THE ARTS
IN TURBULENT TIMES
by
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Like communities everywhere in the world, the arts community was saddened and shocked by the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. The profuse outpouring of grief and anguish that flowed from singers, dancers, musicians, actors and actresses following these tragic events stands as a vivid testimony to this.

As time passed, it became more and more apparent that these were not isolated events, but rather manifestations of something much more profound and disturbing. There is a great deal of anger, hostility and resentment in the world. This is confirmed not only by the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, but also by the violent reactions to globalization, capitalism and free trade, glaring disparities in income and wealth between the rich and poor nations of the world, abject poverty, starvation and homelessness for many people, and deep divisions between religions, cultures and civilizations.

Clearly some fundamental changes are needed in the world if this situation is to be set right. Indeed, it may not be far off the mark to say that a new world system is needed to address problems as difficult, demanding, and debilitating as these.

It is against this backdrop that the arts community should seek to frame its short-term and long-term responses to the tragic events of September 11th, as well as many other developments taking place in the world.

The most pressing need is to provide people with peaceful rather than violent ways to express their emotions, feelings and frustrations. The arts do this largely in soothing rather than unsettling ways, thereby pointing people in positive rather than negative directions. The British recognized how important this is during the Second World War, which is why the Arts Council of Great Britain was created at that time. This is a time for renewing our association with Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, Armstrong’s What a Wonderful World, Picasso’s Guernica, Rodger and Hammerstein’s You’ll Never Walk Alone, Lennon’s Imagine, Enya’s Only Time, Carey’s Hero, and Mendelssohn’s Grant Us Peace.

We need a massive build-up of the arts in neighbourhoods, communities, regions and nations all around the world. Political, corporate and educational...
leaders must be convinced that the arts have a central role to play in the
development of societies at all levels, at all times, and in all places. While military
leaders are vyng for more money to spend on military equipment and the weapons
of war, artistic leaders must be vyng for more funds to expand the arts.

Expanding the arts would go a long way towards cooling off rather than
heating up the world. It would also go a long way towards building strong
foundations and friendly relations between the diverse peoples, religions, races,
countries, cultures and civilizations of the world. The distinguished authority on
international relations, Paul Braisted, recognized the quintessential importance of
this when he said:

Anyone who discards the possibility of developing more
friendly relations among people should ponder the alternative
long and well. The only alternative is continuing and deepening
conflict, with its dangers of increasing reliance upon violence,
and the corrosive effects upon human life of distrust and fear.(1)

It will not be possible to build strong foundations and friendly relations
between people - all people - without a quantum leap in international artistic
relations. This is yet another area where the arts community has a vital role to
play, even if it is a longer-term and more slowly-germinating role.

As the true purveyors of humanity’s most human and humane expression, it
is music, drama, literature, painting and dance that expose the real heart and soul
of nations. These are the activities that communicate effectively across racial and
linguistic divides and political and geographical boundaries in profound and
moving ways, revealing most clearly what nations are all about, how they have
evolved over time, and what they hold most dear to themselves.

This is not the only reason for advocating a dramatic expansion in
international artistic relations. When economic, commercial and military relations
are in flux - much as they are in many parts of the world today - international
artistic relations provide a strong, stabilizing force. They cushion the shocks that
result from erratic swings in the pendulums of economic, political, commercial,
and military power. Thus, a comprehensive program of international exchanges
involving singers, dancers, actors, actresses, composers, painters, writers, theatre
and dance companies, choirs, symphony orchestras, and the like provides the
cement that is necessary to keep people, races, countries and continents together
when other forces are operating to split them apart. In this way, peace, order,
stability and security - yes security - are more readily achieved and maintained in
the world.
Equally important is the fact that international artistic relations do more than anything else to eradicate fear and suspicion - the kind of fear and suspicion that results from an inability to understand the signs, symbols, customs, traditions and beliefs of others. Through a dramatic expansion in international artistic exchanges - exchanges predicated on in-depth encounters with the aesthetic accomplishments of all countries and all people - there is an opportunity to bring the whole of humanity into intimate, personal contact. It is an opportunity that is far too important to the future of the world to pass up.

Also far too important to pass up is the opportunity to provide cultural education in our schools. This is yet another area where the arts community has a pivotal role to play.

While political and educational leaders resist cultural education, it is of utmost importance to the future. As developments over the past few months have repeatedly demonstrated - and demonstrated convincingly - there is an appalling lack of understanding of the different cultures, civilizations and religions of the world. Without a great deal more cultural education, “the clash of cultures and civilizations” could easily become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The world of the future will be characterized by a great deal more intercultural mixing and interaction. Demographic, social, economic and communications’ changes will see to this, as will globalization. People will have to learn much more about African, Asian, Middle Eastern, North American, Latin American, Caribbean and European cultures if they want to function effectively in society and live creative, constructive and secure lives.

As a window on cultures and civilizations, the arts have a valuable role to play here as well. While it is essential to train students for careers in the arts and educate people to participate in the arts, it is equally essential to broaden and deepen people’s knowledge and understanding of their own culture and the cultures of others. The arts do this by exposing people to myths, metaphors, signs, symbols, values and worldviews that are different from their own, as well as by acquainting them with all the great cultures and civilizations of the world.

At a time when people from all walks of life are staking their claims to the type of world system that is most needed in the future, the arts community must make a strong case for a world system based on culture and culture’s highest, wisest and most enduring values. Included among these values are: the quest for equality, justice, freedom and truth; the love of knowledge, wisdom and beauty; the need for stability, security and diversity; the importance of caring and sharing, recognition of the needs and rights of others; and the search for the sublime. Let
us not fall into the trap identified by Oscar Wilde more than a century ago when he said “it is possible to know the price of everything and value of nothing.”

If a world system based on culture’s highest, wisest and most enduring values is to be realized, the arts community will have to play a crucial role in this. This was recognized by James Feibleman when he said:

There is a sense in which the whole of human culture is a struggle towards the higher values. Can there be any greater human expression of culture than art? Art surely lifts us up, although it would not be likely to exist without us…We were meant to actualize the higher values, and incidental to this task is the privilege of enjoying them. (2)

A world system based on culture’s highest, wisest and most enduring values would be an exciting system indeed. It would confirm the fact that the honest expression of feelings and emotions, artistic creation, scientific discovery, learning, spirituality, friendship and human love are the most essential things in life - the things that are remembered long after everything else is forgotten. Not only do these things bring real fulfillment and happiness in life, but also they promote peace and harmony rather than conflict and confrontation in the world. Without this, it is difficult to see how it will be possible for people to live in times as volatile and turbulent as these.

NOTES


D. Paul Schafer is Director of the World Culture Project. He is the author of Culture - Beacon of the Future and Canada’s International Cultural Relations: Key to Canada’s Role in the World. More information on these and other publications can be acquired on the World Culture Project’s web site at: www3.sympatico.ca/dpaulschafer.
