

Thinking Must Shift on Arts

By Susan V. Booth

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We hold these truths to be self-evident....

Bold words. Nation-founding words.

Our forefathers got it. No caveats, no exceptions.

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

I was asked if I would write something about the importance of arts funding in light of a season that saw critical cries for help from some of our most-valued theaters, and the eventual shuttering of an institution with a 30-year history, Marietta’s Theatre in the Square.

If you’re connecting the dots and anticipating the cry that those institutions and their artists have had their rights stepped on, this isn’t that story.

Nor is this the argument that perhaps supply and demand has had its day in the cultural arena, and institutional Darwinism has run its course.

No, this is a modest proposal for a fundamental shift in our thinking.

Core to the pursuit of any happiness is an understanding of self.

Core to the pursuit of compassionately shared happiness within any community is an understanding of other.

Key to obtaining either is a capacity for reflective introspection and empathetic imagination. These aren’t standalone, academic pursuits.

If you’re a baby boomer, you won’t find coursework on introspection and imagination in the Three Rs, and if you’re a Gen X, Y or millennial, you won’t find it in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics).

But regardless of generation, profession, ideology or ZIP code, chances are you’re a daily practitioner and beneficiary of introspection and imagination — because the capacity to understand yourself and the other guy flows through and is essential to everything we do.

So where’d you learn it? Where’s your kid going to learn it?

One of the most impressive outcomes of arts exposure is a metric nobody thought to measure.

In UCLA's longitudinal study Champions of Change, there was an unexpected finding that accompanied the links between arts exposure and improved results in standardized tests, classroom leadership and attendance: Kids with significant exposure to the arts were 40 percent less likely to practice or countenance intolerant language or behavior toward their culturally different peers.

Those same arts-exposed kids were 40 percent more likely to count as friends kids who were culturally different than they were.

Turns out that a culturally robust community is a curious and compassionate community.

The supply-and-demand question isn't really about a supply of cultural organizations and a demand for the arts.

And as long as we keep arts-funding relegated to that small definition, we will always have cries for financial help and imperiled institutions.

But were we to acknowledge that our shared need for introspection and empathy flows through every facet of our daily lives and is therefore essential for us to support, then perhaps we'd stop talking about arts funding and start talking about humanity funding.

That's a hard notion to quantify in a budget line — whether on one's personal balance sheet or that of a civic entity.

But if we held the truth to be self-evident that armed with deep knowledge of self and other, we will build a better community, then perhaps this would be the one investment we'd never question.

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