or community. But democratic cultural development also needs to work on the macro level, on questions of cultural policy. I treat these at some length in *New Creative Community*. For now, I want to read just a little from my book on a key concept, cultural citizenship:

...cultural citizenship comprises the extent to which institutions, events and activities are grounded in cultural identities, promoting mutuality of understanding and appreciation between cultural groups; the extent to which artistic expressions rooted in a particular culture are visible and integral to a society’s cultural industries and communal life; the extent to which a minority cultural identity may be freely expressed and shared in public contexts and public discourse; and the extent to which these things matter to policymakers and ordinary citizens alike.

Are we all equally welcome in our society? Does what matters to each of us matter equally to our society? Does our well-being, our multiple belonging, count for as much as the feelings of others, especially the inheritors of power and entitlement?

⁸ Isaiah Berlin, “Political Judgment,” *The Sense of Reality*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996, p. 46

For example, in the United States, despite its rich and multiplying cultural diversity, members of minority cultures typically report a shared experience: the mingled ecstasy and discomfort they experienced in childhood on the rare occasions when a positive element of their own heritage cultures commanded a few moments on national television.

I vividly remember my grandmother weeping in front of our little black-and-white 1950s TV each year when variety show host Perry Como (who was not Jewish) put on a yarmulke and sang *Kol Nidre*, a sacred Yom Kippur melody, during his primetime show each year. It took me some time to understand that her tears had two sources: the pleasure of experiencing familiar and touching music in a highly public (even “all-American”) context; and pain that this happened so rarely, perhaps no more than once each year.

My father served in the U.S. Navy during World War II; he and my grandparents proudly became citizens, taking care to vote in every election. Yet in the privacy of our own home, when speaking of our neighbors, we tended to call them “the Americans,” understanding that was an identity we would never be entirely welcome to inhabit.

I was born in this country, unlike my father, and I’m certain that to the casual observer, I present an image of utter assimilation. But my heart pounds when I feel impelled to remind colleagues that a glance at the Hebrew calendar before planning major conferences would avoid the offense of scheduling them on the holiest day of the year for Jews; or when I am called upon to help a young friend protest his school’s decision to schedule Homecoming on Yom Kippur. Coldly calculated, I am fully a citizen, but the fullness of cultural citizenship is denied; indeed, the question of cultural citizenship is not even in the minds of those who unthinkingly shape my experiences of exclusion.

How much more so for my Latino neighbors, who have limitless opportunity to see actors of Latin American heritage portraying gang members and drug-runners, and almost none to see portrayals reflecting their own experiences and cultural values! How much more so every year, when our local police tangle with people on the street during Cinco de Mayo celebrations of Mexican independence, arresting numbers for jaywalking or drinking in public!

How much more so for my Muslim neighbors, who every day must face pervasive fear and mistrust which has nothing to do with the actuality of their own social roles, their own desire to live in peace?

How much more so for my Pomo Indian neighbors when I lived in the northern California countryside, whose traditional grounds for the

gathering of basket materials were flooded to make way for a man-made lake, without even lip-service to their cultural rights! How would your community be different if the same presupposition of cultural citizenship were given to every person as to its wealthiest citizens?⁹

“[F]ind out what the people need, said Russell Conwell, “and then apply yourself to that need.” I like the way the 13th century Sufi poet Rumi said it: “Spend less time seeking water and acquire thirst! Then water will gush from above and below.” Seeking thirst this afternoon, we’ve viewed the age of convergence through many windows: nature, politics, culture, science, spirituality and commerce, discovering at each how the immensely powerful practice of community cultural development speaks to our deepest needs. Many streams of knowledge are converging to tell us the time is ripe for a new way of seeing and working in the world, one that speaks to body, heart, mind and spirit. “We can’t solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them,” said Albert Einstein. “The spirit of democracy is not a mechanical thing to be adjusted by abolition of forms,” said Mohandas Gandhi, “It requires change of the heart.”

Every act begins in imagination. How do you imagine applying yourself to this great challenge?

⁹ *New Creative Community: The Art of Cultural Development*, New Village Press, 2006, pp. 227-228