

A R L E N E G O L D B A R D
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WomenArts WPA Panel Presentation
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The United States has sponsored two successful experiments in employing artists in public service. The first was depicted in the play you've just seen. Seventy-five years ago, Congress passed legislation for the Works Progress Administration (WPA), a federally funded jobs program that helped bring about the type of national recovery the USA needs today. The largest WPA program was "Federal One," which employed artists to paint murals, make theater, document history, teach music, and much, much more. The first programs for artists began as part of general job creation, in response to skyrocketing unemployment in the Great Depression.

In the mid-1970s, a whole constellation of public service employment programs was created by the Nixon and Ford administrations in response to high unemployment. The largest was CETA, the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act, and like the WPA, it included many types of employment and training. But artists and arts organizations are enterprising and resourceful when it comes to funding opportunities, and they found ways to use these jobs programs to support their own work, particularly the work of community artists.

In both programs, the arts were treated as just another sector of the workforce, like farm or factory labor. Jobs were made available for men and women who could not make a living in the private economy under prevailing conditions. But once artists filled these jobs, it became evident that employing them was a particularly good public investment, because they could help many objectives for recovery to be actualized. When you give an artist a public service job, you get the individual and social benefits that attach to all job creation: that person pays rent and buys food and other necessities, often helping to support a family, and also putting money into circulation that creates other jobs with similar individual and social benefits.

But with an artist, you also get someone skilled at making beauty and meaning, who invests those gifts in the public good. You get music lessons and performances for kids who would otherwise have far less opportunity to experience the pleasure, magic, self-discipline and sense of accomplishment that entails. You get sites of public memory, such as murals, in communities that otherwise have few opportunities to claim public space and public notice. You get young mothers attending writing workshops that enable them to share their stories and see that their private troubles are actually public issues, enlarging their sense of belonging and cultural citizenship. You get elders and people coping with serious illness, who would otherwise be parked in neglected and depressing environments, coming back to life through caring, creative attention.

Many artists understood this in FDR's time, as they do in our own. At every moment of crisis in U.S. history, artists and cultural activists been ready to place their gifts at the service of democratic public purpose. The resilience that sustains communities in times of crisis is rooted in culture, in the tales of persistence and social imagination that inspire people to a sense of possibility even in dark times. Through art, people prepare for life's challenges, strengthening their creative judgment before it is tested. Artists can expand social imagination, helping us

envision the transformations we hope to bring about, stimulating our thoughts and feelings toward the new attitudes and ideas that will drive recovery and animate a sustainable society.

Viewed through this lens, art is nothing less than the secret of survival. Now, as in the Great Depression, our resilience, creativity and future sustainability are riding on the stories that shape us. There can be no lasting national recovery without cultural recovery, without finding and nurturing the stories that can fuel positive change, restoring faith and creating possibility. It's time to support our collective capacity to create and share stories.

When we think about democracy, we tend to focus on the usual definitions of citizenship, entitlement to certain legal and civil rights and forms of democratic participation like voting in elections. But just as profound is cultural citizenship, an experience of meaningful belonging, participation and mutual responsibility. In a situation of true cultural citizenship, people learn about each other's heritages, respect each other's contributions to community life and public discourse, feel welcome in their own city or town. And the very best way to cultivate this capacity is to employ artists, because direct experience of art-making gives people an inspiring experience of their own creativity and imagination, puts essential tools of self-expression in their hands, and provides an inviting gateway to other forms of social participation.

Many of us have seen how much difference the presence of one able and dedicated artist can make to a classroom, a hospital ward, a prison, a community center. By the end of its first year, Federal One employed 40,000 artists, and that was when the U.S. population was about a third of today's. Imagine what 120,000 dedicated artists—let's say 60,000 of them women artists—could do today!

The usual argument against investing in arts' public purpose is cost. But I think cost is just a cover-story, because we are profligate spenders in other public arenas. We currently have more than seven million people in prison, on parole or probation, with total state spending alone that the Pew Center on the States puts around \$52 billion. The National Priorities Project calculates that we have spent over \$970 billion on wars since 2001, an average cost of \$315 million a day—that equals two annual National Endowment for the Arts budgets daily, seven days a week.

When future generations look back on this period and deduce who we were from the ways we chose to invest our commonwealth, what will they conclude? Do we want to be remembered for our prodigious capacity to punish, or for our vast creativity? The time is past due for a new WPA, bringing our public investment in line with all that is most resilient, resourceful and inspiring in our culture.

So what do we need to do to make it happen?

First, we need to refocus some of our impressive intelligence from critique to proposition. It amazes me how much discussion of public arts funding focuses on censorship. Compared to what? The unfettered free expression of the commercial marketplace? Corporations' famous willingness to give artists *carte blanche*?

The human proclivity to compare actual existing problems with imagined ideals is so common, logicians even have a name for it, the "Nirvana fallacy" or the "perfect solution fallacy." In fact, there are challenges to free expression in every sector and almost every situation, and they don't all emanate from the heavy hand of public or private authority. Indeed, censorship is the only element of public policy that is completely decentralized in this country, as so many artists hold

themselves back from expressing what they fear may step on a funder's or patron's or sponsor's toes.

To be sure, public controversies over freedom of expression have surfaced: arts funding is an evergreen issue for the far-right, whose leaders know how to make mountains of hay out of the way a tiny percentage of public money is spent. Consider the disproportionate number of headlines grabbed in early 2009 by \$50 million in NEA funding out of the \$787 billion American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, the stimulus bill. But so what? The right finds (or invents) something to make a stink about in every public program, inventing controversies if need be: how about "death panels"?

If the prospect of controversy or censorship were enough to stop an arts program from happening, there wouldn't be any. I want to see our best thinking and strongest commitments to free expression inform any plan for a new WPA, but as for public programs being more susceptible to censorship than private ones, I don't think so. There is far more censorship in the marketplace. How often do we hear of entertainment-industry executives wanting a scripted character to be switched from a woman or person of color to a man, to snag that important 18 to 35 year old male demographic? How often do we hear that plays or films about controversial issues can't find a backer or distributor? The history of feminist art is one of works being repeatedly dismissed and rejected as too strident or confrontational, while other art by women has often been rejected as too soft, dismissed as craft. How many artists finally give up on the subjects or practices that move them most because they can't find buyers or funding?

Second, we need both perseverance and patience. When I talk about a new WPA with people who are active in inside-the-Beltway politics, the most common thing they say is this: "I don't know anyone in Congress who would sponsor that legislation right now." The second most common thing they say is, "Washington isn't going to spend money on art anytime soon."

These observations may very well be accurate, but since I've been talking about this issue for a very long time, I can tell you that I heard exactly the same thing during the Carter, Reagan, Bush senior, Clinton and Bush junior administrations. From this I have learned that if you put off starting something worthwhile because it is not immediately doable, you postpone all progress on the issue, maybe forever.

Many worthwhile social initiatives have been a long time coming. Consider that *Plessy v. Ferguson*, establishing the "separate but equal" doctrine that legitimated racial segregation, was decided in 1896. Do you know how many court cases, hours of legal research and strategizing, years of activism, decades of fundraising it took to reach the end of that doctrine? *Brown v. Board of Education* was decided in 1954, 58 years later. It took just as long for the idea of social insurance, introduced by progressives and unionists, to become law as Social Security in 1935. It took 70 years after the mid-19th century Seneca Falls Convention for women's suffrage to be ratified in this country by the 19th amendment. The struggle for gay legal rights has persevered for decades. And changing these laws has been just part of these movements for social justice.

In some realms, people understand and accept the long time that building takes. There are good parents and good teachers who would find it absurd to resent the painstaking investment required to nurture a young and promising life; good farmers and foresters who understand permaculture and sustainable harvest; good healers prepared for the long haul of preventive care; good organizers who understand the cultivation that democracy requires.

But in progressive politics, much of the picture looks different. The more daunted many people are by current resistance to a needed policy, the longer they wait to start pursuing it in earnest, the more the timeline stretches out. We have the numbers, the capacity and creativity to shift understanding of the public interest in art. We have proof from many realms that when people see a way their efforts can make a difference, they will act. Now we need the patience and perseverance to do the work.

Which brings me to my third and final point. We are good storytellers, but so far, we haven't been so good at telling the story of art's public purpose. Right now, arts support is widely seen as something primarily of concern to prospective beneficiaries: it looks like people lobbying for their own jobs and funding. There is a much bigger story to be told, and we need to bring our best creative energies to finding the images, metaphors and approaches that engage the largest possible constituency.

In part, we can do that by generating ideas and excitement about what a new WPA would look like. I've been creating imaginary public-service videos in my head recently. For me, one of the most resonant features of the original WPA was its role in preserving cultural heritage, for instance, by recording and publishing most of the surviving slave narratives that have been such a resource ever since. We learn empathy and imagination through art, how to feel others' experience from the inside, how to see commonality without erasing difference, how to draw on our heritage to imagine solutions to contemporary problems.

In my latest imaginary creation, I see an old woman sitting on a porch swing or an overstuffed couch with a youngster, a great-grandchild. "That's right," the woman is saying, "when I was your mother's age, I had a job working on plays with something they called the Negro Theater Unit, right here in Oklahoma. And the government paid for it!"

"The government paid for you to be in the theater, Grandma? Are you kidding?"

The woman shakes her head no. "Why?" asks the youngster.

"Those were bad days for everyone," the woman says, "and black people were hit hardest, right in the middle of the Dust Bowl. They knew we had to tell our stories, that would help us get through it and figure out what to do. They knew we had to pass our stories along."

"What do you mean?" asks the youngster.

"It's like in slavery times," says the woman. "Sometimes, when things are hardest, all people have is their stories. The memory of better days, the hope of a future."

"And artists give them that?" asks the youngster.

The woman nods. "Artists give them that, and they are ready to do it again."

"Maybe you should tell the President about it," the youngster says. "I think he forgot."

And that's when our slogan and Web site flashes on the screen.

I'm spending every minute I can writing, talking, figuring out what's needed lift this project off the ground. I hope you leave here tonight wanting to help it happen.

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