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Creative Renewal: How Art Can Save Us Now

Greetings, my fellow North Americans. I bring you sympathy and good wishes from the other half of this land mass we share, where arts work in the public interest has been starved for resources for so long that a great many people have more or less given up hope, learning to love that lean and hungry feeling, like long-term anorexics.

Sometimes the short distance separating us feels like a time portal, because it takes so long for news to travel, or at least to trickle north to south through the barriers and blind spots of media bias. When I was preparing for this talk, I searched for information published in the U.S. on the remarkably large cuts in arts funding that have made such an impact in British Columbia recently. I'm certain you will not be surprised that I found next to nothing. But I have been reading in Canadian newspapers and journals and at sites like John Oliver's "Decimating The Arts in Canada," the Alliance for Arts and Culture, Citizens for the Arts, "Stop BC Arts Cuts," and a Facebook page about organizing against the cuts that features a picture of Margaret Atwood, which led me to her blog against the cuts on [globeandmail.com](http://globeandmail.com)—so I have begun to have an inkling of the seriousness of the situation you face.

In many of the letters and statements of protest I have read, the economic impact of BC arts is the first, the central, and in some cases, the only argument put forward to counter the cuts. Many mention that arts funding generates at least \$1.36 in tax revenue for every dollar spent, it promotes tourism, it employs thousands of voters, and so on. On the face of it, the reason seems clear. The cuts were explained and justified in economic terms: funds are limited, and so there must be hard choices, as the Housing and Social Development Minister put it in September: "When you think about a child arriving in school with an empty stomach that isn't going to get the education they require, you have to decide, 'Is that a priority, or some other thing?' You make the decision on behalf of the child." The Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts said the government must "devote scarce financial resources primarily to healthcare, education, and social services for the most vulnerable British Columbians." So it makes sense that much of the counter-argument seeks to prove that arts funding is a productive investment for the public sector, not a net loss.

Add up the public protests and testimonies and meetings and the many other things BC artists and their allies are doing to bring this matter to light and reverse these bad decisions, and you have to be impressed by the energy, commitment and sheer volume of refusal to knuckle under. I hope you are able to prevail, that arts funding will soon be restored—not only because it is right, and because it would enable the most active among you to return to making beauty and meaning instead of reacting to official blunders, but because it would give you a little space to consider whether it is possible to break the rhythm of cut and response, that frustrating and demoralizing counterpoint—and if so, how. Because the argument as it is now framed—and this is true everywhere that public arts investment is threatened—sometimes succeeds in disrupting the cycle, but it cannot change the game.

To the extent that the debate in British Columbia is shaped by local characteristics and conditions, I am obviously the least qualified person in this room to say anything useful about it. But to the extent that it reflects a North American—even, in some sense, a global—discourse

about the art's public purpose and the social value of creativity, I have a few thoughts to share that may be of use. And they start with idea of frames.

In cognitive linguistics, frames are embedded concepts—accumulations of words and images, metaphors and parables—that shape our perception and therefore, our thinking. In politics, this is sometimes reduced to a question of language. For examples, right-wing politicians in the U.S. were able to contaminate the idea of a tax on inherited wealth by reframing it as the “death tax.” But word-choice is just one concrete expression of an underlying frame, a deep and deeply influential meta-story. Everybody likes to use the word “freedom,” for instance, because it is by now so encrusted with intense positive feelings and associations that its effect is akin to spraying the room with a large bottle of pine-and-sunshine-scented cologne. In the U.S., if you can successfully associate your own issue with the Our Cherished Freedoms frame (instead of the dreaded “Government Control” frame), you are one happy campaigner.

A core frame in U.S. economic discourse might be called “The American Dream,” which brings to mind individuals working hard and being rewarded with home ownership, personal safety, friendly neighbors and fragrant backyard barbecues. In the American Dream frame, economic failure is one's personal responsibility, punishment for a lack of industry or prudence. Evoking this frame has been a boon to corporate depredation: for example, countless urban neighborhoods have been wiped out by developers lured with tax-breaks and subsidies billed as the route to prosperity for all in shiny new homes, with American Dream imagery masking removal of the former residents who don't fit the frame. An alternative, truth-based frame would portray public agencies and developers colluding to profit themselves at residents' expense. Exposing the true costs of these policies could lead to proposing a system that really does reward the hard work of families already living in neighborhoods slated for corporate makeovers.

Many commentators on the current arts funding situation in British Columbia have pointed to an incident in September, 2008, when Prime Minister Stephen Harper said in a campaign speech that “I think when ordinary working people come home, turn on the TV and see a gala of a bunch of people at, you know, a rich gala all subsidized by taxpayers claiming their subsidies aren't high enough, when they know those subsidies have actually gone up—I'm not sure that's something that resonates with ordinary people.” The outraged response from high-profile artists was widely seen as cutting into Harper's result in the election, although obviously not enough to unseat him. On the other hand, he's now got a music video on YouTube, so his tune may be changing.

Harper's remark resonated with a core frame in public perception of the arts: the idea of artists playing around—purporting to work when they are actually partying—at the expense of taxpayers who don't have nearly so much fun on the job. This frame comes with all sorts of embellishments: artists thumb their noses at convention, thrusting shocking subjects into the public eye; they make spectacles of themselves, behaving like children; and so on. The stink of this puts arts subsidy on the highly dispensable list, a frill that is easy to trim when times are hard. It invites the type of comparison that—while seldom stated outright—underpins arts-subvention debates: do you really want to support a bunch of flaky, outspoken, hard-partying artists when the money could go to medical care or housing the homeless or buying school lunches?

Ostensibly, the debate is all about dollars-and-cents: are the arts a good expenditure of funds compared to other public purposes? But that's only on the surface. We know it isn't about money per se, because the total BC arts allocation represented only one-twentieth of one percent of the provincial budget, a nickel out of every \$100. When politicians decapitate arts funding as they have in BC, part of their motive is purchasing a particular type of public-opinion insurance as insulation against opposition to other, smaller cuts they will make in more popular public services. See, they are saying, *we lopped the head off all the really unnecessary things like arts before even trimming the fat from medical care or education.*

The anti-artist frame resident in many people's minds is what makes the arts useful in that way. Because that frame is already in place, politicians don't have to argue affirmatively why they find arts subvention so dispensable. If speaking it aloud triggers too much opposition, as happened with Steven Harper, they can play off of it without saying a word. And here's the real rub: when arts advocates respond to the cover-story as if it were the whole story, when they focus primarily on dollars-and-cents arguments, they don't disrupt the underlying frame, which remains solidly in place. That is why, regardless of how solidly the economic arguments are made, every time budget cuts are contemplated, arts funding will once again top the list of candidates for the guillotine. This is by no means specific to British Columbia or Canada, but endemic to every society in which this frame predominates, every place where it is not outbalanced by a countervailing frame such as heritage and pride.

So now the question is more complicated: how to change the frame, the deeply embedded story that makes "the arts" so expendable? My thoughts about this are based on observation of the U.S. situation, which is not directly transferable, because the characters of our societies are so different. For example, the U.S. incarcerates people at the highest rate on the planet, more than 760 per 100,000; Canada's rate is 116, and spending on prisons is commensurately lower. The U.S. spends four times as much of its GDP as Canada on the military, and so on. The cuts and redirections in Canada's FY 2010 budget have gone primarily to stimulus programs and tax cuts, rather than wars and prisons, political choices the government hopes will address the recession, or at least perception about it. Despite these differences, I hope you will find my stories relevant.

In the U.S. right now, a few extreme-right commentators and activists are trying to drum up what some people are calling a new culture war. This is an indirect attack on President Obama which began in other realms, forcing Van Jones to step down as Green Jobs Advisor in response to smears by Fox News' deranged commentator, Glenn Beck. Emboldened by victory, Beck and his ilk fixed their sights on activist artists and on public arts agencies such as the National Endowment for the Arts. They forced the resignation of a staff member who had been involved in promoting President Obama's United We Serve volunteer campaign, denouncing it as an attempt to politicize arts funding. They are milking every recent arts-related meeting and memo for ammunition, and so far, they are persisting, even though they haven't found all that much. I wish I could say their focus on the arts was a surprise. But in truth, when the ideologues of the right want to bash a liberal administration, they almost always pick up the same club, the National Endowment for the Arts, a minuscule federal agency with a budget amounting to a few cents per person. Why?

Whether through intuition or analysis, they understand that the way we craft our stories shapes our lives and collectively, our society. While (to my continuing frustration) Democrats and progressives in the U.S. tend to see artists as nice but unnecessary to real democracy, the right sees artists clearly, as in possession of powerful skills of expression and communication, almost always in the service of freedom, equity, diversity and inclusion. They understand that creativity and public purpose are a potent combination. They want their story—that the United States belongs to white Americans who think as they do, and that their ownership confers the right to exclude, discredit and scapegoat others by any means necessary—to predominate, and so they are willing to do anything to disrupt the counter-narrative of art and public purpose. Racism is clearly one animating force behind this new round of scapegoating; another is the invidious prejudice against artists as exemplars of freedom in action. In media blowhards' arsenal, artists have been a weapon of choice for far too long.

My worry in this moment is that they have also picked on artists and their supporters because, based on past experience, they are counting on us not to fight back soon, or hard, or with much

conviction. In the U.S., we are sadly used to seeing public officials surrender at the first shot across the bow, sacrificing free expression in the hope of preserving their own positions. In the late 80s and early 90s, the NEA responded to smears by abandoning the programs that had been targeted. The new NEA Chair, Broadway producer Rocco Landesman, despite his reputation for forthright outspokenness, seems to be following that tradition by dissociating himself from all controversy.

This has been going on for a long time. About 30 years ago, mainstream U.S. arts advocates committed themselves to a desperation strategy focusing on justifying arts expenditure through weak economic arguments and secondary benefits. Facing threat, certain species shrink and blend into the background, making themselves small and inconspicuous in the hope of escaping notice. This is the typical defensive response of the arts world in the U.S. The chameleon changes its complexion to convince the predator that it's really just an oddly shaped leaf; these arts advocates gave up on asserting the importance of free expression, the personal and social need for beauty and meaning, the social value of cultivating our intrinsic human desire to create, and focused instead on trying to convince the predator that art is just a really clever strategy for raising test scores and tax revenues.

Mozart is good for babies' development, they say. Kids who play in the school orchestra are less likely to drop out—there's no separating cause from effect on that one, as kids whose parents have more education are both less likely to drop out and more likely to join the orchestra. Above all, mainstream advocacy groups have spent vast sums asserting and justifying the "economic multiplier effect," in which every dollar spent on theater tickets generates more dollars on parking and restaurants, multiplying jobs and prosperity. This is true, as far as it goes. The thing is, the arts have no special claim here: buy tickets to a football game or a dog show or nude lady mud wrestling, and you get the same result.

Loyalty to these weak and defensive arguments has produced a kind of brain damage, where people keep compulsively repeating the same failed strategy, insisting on its efficacy despite the results. At every arts conference, an advocacy expert offers a workshop, complete with charts and graphs, claiming that we have to speak the language of legislators and corporations if we want to succeed. Really? After thirty or so years, what has been the result? The real value of federal arts spending in the U.S. has declined since the Reagan administration by forty-five percent!

It's not entirely these arts advocates' fault that they have wagered their future on such feeble arguments. To a certain extent, most of us have internalized the dominant view that art—the passion and purpose of thousands of artists and cultural activists around the globe—is merely entertainment, embellishment, really cool products. Nice to have around if you go in for that sort of thing, but basically unnecessary. To the extent that we buy (even subconsciously) into that view, we will always be defensive, and that will always weaken our position.

Instead, I believe we should be standing up and speaking out for a much deeper truth. The human proclivity to make art is intrinsic to our species. We do it in marble palaces and grass huts, at every moment of history, every time the unfolding of our lives asks to be marked. Even under the most horrific conditions of confinement, in SuperMax prisons and concentration camps, people hoard crumbs or scrape up mud to make sculptures, scratch on walls with rocks and lumps of charcoal. Herbert Zipper, the founding director of the National Guild of Community Schools of the Arts, led a clandestine orchestra in Dachau. At the dawn of human history, we sat around cave fires, the darkness at our backs, sharing stories of the hunt, the trek, the storm and their meaning for ourselves. Today we sit in darkened multiplexes, warming ourselves by the light of stories clothed in infinitely busier and more complex images. But underneath, they are the same.

Our lives are nothing more than a string of experiences until we craft the narrative that shapes them. Through our stories, we learn empathy and resilience; we establish a sense of connection

with our own past and with others; we align the compass-arrow that will allow us to navigate life's challenges. We work out the shared meanings that enable us to find a *modus vivendi*, a way of living together despite our differences. Our creativity, the art that expresses and shares our stories, determines our very survival. What's more, it determines whether it will be our lot merely to exist, or to live to our full capacities as individuals and communities, attaining the moral grandeur of which human beings are capable. The big frame we need now is this: that art is the secret of survival, that if our resilience, creativity and future sustainability are riding on the stories that shape us, we had better invest in our collective capacity to create and share stories.

One of the pleasures of reading history is the way it makes us feel so much smarter than our forbears. Read about the discovery of viruses and bacteria, we can feel superior to those who couldn't figure out why so many patients died in hospital before doctors and nurses learned to wash their hands. We delight in reading about people who thought that an excess of blood brought on fevers, which had to be cured by bloodletting; or who believed that the earth was the center of the universe, with the other heavenly bodies dancing obeisance.

There is little doubt that future generations will feel the same sense of superiority as they look back on our times. We still have plenty of scientific superstitions, to be sure, but in many ways, the most pernicious are our social superstitions. Everything we know about the centrality of story, the universality of artistic creativity and its roles in human and social development is demonstrably true, yet we are still laboring under the social superstition that says art has nothing to do with the serious problems we face, that creative work is trivial and negligible, meaningful only for its commodity-value. Open the arts section of any major U.S. daily: if you eliminate all the reviews and announcements, you will find that this is the main focus: which TV shows drew the most viewers and sponsors, which movies and plays earned the largest box-office revenues, which songs sold the most copies, which performers made the largest fees. If all you have is a cash register, everything looks like a sale.

We are standing at a crossroads now. On one side is an old order that contradicts everything we know from direct experience. I like to call this old order Datastan, because it has embraced "hard" data—weights, measurements, any form of quantification—almost to the exclusion of other forms of value, with the absurd result that many of the things we humans care most about are not part of social equations because they can't be quantified. In Datastan, we are willing to sacrifice children's well-rounded education, the kind that teaches them to be resilient, improvisational, curious and creative, for one that reduces education to numeric test scores. In Datastan, we are willing to sacrifice health to preserve the profits of insurance and drug companies, because if you have to treat everyone who shows up in need of care, the bottom line suffers, and that suffering is prioritized over human pain. In Datastan, we have taken means of measurement that work just fine in the physical sciences and transferred them to human communities, where they don't work at all. When things don't fit the system—messy things, like emotions, or the life of the senses, or spirituality—we just ignore them or pretend they don't exist.

It is intrinsically impossible to justify public investment in creativity using Datastan's tools, such as the economic multiplier effect. It can't be done, because art's essence is its ability to engage us fully in body, emotions, mind and spirit. Trying to explain or demonstrate this with numbers is like trying to describe a rainbow without mentioning color.

There is an old joke about a man who goes into a tailor shop to buy a suit. The salesman hands him one to try, but one sleeve is too long, one trouser-leg is too short, the whole thing seems lopsided. The man complains. "What do you mean," says the salesman, "this is a gorgeous suit, the finest material. You have to know how to wear a suit like this. Raise your right shoulder," the

salesman says, and the customer complies. “Now lean into your left hip,” he says, and the customer does this too. Finally, satisfied, the salesman pivots the customer to face the mirror. “Look at that!” he crows. “What did I tell you? A gorgeous suit, if only you know how to wear it.”

That suit is Datastan, and it is beginning to chafe in some important places. Instead of a single salesman, we have a vast apparatus of spin to convince us that what we see with our own eyes and experience with our own bodies is wrong. The funny thing is, the legions of clever people who operate this apparatus understand many of the same things we do about the importance of stories. The rabid right-wing opposition to healthcare reform in the U.S., for instance, has invested a prodigious—if distorted—creativity in stories aimed at magnifying people’s fear of change into full-blown terror. They understand that people who cannot be engaged by mere facts will respond powerfully and compliantly to the idea of their aged parents being carted off by “death panels,” a fear-based frame that echoes and therefore enlists countless images in historical depictions of fascist and totalitarian regimes. The people who are creating these campaigns fully understand that the way we frame the story, the way we craft the narrative, determines our actions.

Yet even as Datastan rolls along, sending out messages declaring its timeless superiority, more and more voices are calling for a truly humane society in which our lived experience, not only that which can be quantified, guides our social arrangements. I have a name for that place too, and it is Storyland, because it is built on the centrality of stories. In Datastan, we practice a form of superstition that entails imagining that categories tell us something truly meaningful about individual human lives: “So-and-So is a gay Asian-American male between 18 and 35.” In Storyland, the categories step out of the chart into three dimensions: we come from named places, we have specific experiences, values, hopes and fears. We are not examples of something. Instead, we all possess the fundamental human right to be ourselves.

Now, it isn’t as if Datastan and Storyland are two different nations. All of us live in both places. But the opportunity we have now is to shift our weight toward Storyland, so that Datastan relaxes its grip on our cultures. Try it on as a hypothetical. If I am right, and the way we craft our story shapes our lives, then what stories do we need now?

We certainly need stories that draw the connections between personal and public policy choices and their impact on actual human lives. Look around you: our ability to process information is constantly accelerating because we practice it every day, interacting with computers, video games, smart phones and other devices. But without comparable attention to and investment in cultivating imagination and empathy, how will our hearts keep pace with our minds? To an alarming extent, the pain of our current economic crisis was created by people sitting at computers playing with numbers, forgetting that actual homes, livelihoods and families were at stake. Without imagination and empathy to balance ambition, we lose touch with the inner voice that says, “Wait! Consider the impact on others of the actions you are about to take.”

Empathy cannot be acquired through intellect alone. It is through experience and imagination, through film, theater, dance, music, literature and visual art, through sharing our stories of resourcefulness and resilience, through sharing our own creativity, that we learn to know and care for each other, to strengthen our families and communities and to face down challenges.

To pick just one example, in the U.S., we need a counter-narrative to the dominant saga of crime and punishment. There are currently 2.3 million people in prisons and jails there. While U.S. population has increased by a little over a third since 1972, the prison population has grown by 600%. We have by far the highest incarceration rate and the largest prison population on the planet. Since 1980, more than 400 new prisons have been built in rural communities across the

country. The number of people serving life sentences has quadrupled since 1984, to more than 140,000. Half those people are African American. The number of people in prisons and jails for drug offenses has increased more than 1100% since 1980, and 60% of those in state prisons for these offenses have no history of violence or major sales. The United States has become Incarceration Nation.

What is known about the U.S. criminal justice system is that it is voracious, despite a steady diet of taxpayer funds; that it is choked with prisoners, often in conditions that beggar imagination; and that it is a breeding-ground for illness, violence and the type of resentment that never goes away. We know that increasingly, the prison system is abandoning the idea of rehabilitation in favor of pure punishment. In many of the new SuperMax prisons, inmates spend 23 hours a day in their cells, constantly watched by an armed guard. Increasingly, prisoners are shipped to faraway places their families cannot afford to visit. Increasingly, prisons are becoming big business, making millions while overcharging families and inmates for phone time and such necessities as soap. Increasingly, prisons are being privatized, taken over by corporations with no public accountability.

Even those who have no direct personal connection to inmates are connected to this system, living in a rural community that's being sold on prison as the new growth industry; acquainted with someone who builds prisons or supplies them with food or services; or someone who works as a prosecutor or a defense attorney, or who teaches classes to inmates. We support prisons through our taxes. Yet so far, despite widely publicized statistics, a raft of newspaper articles and television documentaries, ballot initiatives and organizing campaigns, very few people see themselves as implicated in or able to do anything about a cruel and ineffective system that squanders our commonwealth and the lives of so many young men who could contribute to their own families and communities.

In my book *New Creative Community*, I wrote about the Thousand Kites project ([www.thousandkites.org](http://www.thousandkites.org)), a collaboration between community artists and people across the country who are affected by the United States' burgeoning prison industry. The project was started by community artists at Appalshop, a multi-arts and education center based in Eastern Kentucky coalmining country, where local well-being has been sacrificed to the national appetite for energy, where coal companies have strip-mined the earth to the point that they are now blasting whole mountaintops to rubble so as to claim the remaining coal far beneath the surface.

The Thousand Kites project has grown over several years to include a call-in hip-hop show on Appalshop's community radio station, which has become a national communications nexus for prisoners and their loved ones. They produce an annual "Calls from Home" radio special which is distributed nationally. They have made a documentary film, *Up The Ridge*, and a play, *Thousand Kites*, both being used and adapted by communities across the country. They have built a Web portal to provide a connecting-point and a toolbox for people who care about this issue. Every element of the project is grounded in songs, poems, pictures and stories contributed by a wide range of people whose lives have been touched by the prison system, including prisoners, guards, local officials, builders and others who work on prisons, the families of all these people and victims of crime.

As a foundation for the *Thousand Kites* play, these artists use the story circle, a simple, accessible cultural development technology. People come together in a circle. Guided by a facilitator, each person has the same amount of time to share any story—in this case, about prisons and their personal impact—while everyone else gives total attention, recognizing that person's right to speak his or her own words in his or her own way. When everyone has spoken, the group talks about what has been learned from the layering of stories. The story circle is a kind of stem cell, yielding tales that can be shared in many ways, becoming the material of both art and activism.

How do we shift the energy from Datastan to Storyland, so that this same skill at eliciting and using stories to expand our collective awareness permeates every sector of society? Those who have a depth of experience working in community will corroborate the answer I offer: we need to give people direct, first-person experiences that shatter the spin-induced trance of Fox News, which is to say experiences that engage us fully in all dimensions of our humanity, body, emotion, mind and spirit. There is no better way to achieve this than through the creative process, specifically, through making art. There is no fuller, better way to cultivate full citizenship, in the sense of meaningful belonging, participation and mutual responsibility for society's choices. And therefore, there is no better investment of public funds.

To tip the scales toward Storyland, the act of creativity and the moment of presence are paramount, not the particular mode in which creativity is expressed. Whether we are playing sonatas or ragas, performing *Hamlet* or a piece crafted from our neighbors' stories, dancing ballet or samba, reading Pablo Neruda's poems or writing our own is incidental to the fact that we are experiencing artistic creativity, a life-embracing, non-polluting, spiritually enlarging activity that helps to heal the world and the human heart.

And the best way, the most potent and exciting way to give people these experiences is to support artists in placing their gifts at the service of public purpose. One dedicated artist working in collaboration with other community members makes the argument for investment in art more powerfully than a hundred cost-benefit analyses or a thousand charts of the economic multiplier effect.

If the orthodoxies of Datastan have any sort of grip on your mind, you are probably generating dozens of reasons why what I am saying can't be true. Put them off to the side for a second while you consider this: *What if I am right?* What if—as implausible as it may seem from a Datastan perspective—investing in artists is the best available lever to change our course as a society? What if the cultivation of personal and social imagination that is possible through the work of artists actually turns out to be precisely the right medicine to save us now?

In a time of great social upheaval, the future is up for grabs. Things come about in mysterious ways. One person can start a trickle that becomes a flood, for good or ill. Right now in the U.S., we are watching the right engage in a sort of media terrorism, using the airwaves to spread stories that ignite the fear most people feel in the face of change, fanning an angry flame of hatred, racism and scapegoating. As has often been true, art is the match-head, striking those internalized frames that make it handy fuel for this type of bonfire. This is very different from what is happening here in British Columbia, but for me, both situations raise the same question of how to respond to attack: What if instead of following the defensive strategy that has kept artists marginalized for so long—instead of making ourselves smaller or trying to camouflage ourselves as a way to improve tax revenues and test scores—we spoke and acted as if what I am saying were true? As if art were the secret of survival and sustainable community? As if the cultivation of personal and social creativity were an absolute necessity for any healthy society? As if art were the essential way to cultivate the imaginative empathy and social imagination that underlie cultural recovery, without which no lasting economic recovery is possible?

Since May, I have been working with a group of artists and organizers who first came together as part of a White House Briefing on Art, Community, Social Justice, National Recovery. After our briefing with administration officials, we held working group sessions about what to do next. I convened a working group on cultural policy. Group members gave ourselves a challenge we have been working on ever since. In Datastan, when we hear the word "policy," many of us want to lie down for a little nap. It conjures endless boring documents in which every detail is spelled out, like the boilerplate in a contract. But our goal was to wake people out of that somnolence. We

challenged ourselves to use plain language to convey the necessity of a major new investment in art's public purpose.

Right now, with fresh outrages crowding U.S. TV screens every day, we have unlimited opportunities to be defensive: hiding out, running away, hoping those who attack us will tire of it and relent, fighting fire with fire. What all these responses have in common is allowing the other side to set the agenda. What if we worked with comparable energy to bring about what we desire? What if we dedicated ourselves to putting artists to work for art's public purpose, mending our social fabric, promoting freedom of expression and a vibrant, inclusive national dialogue, and revitalizing both education and commerce with the creativity that has always been the wellspring of energy and success? We have an amazing group of founding endorsers for Art & The Public Purpose: A New Framework. The Web site is launching right now ([www.newculturalpolicy.org](http://www.newculturalpolicy.org)). Building support for this new paradigm in cultural policy is one way we hope to change the frame.

The people in this room have the power to craft the narrative that defines this moment, to choose whether those who look back on this time will see a community running scared or standing for all they know is true. Despite the social superstitions that devalue culture's power, this moment calls for daring to live as though we believe that art is the secret of survival—which it is—and that our own creative actions may be precisely what's needed to save democracy now.

The usual argument against making an investment in arts' public purpose is cost. I know you are doing your own good work to counter the social superstition behind this red herring. In the U.S., we are pointing out that the National Priorities Project<sup>1</sup> calculates that we have spent over \$915 billion on wars since 2001, an average cost of \$315 million a day—that's two annual National Endowment for the Arts budgets daily, seven days a week. We currently have 2.4 million people in prisons and jails. Prisons costs taxpayers well over than \$30 billion a year. In the aggregate, states spend more on prisons than on education.

The great evolutionary biologist J. B. S. Haldane was once asked what a study of creation could teach us about the nature of God. He answered, "An inordinate fondness for beetles," because they make up a quarter of all living species. When future generations look back on this period and deduce our characters from the ways we chose to invest our commonwealth, what will they conclude? In the United States, it will be evident that above all, we prioritized punishment. What will they say about British Columbia?

When pundits and policymakers insist that we cannot afford to invest in culture, the literal meaning of their words is an unquestioning faith in a distorted sense of public priority. It is time to experiment with a new frame grounded in the truth that the way we shape our stories shapes our world, instead of the frame that juxtaposes bejeweled people at art openings with hungry children. It is time to ask our fellow citizens who they really are, how they wish to be seen by future generations. It is time to stop sounding defensive and call for major investment in cultivating the imaginative empathy and creativity that, above all things, can save us now.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.costofwar.com/>