**Seeing the Way Forward**

**Through Arts Education**

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**From Wild Caught Stories**

There are the things critical to our survival we don’t see, or refuse to see, that are, often, staring us in the face. I would speculate that we are all afflicted by one version or another of this kind of “selective blindness.” These blank spaces on the community landscape can manifest as our next-door neighbors or the people we pass by every day on the street. They might also be communities we avoid or don’t even know about. Sometimes, they show up as slow motion changes that sneak up on us, transforming long held assumptions into a private shriek: “what in the world has gotten into ‘this place’ or ‘those people’?”

For me, one of the most obvious of these hidden-in-plain- sight conditions is what has happened, (and continues to happen), to America’s relationship to creativity and learning. Despite the election of a President who has said that arts education is critical to the future of our democracy, the creative learning agenda we hoped for (even anticipated) has not emerged.

Like health care, and energy, the re-invention of education is a make-or-break issue for this country. Obama’s “Race to the Top,” initiative clearly signals that it is a top priority for his administration. Unfortunately, thus far, I view this effort as missing an opportunity to change the intrinsically flawed nature of educational practice in America.

It may seem audacious to say that an education that does not include arts-centered learning is below standard, but I truly believe this is the case. I would further argue that sometime in the next twenty years, the educational establishment will catch up with the brain scientists and neuropsychologists who bear me out (and many others) on this point. Though this contention will probably require decades of research to “prove,” arts educators and teaching artists in this country have known and “seen” the obvious link between creativity and learning for as long as we have embraced the notion of public education.

The diminishing numbers of arts educators who remain in the classroom, are reminded everyday, that arts-centered learning is where discovering, then knowing, and finally “seeing” in the cognitive sense, often comes together for a child. This kind of vision is not an esoteric attribute. It is what humans use to apply basic skills, like literacy and numeracy, to the task of solving complex problems. And, to reiterate the point made by our President, beyond each student’s individual development, creative learning is also the incubator for community cultural and social development.

Put simply, arts education exercises and strengthens the imagination and creativity we have always called upon to survive and thrive, individually and collectively. But these capacities do not just spring forth, fully formed. Just like language acquisition and critical and abstract thinking, creative learning requires practice, exercise, and real life application---particularly today, as we navigate our multivalent, cross-sector, change constant environment. (For more on the essential role of arts education in a changing world see: *Arts Centered Learning: NEA Leadership & America’s Creative Future* in **Morning News** (above, right, on this page.)

**On the flip side**

I would also observe that our protective blinders are indiscriminate and can separate us from more than unpleasant truth. These filters can also prevent us from recognizing that the resources and capacities we need to “see” and manifest a different future are all around us. At the Center for the Study of Art and Community, we view our work in arts-based community development as having a lineage that stretches back to the pre-historic role of the shaman. One of the Shaman’s jobs was to mediate the relationship between the community and the spirit world. A good part of this work involved the invocation of the benevolent spirits as protection against the destructive forces loose in the world. I would venture, that If there was ever a time when these shamanic services were needed, it is now. In fact, it was the invisibility of contemporary artist/shaman that led me to document and share the good news contained in *Art and Upheaval: Artists on the Worlds Frontlines*.

Even though these stories deal with the likes of Milosevic, the Khmer Rouge, and apartheid, they also say something universal about the creative process as a uniquely powerful mediating force in less damaged places. They say that if you scratch the surface of a community in need you will find artists responding, making art, to live, to speak, to kindle the human spirit,

to bring peace, or to resolve conflict,

to manifest beauty in the face of horror,

or--- to reveal the ugly truth in the face of denial,

to rally, or bring order,

or to educate and inspire,

to entertain, to heal,

and most of all to tell the story,

directly, obtusely, in code, as a joke,

as a song in a pub,

as a play unfolding in cramped a living room

a dance in the streets.

or a painting on the wall

drenched in the shadows

of a flickering fire

Most importantly, they say that in the face of the destruction we are impelled to create--- that upheaval begets both crises and opportunity and Shiva dances to create as well as destroy. Our creative capacity is a survival impulse that that seems to arise almost unconsciously. In the face of the unfathomable, the senseless, we roll up our sleeves and get down to the business of making sense, making meaning, and seeing the way forward.