Cultural Institutions and Cultural Courage
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Abstract

Experiences in cultural institutions lead us toward questions and ambiguities related to contexts, voices, histories, and ethics. Part of living in a democracy is to be challenged, and to respond, and to live up to our responsibility to learn from what we think and feel. If we wish to be citizens, that courage is what our destiny requires; we also will want to live up to it. To be instrumental in the construction of thoughtful lives, libraries and museums and their people require engaged public conversations devoted to building critical awareness of the continuing evolution of the human context. When a cultural institution invites its users to bring original experiences and questions to each other, it recognizes the truths that we are never finished becoming, and that we need to speak to each other. This invitation is also an expression of respect and anticipation. A cultural institution that invites its people has begun to create lifelines, ways to rescue and inspire literacy, identity and confluence.

As I begin this evening, I find a certain sense of tension, since this morning we went to the Royal Ontario Museum, and all I want to do is talk with you about what I saw there in the Chinese galleries: early information tools like the oracle bones from fifteen centuries before the common era; axes, awls, adzes, blades and chisels; blades and flake tools from the upper Paleolithic, 35,000 to 10,000 BCE; exquisite tea bowls from the more recent Song dynasty, only eight centuries ago; and Jun ware from the Yuan dynasty, its glaze distinguished by what a label calls its “opalescent opacity.” I was moved and impressed as well by the respect and resonance evident in the galleries of the First Peoples: the cradle board as a cognitive device, directing the child’s capacity to observe and learn; how the museum is in this presentation an homage even
more than it is a display; and the words of Margaret Nelson, President of the Alaska Native Heritage Center in 2001: “We need these traditions, not only to know who we are, but to know who we can become.” These words are fit for an inscription over every museum door. Also, about a century ago, when he was fifteen or so, my father left his home and family in New York to farm in Winnipeg, and then to serve with Canadian forces in World War I, and then to return to homestead near Medicine Hat. He left in his early twenties, unable to bear the isolation and the prairie harshness. I should have asked him more about that time, and so I am thinking of him tonight as I talk to you.

Having seen reports and images of the tsunami in the northern region of Japan, and having imagined and witnessed its effects on life as it is lived, you all share knowledge of an event that matters to our senses and our understanding. It is also about us, and about our understanding of what we do for our cultures, and how our institutions make us safe.

My friend Frank Galuszka, an artist who lives in Santa Cruz, California, wrote to me a day or two after the event, “This whole business in Japan is like a physical manifestation of the emotions the world has been feeling for the last few years.” I have no wish to demean that national natural disaster, and its consequences for human order and life, but I want you to consider for the moment the tsunami as it can be ours, that is, as a metaphor.

In little more than a decade, for example, electronic information tools have ineradicably reshaped our awarenesses, our books, civil society, commerce, communication, our communities, culture, dating, education, encyclopedias, entertainment, our friendships, government, information, institutions, learning, our leisure and our literacy, our memory, music, news, play, politics, publishing, our reading, research, schooling, social participation, visual images, writing, and more, just thirty things to start.

In little more than a decade, the capacity of a mindful civic life has come to include global AIDS, al Qaeda, ambiguity and ambivalence, avarice and corruption, climate change, crumbling national infrastructures, abuses of democracy, domestic terrorism, drug trades, earthquakes and tsunamis, economic collapses, educational breakdowns, environmental disasters, emigration, faith-driven politics, famines and fears, foreclosures, genocides, hurricanes, international jihad, internecine war, joblessness,
lasting drought, massive national debt, nuclear meltdowns, plutocracy and technocracy, political revolutions, politicized news, redefined families and genders, the losses and unresolved feelings of 11 September 2001, and more.

As we think of these things, these changes, it may be useful to remember that we cannot download, curate, or collect any of the following things: altruism, artistry, attention, authenticity, cognition, collaboration, consideration, courage, critical thinking, curiosity, democracy, empathy, esteem, expectations, freedom of thought, generosity, hope, imagination, inquiry, integrity, kindness, patience, respect, responsibility, or wisdom. These things must come to us from elsewhere. Where? When the continuities of our lives are swept away, as we have seen happen around the world, what is our future? When in the path of a tsunami, what is our relationship to knowledge? If we survive, what shall we give to each other? Why do we cling to each other? In a tsunami, if we are capable of rescuing others and ourselves, what is the most useful thing to do? After the tsunami, what parts of our lives can we understand in new ways? What shall we do for each other now? Which of our losses, which of our strengths, shall we discuss first? I like to remind myself of four lines from T. S. Eliot’s Choruses from “The Rock,”

When the Stranger says: “What is the meaning of this city?
Do you huddle together because you love each other?”
What will you answer? “We all dwell together
To make money from each other”? or “This is a community”? ¹

I advocate the importance of cultural institutions helping people to increase their capacity to grasp, negotiate, adapt, and respond to change in their lives. We are always challenged to do this, at every age, in every era. Unless we live forward with change we become its victims, locked in silence, detached and invisible. We will always be ambivalent and unwilling. There will always be fear, as when the tsunami recedes, and our lives are farther away from us, disassembled in the fragments and wreckage of where we used to live and how we used to think. In the devastation it leaves behind, it does not tell us about our future. The structures that contained our

lives have collapsed and disappeared. The conversations that informed our lives are impossible to have. The transmission of continuities that have shaped us stops cold. We have nothing left of what defined us. How do we change and learn when we lose these things? How do we rediscover and restore ourselves without these things? How do we think about these things after the tsunami? How will we know who we are, or what we might become?

I contend that there is no one to help our citizens to think about our tsunami, or our choices, or our strengths and losses, other than cultural institutions, places of information and knowledge, places for dialogue and process. There is no one, no other institutions and no other agencies of democracy to help us to become something together as people, even in small places of respect and generosity, other than us. It is in fact only in the small places of respect and generosity that this can happen. We have the capacity to survive, and the intellect to guide our continuity, and the will to become different.

John W. Gardner wrote, “A great civilization is a drama lived in the minds of a people. It is a shared vision, shared norms, expectations, and values. … Societies that keep their values alive do so not by escaping the process of decay but by powerful processes of regeneration. … [T]he great ideas still beckon – freedom, equality, justice, the release of human possibilities.” In the early nineteen nineties, Vaclav Havel talked about the need, “if we are not to perish of our modernness … to rehabilitate the human dimension of citizenship.” And here is philosopher of education Maxine Greene: “My hope is to remind people of what it means to be alive among others, to achieve freedom in dialogue with others for the sake of personal fulfillment and the emergence of a democracy dedicated to life and decency.”

My work is to remind us that a life rises to itself through anticipation and awareness, trying out and taking in. The rising life needs trusted resources, mentors, living exemplars, and a repertoire of instrumental behaviors and strategies. A person needs to be comfortable with ambiguity and risk, flexible, adaptive, willing to respond to both advances and setbacks with reflection and self-renewal. A life that gradually emerges from routine or from loss requires energy, persistence, motive and courage to see and listen, to think and act. The evolving life rises toward the possible.
Think with me about how we fold our lives over and over intentionally -- almost like origami, to make something complex yet recognizable out of something plain -- and think with me, also, about the delicate, invisible work of problem solving in a cultural institution, where the problem is the construction of an aware self. The user negotiates and improvises in an uncharted world, keeping questions open. This working mind at work in a collection is ultimately what cultural institutions are challenged to study, to ask about, and to illuminate. We study the interiors of our institutions, but we also need to study the interior lives of men and women in their times, human beings making lives among all the formidable yet tacit dimensions of the complex social and intellectual space that a library or museum is.

Think with me. To enter a strong cultural institution is to experience a place so deeply in motion that it necessarily puts us in motion. Our thoughts are both here and not here, moving among objects and tools and yet also within an idea or an image of our own. This is one way to understand cognition in the situation provided: it is an uncharted, moving territory, a situation for thinking, an experience of elevation and surprise. Responding to great works and concepts, discovering new paths, we become less tangible to ourselves. We think; we combine and adjust our thoughts; we try out what we tentatively see and have the words to capture. We negotiate and improvise our passage, pausing for insights to take form.

And yet, beneath these elevated sensations and hidden dimensions is our need, the true engine of the human path. What is it we need? What is it we want? What do we need or want to become? What is this wanting we have? We might know it in a slightly parallel form when we read. Our wanting and desire for complexity and experience to appear to us and engage us is proven each time we open a book. One of my students, after a discussion of reading groups, wrote to me, “All people who read the story become part of the story forever, just like the story becomes part of them forever.” She continued, “In the same way, when lots of people read a story and especially when they talk and write and think about that story together they become something together.”

Think with me. What if the museum, the library, the zoo, the history collection, the children’s art studio, the science and the natural science collections, what if they are all about becoming something together – becoming thoughtful together, and striving to imagine together? What if our collections could be seen as structures, situations, even
maps, for finding our way together into the unknown and back, ways for sorting the contextual intangibles we all recognize in our lives, so we might imagine and understand the possible difference a single clear idea can make? What if we could hold the idea before us, exploring its meaning among other people and other minds? The idea before us also has its origins, and a place among other ideas, other interpreters, other forms of knowledge, and other memories central to other lives. Context is an inevitable confluence of different voices in the continuing fabrication of experience. These voices say no context is identical to another.

Each context has its own energy and its own surrounding themes. Each context evokes potential ambiguity or disintegration. We experience our lives through such tensions. I am a man, a husband, a parent, a librarian, a professor, a writer, a reader, a photographer and other things all at once, responding to my life as a construction of perpetually undernourished contexts. Librarians know better than others that such contextual abundance means an abundance of new information and knowledge, each adding new energy and new ambiguity to the flow of problem solving.

In a difficult cognitive journey there is nothing to do but to think your way forward, to negotiate a balance among the contextual intangibles, the aspects of the infinite that present themselves, and to work toward coherent thoughts. When we think at our best, contexts enrich each other and how we see the great complexity of things. Museum or library use, it seems to me, is not about learning, but about experiencing and thinking -- organizing, connecting, always under the uneasy tensions of multiple contexts. At times we may be like witnesses to a conflict or a rescue, or survivors who live on to think, remember, and testify from all the truths we have crafted for ourselves.

*Think with me,* the place must say. Museums and libraries, any or all, are not about learning anything; they are about thinking anything, fully experiencing anything contained within. They work well in response to questions, but they are not examinations and they are not schools. They derive their integrity from knowledge, but they are not judgmental of people who seem to know nothing. They inspire scholarship, reading, inquiry, communication, community, engagement, writing, drawing, conversation, but they are not curricular. They assist every form of literacy, but they are not schools. We may be in the museum or the library because we went to
school, and we may think of ourselves as having been schooled; we may be educators and scholars ourselves, but cultural institutions are not schools.

I have come to believe that our most important, sustained professional questions ought to be about the thoughts of the user, about the interior, wordless experiences, the pauses, the interpretations, the conversations with the situation, the times spent engrossed in confusion – working a way out of it by thinking. I will always aim my attention toward the things we cannot see: the invisible actions, the invisible traces, that place that is not a place except somewhere in the mind, the thing that has not happened yet, the people we have not yet become, the immanent aspect of the infinite.

And so, in both the library and the museum, I am most engaged by the idea that our experience is a process occurring under our eyes but not visible to us, its effects not immediately apparent, a dreamlike and intangible thing that constructs and alters us. However, there are sometimes visible, sometimes audible artifacts of thought in our institutions, and they are typically associations and questions, indicators of wanting to know more, to know what it is possible to know, and to know where and how knowledge might be found. People observe and speak, consult directories, maps and catalogues, pay attention and take their time. Our experiences in these places will always be unfinished. In museum or library, the question, “What more do you need to know about what you have seen?” will help us to understand a great deal. When we ask this question, we ask, What kind of thinking has taken place for you here? What fresh unknowns did you discover today? What changes in thinking will you practice tomorrow? What possibilities has this experience opened for you?

John Dewey says mind is not something we have, but something we do; we attend, we care and feel. To mind leads us to see, and engages us in “active looking after things that need to be tended; we mind our step, our course of action, emotionally as well as thoughtfully.” (Dewey, 1934 [1987], p. 268) Minding is questioning. For Dewey, the infinitive “to mind” is defined by intellect and applied attention. It signifies memory and purpose.

We need to worry about mind in all its uses, noun or verb. Think with me about the present moment in American national life and its meanings for cultural institutions. In the United States, educational evaluation has in the last decade been tied to tests, not to curiosity or invention, nor to the subtler forms of literacy and interpretation. Imaginative, flexible, progressive educational policy has to overcome a polarized and
uncivil public arena and severe accountability demands. Achievement is measurable. Compromise and patience are rare or invisible. Compounded by the abbreviated cognitive processes that characterize Twitter, Facebook, and much of the World Wide Web, [my doubts] cause me to wonder, What kinds of young scholars, thinkers, learners, and readers are we now creating? What kinds of adult learners will they become? How will they learn to think critically in the ambiguous parts of life? Have our children been compromised and narrowed by our schools? Have we, and their parents, been diverted from the construction of living minds?

Whatever your response to these questions, perhaps you will agree with me that a generation prepared for the test in a culture of shallow competition is not likely to be a generation that trusts complex personal experience as the basis for learning. Nor will an insular generation easily understand the perspectives of others, nor will it fully grasp the importance of cultural institutions to civic society, and to democracy. Nor will it easily respond to my questions, “How do we think and trust in times of fear? How do we come to understand the increasing variables and diverse evolutions in forms of culture, knowledge, and context? How do we speak and think together with others?” Educational arrogance, no matter how broadly practiced, cannot replace the cultivation of trust and intellect in a time of ambiguity.

Think with me about what a museum or library forum might suggest about human differences, historic events, or about alternate ways to think and strive for knowledge worthy of trust. Think about how our institutions might assist us to understand the lives and families of others near us. “Everybody has a hungry heart,” Springsteen sings. Assume with me that creative and responsive lives, lives of wanting more than they are capable of providing, are everywhere. I think that they are likely to be motivated by a desire to complete the unfinished parts of their worlds, and to fulfill the imagined possibilities of their experiences. Our work is founded upon respect for such common wanting.

It appears to me that our task each day is to reconfirm what is fragile, and to understand how we are strong. We can rescue a civic life of insight and expression, and make a more thoughtful community possible, first by imagining it as a situation of possible ideas and conversations. If uncertainty is valuable to thinking and therefore important to our institutions, how shall we define it and how shall we use it? What do we not know in our world, that we might explore and experience together? How shall
we demonstrate, through what we provide, that thinking well can be a form of apprenticeship, and that there are many masters of thought and understanding to be heard before we will feel certain of whatever truths we must craft on our own?

A democracy requires intellect in its citizens. We ask questions and listen, and perhaps we ask again. We avoid judging, we encourage the narrative to continue. Tell me more, we can say. We can see how one life varies from another in family, in resources, in choices, in education, in happiness, and how it differs in health, in civic participation, in employment and avocation. We all differ in these and other parts of our lives, but they do not make a difference that prevents us from understanding each other. Tell me more, tell me more.

A democracy requires that we spin and weave our own strands; yet we are also in part woven into the strands of others. Our hopes, anticipations and hardships may be private, but we can cull a lifetime of stories from our conversations. Whole families and communities are in these stories. And yet, it seems to me that, even with so much to say, we are largely without places to speak and present ourselves, without ways to express what we see and know, in ways that reach toward the experiences and knowledge of other people in the same culture. Consequently it also seems to me that without rescuing voices and experiences, we will not live up to the possibility of sharing a common world, or filling it with something that will last beyond our selves. We will be faint mysteries and vague shadows to each other, and to those who follow us.

Part of living in a democracy is to be challenged, and to respond, to live up to our responsibility to learn from what we think and feel. If we wish to be citizens, that courage is what our destiny requires; we also will want to live up to it. To be instrumental in the construction of thoughtful lives, libraries and museums and their people require engaged public conversations devoted to building critical awareness of the continuing evolution of the human context. When a cultural institution invites its users to bring original experiences and questions to each other, it recognizes the truths that we are never finished becoming, and that we need to speak to each other. This invitation is also an expression of respect and anticipation. A cultural institution that invites its people has begun to create lifelines, ways to rescue and inspire literacy, identity and confluence.
In my experience, museums and libraries are the cultural instruments most able to approach the complexities and ambiguities of our lives. They are places of artifacts, records and documents, but they are also not-places, meaning that when we occupy them we are in process and motion; they cause us to think of some place or thing beyond ourselves. They allow us to construe meanings elsewhere, to go beyond the information given. Cultural institutions deepen, inform and encourage – even elevate – their users toward reflection. As we experience museums and libraries, we are likely to become more complete, more open, our awareness and language are likely to expand. Museums and libraries are resonant places, they imply affinity, continuity and safety; they promise a place of sustenance and advocacy. They suggest the possibility that there is more to think and imagine than we can see.

I propose to reinvent cultural institutions as places for the expression of human, adult voices, and to explore the ways we have of discovering possibilities, changing our perceptions of complexity, and reinventing our attention. My idea is to use these democratic cultural instruments, already dedicated to the invisible actions and meanings of lives, to recover the lost voices of living citizens.

Every nation is continuously unfinished; so are its peoples. Accordingly, our cultural institutions are about the democratic process of coming into knowledge, informing our minds and moving our feelings. We must come to be comfortable with the open end of civic hope, with the striving that never ends. In contexts large and small, the nation cannot hide its errors or losses, but it also cannot hide its fears; nor can it obscure its resources and energies. We will always want to see the nation evolve openly, through informed acts carried out with purpose, undertaken fearlessly, by thoughtful people. What it cannot bear, it seems to me, is fear of others whom we do not yet understand, or a failure to be curious about the possible dimensions of lives we cannot yet see. To be called incurious -- implying pre-knowledge of answers before the statement of a problem, or of simply not caring to consider the crafting of truth – is the most damning epithet for the mind I can imagine.

Our institutions can help to bring communities to their questions, to the knowledge that helps to inform their responses, and to the ideas and values that will shape our policies and plans. We especially require new thinking to discover the experiences that will last within us, for rebuilding our institutions, and for growing new fields of ideas, sown by our own lives. Children should be present to see adults do this, so they will
never believe that thinking critically and the public applications of thought begin elsewhere, with other people. Children might also come to know that libraries and museums exist for exactly this kind of transformation by deepening what we think about, and how we think about, differences. If a nation is capable of becoming engaged in this immense work of rediscovering itself and its forms of trust, its people must be thinking with each other.

So: think with me. We need to replace ruthlessness and selfish individualism with becoming something together. As we can see in pockets of our past, it will not be the first time we have done this. It will begin with stories told in places where we live, to others who sit near us. Over time, we all will be unafraid to speak in the safe places we have made for discoveries, reflections, and voices. If we teach ourselves to speak, listen and think together, our places, our libraries, our museums, even the noblest and least corrupted places on the web, will open us to ourselves -- to something courageous within ourselves -- and move us toward the possibilities of self-rescue that every civilization needs.

Recently, an opportunity to speak in Portland, Oregon, brought me to that beautiful city, where, in the Portland Art Museum, we saw a transformation mask, worn in sacred dancing of the Kwakwaka'wakw [“Kwalk-walk-ya-walk-wuh”] people, made in the late Nineteenth Century of red cedar and fur. The transformation mask is two masks, one within another. This particular outer mask is a dark, heavy browed face of the animal world. The inner mask is a human face, mortal, wide-eyed, seeming to be taking in an astonished breath as he is revealed by awe, the human within the animal spirit. I was moved to contemplate this image of transition from form to form, animal to person, person to animal, as I envisioned the dance. Each of us, I think, wears a mask covering a more human face within. Of our lives, I ask how might we best -- we who assist others to open themselves -- act with courage in our culture.

We can never assume that the future requires no inspiration, or that our thinking is of little consequence, that our gifts of memory and fabrication, being merely personal, do not have infinite dimensions or consequences for citizenship. We are not without our masks, and we are adept at hiding our faces. And yet we too can be revealed in awe. Of museums and libraries, I hope it will be said in the future,
Even though people were uncertain, they were unafraid to question together for the common good, using institutions where knowledge was treasured. They identified the unknown and worked to illuminate it. They helped to reconfigure fears and doubts into previously invisible strengths and possibilities.

Cultural institutions are places for the renewal of lives by other lives, the construction of ideas by other ideas, and the generation of thoughts by other thoughts. Therefore they are about friction and transformation. They attend to the places, both grand and humble, where we have made ourselves safe from autocracy, authoritarianism, and theft of the revealing, inquiring spirit. I encourage you to take up advocacy for a renewed era of public thoughts and explorations, ways of knowing and becoming stronger together, beyond schools and teachers, in the continuities of life as it is lived. I believe that there is useful, enticing and provocative thinking to be done in this living experience, and it all will begin with the words that invite: think with me.