

The Arts Don't Just Heal, They Also Unify and Inspire Action, Dec, 2017 Huffington Post

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I have been playing a lot of piano lately - my antidote for when I am feeling low, or my energy source for when I am working through challenges. This election season has brought to light challenges in our country, divides that I have always believed the arts can bridge. And so I find myself sitting at the keyboard and playing tunes by artists I admire like Bob Dylan, or trying out some dark Leonard Cohen pieces on guitar, or writing some of my own poetry in order to help me get from one state of mind to another. It also makes me imagine how to better convey the power of the arts during these difficult times as part of the solution for our country, much like my own art does for me. It doesn't matter whether I am great at it. It matters that I immerse myself in this different creative and healing space. The American poet William Carlos Williams once wrote that "it is difficult to get the news from poems yet men die miserably every day for lack of what is found there" - the line has always been a favorite.

And so for this holiday season I am thankful for many things, including my long-suffering piano teacher Mrs. Luted in Stoughton, Massachusetts, who for the two years I had lessons desperately tried to get me to actually read the notes and play what was on the page. And I am thankful daily for the poets and professors I learned from in college at UMass Amherst who encouraged my own writing and introduced me to William Carlos Williams, along with Langston Hughes, William Butler Yates, and Maya Angelou. Actually, I am thankful for every artist I have ever encountered and in whose work I have immersed myself even if only for a moment. My life is better because of their art. My work is better. My community is better too.

We are in a time once again where our need for the arts is growing more and more apparent. Controversy and anger and fear seem to swirl around us these days in large supply. This has happened plenty of times in our history. We have needed and sought the healing and teaching power of the arts for a long time, perhaps forever.

Who cannot read the words of Congressman John Lewis without better understanding the painful struggle in our history for equity and rights? Who cannot stand in front of Picasso's Guernica or read the last page of All Quiet on the Western Front or watch "Saving Private Ryan" without understanding the horror of war a bit more and feel the pain of those who suffered? Who cannot walk through the halls of our National Museum of the American Indian, or the stunning new National Museum of African American History and Culture, or the Holocaust Museum, without feeling differently about privilege and hate, and also feel more love and hope coming out at the end of the experience? Art helps us understand our tragedies and perhaps rethink our priorities. It always has.

We often go through life carrying personal tragedy and collective pain and grief very close to the chest, very privately despite the endless blather of bloggers and the angry outbursts of ideologues. In my family we had a tragedy this summer, the death of my wonderful young nephew Ian. We, especially my brother and sister-in-law, will never fully recover, but it was the music, dance, poetry, film, photography, and camaraderie through song and ritual that brought us all some solace and hope.

On a national scale we have just labored through an election that left many people confused. We have seen a rise in ugly racial statements and verbal and sometimes physical attacks on people perceived as 'other'—whether because of gender or sexual orientation or perceived disability or race—and they have left many people fearful and some feeling hopeless.

But again, here is where the arts and artists and every single art worker can help. Art fights hate and helps celebrate and interpret difference. Ford Foundation CEO Darren Walker says it well: "the greatest threat to our democracy is hopelessness."

While I don't have easy or complete answers, I work in an organization and field that is steadfast in the belief that the ability to live a full, equitable, and creative life is a basic human right.

Americans for the Arts will continue to advocate, convene, and educate with and for all people in this new administration, as well as in states and local communities across the country. Art gives hope. Art fights injustice. But we ALL must fight for the freedom and resources for artists and arts organizations to unify us, bridge community differences and create places of understanding and healing.