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This is the text of a keynote I delivered at Arts Summit 2010, sponsored by the Alliance for Arts and Culture, based in Vancouver, British Columbia. See www.allianceforarts.com.

Art and The Public Good: Your Money Or Your Life

Among arts funding advocates, there's a long-running debate that pits "instrumental" against "intrinsic" value. Instrumental-value arguments attempt to show quantifiable benefits to arts participation. For instance, advocates argue for spending on arts-in-education because kids who take part in arts programs do better on standardized tests, or have lower drop-out rates; or they show how spending on the arts drives economic growth. In societies that make a fetish of numbers, dismissing other forms of evidence, these arguments are heard most often.

Intrinsic-value advocates argue that arts experience brings pleasure, teaches empathy, or creates shared meanings, and that individuals seek (and pay for) arts experience because they enjoy these benefits. No doubt, everyone here has experienced the truth of these arguments, but because you can't put them on a balance sheet, advocates tend to downplay them.

I've been urging arts advocates not to rely on the instrumental-value approach, with its numeric framework, because it is conditioned on false premises that make the argument impossible to win. The first premise is that public arts funding is being cut to save money, but this doesn't hold up to scrutiny. The actual savings are negligible in comparison to expenditure on other priorities: for instance, public arts and culture spending in B.C. represented one-twentieth of one percent of the provincial budget before the cuts. Last fiscal year, the total allocation for the state arts agency where I live, the California Arts Council, represented less than one-one thousandth of one percent of the state budget, a penny out of every \$100,000. Cuts in arts spending are symbolic statements, an easy way to signal that budget-cutters mean business without offending powerful constituencies.

The second premise is that policymakers will respond best to instrumental arguments that quantify art's secondary benefits, that intrinsic value sounds too soft to win them over. That assertion has been superseded by reality. If it were true, the vast effort expended over the last forty years to assess and document instrumental effects would have been rewarded with handsome budget increases. Instead, in the U.S., the real value of the National Endowment for the Arts' budget has declined by nearly half since 1980; and in British Columbia, public arts expenditure is slated for something very close to extinction by Fiscal Year 2011-12.

We have worn ourselves out trying—and failing—to cram the enormous power of art into advocacy strategies too small to hold it. There is simply no way to convey through test scores, economic multiplier effects, and other numeric indicators the personal and social value of the experience of beauty and meaning. I often say that trying to explain or demonstrate art's value with numbers is like trying to describe a rainbow without mentioning color.

But lately, the more I think about it, the more the distinction between *intrinsic* and *instrumental* melts into air. Consider my own experience. I grew up in a socially and economically marginal family, in a house without books, without music, without objects or images other than family photographs and mementos. By a stroke of good fortune, from an early age, I demonstrated a flair for line and color, an ability to capture a likeness of whatever I saw. By the time I entered school, the world of art had become my sanctuary.

There were art teachers, and they let me slip into empty classrooms to paint or draw, the only hour of each day I had a quiet place to myself. I used my pencils and paints to create the universe I wished to inhabit. Bizarrely, the artist I most identified with was the damaged aristocrat Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, whose ambivalent depictions of Montmartre nightlife seemed inexplicably familiar and beautiful. I think it was because he embodied a trait nearly universal in artists: a natural proclivity to make something beautiful or engaging or otherwise meaningful from one's alienation.

Becoming an artist gave me empathy, imagination, the ability to conceive of another life, the power to observe, reflect, and communicate, the experience of beauty, the ability to create meaning, a taste of what it meant to excel at something, the desire to always go deeper and see more, a longing to use my gifts to make a difference, and most of all, a dual identity as observer and participant that equipped me for every role I have since occupied as writer, social activist, and consultant.

I am absolutely certain I am not the only person in this room whose life was saved by art, a claim I make without hyperbole, merely stating the truth of my experience. Indeed, the Alliance's "Creativity Counts" campaign has a "Saved By Art" page eliciting testimonies from professional artists inspired and sustained by school-based programs.

So, tell me, does my story demonstrate intrinsic or instrumental value? Given that choice, I can only say, "Yes."

Our individual stories are different, but always, the choice to live one's life in the arts, as a maker of beauty and meaning or one who supports that process, is grounded in an encounter with the ineffable, with something that can never be adequately expressed, but which ignites in our hearts the desire to keep trying. Perhaps you were taken to a theater, a film, or a concert, and in that darkened space, your entire being was concentrated on receiving something, your body, feelings, mind and spirit came for the first time into absolute, coherent focus, and you wanted to return as soon and as often as possible. Perhaps you lifted your own voice in song and felt the world change around you. Perhaps you raised a pen or brush to make a mark, and felt time standing still, with you at its center, entirely awake and dissolved in the experience. All human beings are drawn to this integrated state. It is the way we feel in the full flow of creativity, when overcome by love, when gazing into the heart of a rose, when watching the sun rise over the ocean. It is one of the essential experiences of being human, and when we make art, we can have it again and again and again.

Making art is the most direct route to this experience, but not the only one. The plain truth is that for many people, including those who might say, "I don't know anything about art," cultural practice—images, stories, music, dancing, taking part in rituals and celebrations—is the essential stuff of life and the principal container of meaning. Music lightens their way as they go from place to place; they dance to celebrate life's milestones; they sing to honor whatever they hold sacred.

They create a personal sanctuary with the images that symbolize their delight and desire. Stories on film, television, and the printed page, stories passed mouth to ear for generations, spur passionate and thoughtful conversations about the great questions of our day.

This ecology sustains professional artists, exactly as the entire forest floor sustains *Sequoia sempervirens*, but even some “arts people” don’t see it. That’s because “the arts” as a concept has been jammed into a frame that is all about entitlement and privilege. Henry Lee Higginson founded the USA’s first symphony orchestra in Boston by exhorting his fellow plutocrats to “Educate, and save ourselves and our families and our money from the mobs!” The stink of that has clung for 125 years. Around the world, the snobbery contaminating much of the nonprofit arts sector has done more to alienate potential supporters than any other factor.

In North America, even public discussion about cultural policy has been constrained by it. Instead of raising essential cultural questions—digital democracy, cultural equity, the nature of education, the public interest in telecommunications, the role of artists in building community and economic recovery—the whole debate has been reduced to an on-off switch: arts funding, yes or no? Instead of a great case for a great cause, arts advocacy often sounds like special pleading by the beneficiaries for their own incomes. There’s nothing wrong with a decent living for valuable work, but framed that way, advocacy doesn’t win many allies.

In business, a “value proposition” states the unique value of whatever you are offering, derived from identifying the costs and the benefits to your particular market, the distinguishing character of your product or service, and the evidence that supports your conclusions.

Recently, the language of “the value proposition” has begun to creep into arts advocates’ vocabulary. Every time I hear the phrase, a little scene from an old movie pops into my head: in a dark alley, a bandit pokes a gun into his victim’s back and offers a choice: “Your money or your life.” A different type of value proposition, admittedly, but one that is worthy of what is actually at stake: I fear for our future if we continue disinvesting in the best ways we humans know of cultivating a life worth living. How do we bring attention to the full weight of that choice?

I’ve been obsessing for the past week about the clues that might be hidden in an op-ed that recently appeared in *The New York Times*.¹ Wes Davis describes how in 1952, top executives at Bell Telephone began to be concerned about the scope of managers’ education. It was put this way: “A well-trained man knows how to answer questions; an educated man knows what questions are worth asking.” The president of Bell Telephone in Pennsylvania was also a university trustee. With academic colleagues, he created “the Institute of Humanistic Studies for Executives.” This was an immersion program: ten months on campus, 550 class hours. Guest lecturers included W. H. Auden, Delmore Schwartz, R. P. Blackmur, Lewis Mumford, Virgil Thomson, and David Riesman. They read and discussed James Joyce’s *Ulysses*.

¹ Wes Davis, The ‘Learning Knights’ of Bell Telephone, *The New York Times*, 15 June 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/16/opinion/16davis.html>

The program was intensively evaluated. Participants reported heightened curiosity, awareness, ability to see more than one side of questions. One executive is quoted as having seen himself before the program as “a straw floating with the current down the stream.” “The stream was the Bell Telephone Company,” he wrote. “I don’t think I will ever be that straw again.”

Yet, Davis writes, “Bell gradually withdrew its support after yet another positive assessment found that while executives came out of the program more confident and more intellectually engaged, they were also less interested in putting the company’s bottom line ahead of their commitments to their families and communities. By 1960, the Institute of Humanistic Studies for Executives was finished.”

Today, the world of commerce is engaging with the same questions. A recent special issue of the *Journal of Business Strategy* was devoted to “Arts-based learning for business.” The editors note that top-selling business writer Daniel Pink’s idea that “The MFA is the New MBA” was named by *Harvard Business Review* as one of its breakthrough ideas of 2004, while at roughly the same time, NHK, Japan’s public broadcasting network, “identified arts-based learning in business as one of the ten most important emergent trends of the twenty-first century.”² The issue features ten articles by practitioners of arts-based business learning, from those who teach collaboration through music to those using visual art to develop skills of discernment and reflection.

The overview article is by Nick Nissley, Executive Director of the Leadership Development program at the Banff Centre in Alberta. He quotes a number of business leaders, including Donna Sturgess, whose title is Global Head of Innovation at the pharmaceutical corporation GlaxoSmithKlein:

We have found that art-based tools help teams to see beyond the obvious to generate new ideas. Adventures through art give us more transformative experiences where new ideas emerge and our awareness is heightened to see beyond the obvious. Attitudes and influences on our thinking are made visible and our imaginations are stimulated. Art teaches business the ability to conceptualize and to push beyond the established norms and boundaries.³

Nancy Adler, who teaches at McGill University in Montreal, is one of the leading scholars of arts-based business practices. In a highly influential 2006 essay, she wrote:

Designing innovative options requires more than the traditional analytical and decision-making skills taught during the past half century in most MBA programs. Rather, it requires skills that creative artists have used for years.⁴

Adler’s and many other essays on the subject of art and business feature compendia of quotations; the footnotes are sometimes longer than the texts. It would be easy to fill my entire time today with quotes like this. But it wouldn’t be altogether honest, because, as the editors of

² Guest editor(s): Harvey Seifter and Ted Buswick, *Journal of Business Strategy*, “Creatively intelligent companies and leaders: Arts-based learning for business,” Volume 31 issue 4, 2010

³ Nick Nissely, “Arts-based learning at work: economic downturns, innovation upturns, and the eminent practicality of arts in business,” in the *Journal of Business Strategy*, Volume 31 issue 4, 2010

⁴ Nancy J. Adler, “The Arts & Leadership: Now That We Can Do Anything, What Will We Do?” *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 2006, Vol. 5, No. 4, p. 489.

that special *Journal of Business Strategy* issue write, “Over the past 18 months, in the wake of the global financial crisis, it has become far more difficult to forge new learning-based arts-business partnerships, launch new arts-based learning projects in corporations, or even complete existing programs.” They describe how, under economic pressure, companies have cut back on such programs and some of the nonprofit initiatives created to advance this work have folded. As with the leaders of Bell Telephone back in the fifties, the enlarging value of culture has been proven; but in a milieu dominated by short-term, bottom-line thinkers, the cost outweighs it.

When I was in Vancouver last fall, people were protesting the steep public arts cuts that had recently been announced for British Columbia. There was a stunned atmosphere, equal parts shock and disappointment. Artists mobilized with great energy and inventiveness. I understand that so many messages protesting the cuts were posted to the Ministry’s Website that it crashed. Lifelong artist-activists described how hard they had worked to create compelling, utterly convincing presentations focused on restoring arts funding, and how some officials had responded in a way that utterly floored them: *Yes, they said, I can see how all that is true, but there’s nothing I can do about it.* The three-year cuts announced last year were draconian, and as you know, the impact worsened this spring, when massive cuts were revealed in arts-based use of gaming funds.

While people continue to work on the public front, the decline in public funding in many countries has stimulated increased interest in what is called “arts entrepreneurship,” which includes the types of work I mentioned earlier, wherein artists apply their skills to business training; and also arts-based businesses such as crafts retailing, media production for hire, or entrepreneurial ventures in marketing music or other artistic products. People reason that if income generation is the remaining path to sustainability, the private sector is the place to do it; and that if artists learn the ways of markets and acquire the skills needed to navigate them, untapped rewards may await them.

Like many artists, my relationship to business has been—to say the least—ambivalent. I’ve learned to live with a level of economic anxiety that drives my non-artist friends wild. I would be thrilled to have money, but whenever I manage to stockpile some, I decide to use it to buy my own time, control of one’s time being the essence of freedom. I would rather grant myself that luxury now than postpone it until I’ve accumulated enough to retire, whatever that means for an artist. And of course, my grasshopper-like attitude seems more and more sensible as I see all around me abstemious ants who lost their retirement savings in the economic meltdown.

While artists represent every segment of political opinion—think Ronald Reagan—most of us cluster on the left side of the aisle, where we can easily acquire the fastidious tendency to equate business in general with corporate predators in particular.

But of course, that isn’t true. Markets are cultural artifacts, like other types of social organization, intrinsic to human society, appearing wherever we form communities. Trade is arguably the basis of culture, and markets are the most efficient and user-friendly way to distribute certain goods. The only real similarity between BP and a green energy company—say a business that manufactures solar panels or converts engines to run on recycled cooking oil—is that both are

businesses. The distinctions are legion, but to me, the most important difference turns on the values that animate their work. Nowadays, everybody pays lip-service to stewardship of the environment, even BP executives. In almost any room, when you ask for a show of hands from those who care for the earth, every hand will be raised. But only some of those hands will dig into their own potential profits to invest in the practices that actually help to heal the earth. As more people with capital and business expertise enter socially responsible investing and underwrite social entrepreneurship, this may change. So far, though, the leaders in social entrepreneurship haven't shown much interest in the arts and culture as a place to invest, and we haven't done much to change their minds.

The takeaway lesson from the Bell Telephone experience, from the arts-based business learning experience, and from the experience of arts advocates here in BC is the same: we talk about economic crisis, environmental crisis, but as civilizations, our most urgent crisis is the crisis of value. Who are we? What do we stand for? Are we willing to invest our resources, even at the expense of short-term profit, in social goods that greatly increase the value of lived experience? For any answer to have real meaning, it must go beyond words to be embodied in action, including economic action.

The darkest hour is just before dawn: we've heard this countless times. But what if it's true? Everywhere I look, I see surprising evidence of art's value being discovered and translated into the languages of disparate fields.

There has been a tremendous upsurge in evidence and analysis of art's critical roles in human and social development. Scientists are now very keen to demonstrate all the ways art brings healing, builds useful skills, and enhances our understanding. Emergent truths may be widely experienced firsthand, but in our societies, it's not until they are packaged in scientific wrapping that some sectors can perceive them. Now, that packaging is being manufactured at a remarkable pace.

Evolutionary biologists have recognized what they call "gene-culture co-evolution," as "the dominant mode of human evolution."⁵ In other words, if human evolution acted only on our genes, our species would be a lot less adaptable: those who couldn't take the heat or cold would lose the reproductive contest in places with extreme weather. Inventing clothing and shelter was our ancestors' adaptive solution. They also created cultural markers—legends, parables, rituals, dances, and images—to accelerate certain genetic trends, such as the predisposition not to mate with those who raised us. Reinforcing such findings, philosopher Denis Dutton argues that human artistic creativity was central to our development during the Pleistocene era. When seeking mates, our earliest ancestors valued innovation, dexterity, grace, and other forms of skillfulness associated with art. This is also good news for countless starving artists looking for love in a time that otherwise values earning capacity. Don't give up: evolution is on our side!

⁵ Kevin N. Laland¹, John Odling-Smee, and Sean Myles, "How culture shaped the human genome: bringing genetics and the human sciences together," *Nature Reviews Genetics* 11, 137-148 (February 2010); <http://www.nature.com/nrg/journal/v11/n2/abs/nrg2734.html>

Neurologist Oliver Sacks has written about patients who no longer speak, but can communicate by singing, or who no longer walk, but can proceed from place to place by dancing. He's a fellow of the Institute for Music and Neurologic Function in New York, which, like the Music and Neuroimaging Laboratory at Harvard, is pioneering research on and therapeutic uses of music. At the most recent American Association for the Advancement of Science Conference, Lab director Dr. Gottfried Schlaug made headlines by showing how brain-damaged individuals can regain the power of speech through singing.⁶

Last year, Columbia University's medical school in New York launched a Master's Degree program in Narrative Medicine, which they describe as fortifying "clinical practice with the narrative competence to recognize, absorb, metabolize, interpret, and be moved by the stories of illness." Think about it: that a major university has made this level of investment in exploring and engaging stories' power to heal is a significant indication that art's public purpose is emerging into visibility.

The same knowledge is surfacing in the world of politics too. Cognitive linguist George Lakoff is an advisor to many progressive political campaigns in the U.S. The studies of Lakoff and his colleagues have shown how we assign value and make decisions based on what he calls "real reason," which incorporates our bodies, emotions and spirits as well as our intellects. People make decisions about the important things in life, including politics, through story, metaphor, physical sensation, and emotion, as well as logical calculation. That's why focusing on what you will do and how is likely to lose out to a campaign that focuses on why, which is what really drives us.

Some people are annoyed when voters respond to political campaigns that substitute emotive imagery for the facts and figure that ought to undergird logical conclusions. It feels like manipulation, and that feels fishy. But peel back the layers of judgment for a moment and consider this: what if our brains really are wired to respond more powerfully to stories, images, and feelings than to data? What about you? What affects you more deeply, a thick white paper full of bar charts and policy-speak, or a powerful story about the human impact of policy? Even if you share my own wonkishness and like to curl up with a white paper now and then, you will admit that the facts and figures you devour derive their force from stories and images you have taken in. Learning the number of gallons of oil that have escaped into the Gulf horrifies us because it scales up the damage we've seen and heard on television or the internet. We see an image of a bird drowning in oil, and mentally multiply it by millions.

The stories we tell ourselves about who we are and what we are doing shape our lives. You and I know that our societies should be investing in our skill at surfacing, shaping, and sharing stories, because a sustainable future depends on it. Art's value proposition has been proved, beyond a shadow of a doubt, but we have not been able to spread the news. The crisis in values is poking a gun in our backs: your money or your life? One answer leads to short-term profit-taking, heedless of the cost to human beings and the planet we share with other life-forms. The other leads to a paradigm shift, in which beauty and meaning are at last given their true social value, to

⁶ Richard Alleyne, "Encouraging severe stroke victims to sing can help them regain the ability to talk, new research claims," 21 February, 2010.
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/health/healthnews/7285154/AAAS-Singing-helps-stroke-victims-relearn-language.html>

the benefit of all. Our challenge is double: holding to what we know to be true, despite discouragement, and using its power to convince others of what is possible.

If I had a magic wand that could transform arts advocacy for the task at hand, I would use it to do four things:

- Activate a systematic search for the stories, images, metaphors, and feelings that can fully capture the public interest in art, and apply our enormous creative power to conveying them to our fellow citizens, especially those who don't already think of themselves as part of the arts. (We're going to do a little of this in my workshop this afternoon.)
- Downplay or abandon weak secondary strategies that lack heart, but are undertaken on the supposition that they will be effective with certain audiences. If you are certain that MLAs⁷ respond to demonstrations of the arts multiplier effect, then keep them coming. But this case has been argued for a long time: the language and numbers are readily available; use what you have, and don't waste too much energy cultivating a field that has yet to yield a viable crop.
- Make the entire cultural ecology work together, so that market-driven sectors support the development of public-benefit arts work, correcting for market imbalances. Canada already mandates domestic content on television and radio, mitigating the oversupply of Hollywood product. A small tax on recorded media could generate considerable revenue to support new artistic creation and presentation. Policymakers could be persuaded to see nonprofit cultural enterprises as a kind of R&D wing for the commercial creative sector, and provide stimulus accordingly. One of my favorite ideas is a small tax on advertising: TV advertising revenues alone in Canada are estimated at about \$3 billion a year, and that doesn't include billions in print, interactive, and mobile advertising. There are countless ways the consumer cultural industries can generate revenue to support art in the public interest.
- Be propositional: don't wait for the government to articulate and adopt a comprehensive, democratic cultural policy. Challenge yourselves to write a policy that sings, even to people who aren't already on your side. Policymakers in many realms seem to train at the same school of unreadable prose; challenge yourselves to use plain, accessible language. Include and go beyond the usual categories of funding for artists and organizations and arts-in-education. There's room for entrepreneurship in the public sector too: recent findings about the value of art and culture for social and personal healing can underpin a job creation scheme for artists in health, business, and social services, one with enormous social benefits. Advocate integrating artists into every aspect of government, recognizing that creativity and expressive power are exactly what our weakened public sectors need to regenerate awareness of the public good. Advocate for artists' work in building bridges of understanding between groups, bringing creativity and equity in the place of racism and other forms of invidious discrimination. Craft a policy that recognizes artists' essential role in resolving the

⁷ Members of legislative assemblies in Canadian provinces and territories

values crisis, by opening our eyes to what really matters and helping us imagine our journey toward it.

We can't expect unanimity. Some people will always choose the immediate bottom line over a longer and larger understanding of sustainability and mutual responsibility. But that will not grant them immunity from the consequences of their actions. They are vastly outnumbered by the people who want more from life, but may not yet know how to act on their desire. It isn't hearing how bad things are that mobilizes people, but the prospect of a remedy, one that offers each of us a meaningful role. You hold the key to that remedy.

Look around you, at the shining faces, the intelligent eyes, the full hearts that occupy this room. Take a breath: on this amazing planet, nothing is ever lost. Each inhalation carries a trace of every person who has ever existed, generations who feared the end was near and found instead that their challenge was to live on, ancestors whose legacy of stories nourishes our own resilience and creativity. As artists, we have the essential skill needed to resolve the values crisis, crafting beauty and meaning in many forms, uniting body, heart, mind, and spirit in awareness of our common fate. We know how to awaken, to create, to include. And now there is a vast and growing body of evidence to support our lived experience of art's power. We have everything we need to tell the stories that can turn the tide. Whether or not everyone knows it yet, the world is waiting to hear them.

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