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Shanti Foundation Conference: Building Peaceful Communities Through the Arts
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Out of The Box

I'm very happy to be here this morning, welcomed by the Shanti Foundation, an organization whose very name means peace. There are many ways to define peace, and all of them are in some sense true. But I find myself reluctant to settle for the word's smallest meaning, which is the absence of conflict. This conference's purpose—demonstrating creativity's power to generate a culture of peace—demands far more than an absence. It requires us to embrace the larger sense of peace which is conveyed in the Hebrew word *Shalom* and the Arabic word *Salaam*, close cognates. Both words encompass peace in its narrow meaning, but they also signify wholeness, integrity, and fulfillment.

In just the same way, I want to talk with you today about rejecting the view that puts community arts work, community cultural development, in a too-small box labeled “nice but inconsequential.” I hope to persuade you to accept the much larger and more exciting view you will take in throughout this conference, showing you how the work of deeply committed and talented community artists has enormous potential to create community and nurture peace, a power far beyond most of the conventional interventions people keep trying over and over again, despite their evident failure.

A chief reason for this is that artistic creativity embodies wholeness, aligning our bodies, minds and spirits in the creation of beauty and meaning. Regardless of the particular objective—helping to rebuild a shattered community or strengthen a shattered mind, making an equal place in the social fabric for every community without privileging some at others' expense, surfacing buried history, stimulating social imagination and social engagement—wholeness is the underlying aim. Like every act, the creation of wholeness must begin in imagination. Working with other community members, community artists can help a culture of peace into being, building outward from imagination.

In the introduction to my book *New Creative Community*, I mentioned the rioting that had plagued French suburbs in 2005—violent clashes between young immigrants and the police. I described how the *New York Times* carried an article by Alan Riding entitled, “In France, Artists Have Sounded the Warning Bells for Years.” Riding pointed out that musicians and other artists had consistently predicted this conflict, whereas newspapers and politicians had “variously expressed shock and surprise, as if the riots were as unpredictable as a natural disaster.”

I do not think artists are better or smarter than other people. But clearly, artists, especially artists whose work is grounded in connection to community, are adept at pulling back the curtain of official denial to expose what's wrong. For a long, fear-ridden, harrowing time in this post-9/11 period, many have trained our attention on social crimes and their consequences, often believing that if we point to a problem with enough energy and force, people will be moved to respond. But this runs counter to one great insight coming from community arts work, that it is not pain that mobilizes people so much as the prospect of a remedy. The times call on everyone in society to use our gifts to defuse paralyzing fear, calling attention instead to our individual and collective power to create something better in its place. This call is being echoed in every realm of human knowledge, but community arts activity answers it more fully and effectively than any other practice.

As we discover more about the human brain, for instance, our understanding of the role of cultural expression deepens. Brain scans tell us that when we remember or imagine experience, our brains act very much as they do when we enact the same experience with our bodies. Athletes have made good use of this information, training in their imaginations for the feats of physical prowess they will perform in actual competition. Artists know this too: when we weep at the death or rejoice at the triumph of a character in a book, play or film, it's not because we've developed a deep attachment to that fictional person. It's that by allowing ourselves to enter imaginatively into the story, our capacity for empathy and compassion activates the same neurological impulses as when we experience a real loss or gain in our own lives.

If our higher purpose is to develop communities grounded in possibility, compassion, and connection, we need to deepen our ability to imagine these things. There is no more powerful way to do that than by making art that rehearses the future we wish to help into being. Let me describe two such projects I wrote about in *New Creative Community*:

In 2005, the Ukiah Players Theatre, a community-oriented group in rural northern California, inaugurated The PlaceMeant Project, focusing on the meanings particular places within the community hold for people who make it their home. UPT offered writing and digital storytelling workshops, guiding participants through a series of discussions and exercises to create vivid, compelling stories about a local place that has meaning for them. Participants of all ages included Pomo Indians whose ancestors have lived on that land for countless years; newly arrived members of the local Latino community, some still learning English; several residents who arrived during the "back-to-the-land" era of the 1970s, as well their children, second-generation back-to-the-landers; and members of old farming and timber families. Their writings became the narration for brief sound-and-image digital stories created by participants.

Workshops further developed the material into a live dramatic presentation for the community: digital stories were projected on two screens juxtaposed with live performance combining spoken word and movement, presented by a diverse cast of 25 community members. The production coincided with an important event in the life of the community: an unprecedented proposal for development was being debated in city and

county boardrooms, calling for a 700-unit housing development and a super-size “big box” retail park, a potentially huge impact on a rural community. The production was cited repeatedly in community meetings, according to its organizers, helping to “focus public conversations on our collective responsibility to not only protest unwise development, but, more importantly, to work together as a community to imagine and manifest the kind of growth that allows for the development of housing, industry and jobs, while preserving the agricultural nature and beauty of the region.”

I also wrote about dozens of artists and groups whose task is to reveal connectedness and ignite possibility, such as Cornerstone Theater’s Faith-Based Cycle of plays mounted in collaboration with diverse spiritual communities in Los Angeles. Let me read you just a bit about it:

The project kicked off with a festival of 21 original plays at Hsi Lai Buddhist Temple; the Los Angeles Baha’i Center; the Faith United Methodist Church; Temple Emmanuel, a Jewish synagogue; and New Horizons School, a private Islamic school. Among the many plays developed and performed in the five-year cycle of story circles and collaborations were *Beyond the Jordan*, a collaboration with Arab Catholics; *As Vishnu Dreams*, a Hindu community collaboration; *Center of the Star*, a Jewish community collaboration; *Body of Faith*, involving the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community members of many faiths; *Order My Steps*, a collaboration with African-American clergy and African-Americans affected by HIV and AIDS; and *You Can’t Take It With You: An American Muslim Remix*, a Muslim community collaboration. The project surfaced many deeply controversial issues, such as acceptance of gay men and lesbians within conservative faith communities, fostering countless hours of community dialogue.¹

Community cultural development work is many things: activism, art, community-building, enterprise, and much more. Lately, I have been thinking more and more of community arts work as a form of spiritual practice, regardless of subject matter. Art and spirit both focus on meaning, which makes them extremely compatible. Exercising our creativity magnifies our sense of connection, just as when we engage with spirit to declare the holiness of life. When we make art together, we collectively create sacred space, generating feelings also evoked in worship. We breathe deeply, we see more, we feel more alive and less alone. When artists understand our practice as spiritually enlarging, as helping to heal the world—whether we are creating a play or a mural or making a film together or collecting oral histories to disseminate through a Web site—then the practice itself reminds us of our connection, our power and the beauty of our voices in spite of all the forces telling us to sit down and shut up.

¹ *New Creative Community: The Art of Cultural Development*, New Village Press, 2006, pp. 134-136.

Community arts work is a powerful social healing modality, something we know both from our own experience and from the work of scientists who are learning more and more about how our brains process trauma, how we do or don't recover from psychic injuries. Traumatic abuse insults every aspect of our humanity: the traumatized person, the traumatized community, is disrespected, used, harmed, shamed, blamed, made to feel worthless and dispensable. We know that it can be healing for a traumatized person to tell his or her story in fullness and in detail, so long as the telling is received in a way that's in strong disparity to the original trauma. If in retelling the story, anything evoking those insults is again experienced, the result is more likely to be a repetition of the injury than its healing. For healing to begin, the story must be received with respect, presence and caring, something much more likely to happen in a context of creativity and wholeness than a courtroom or an office.

The same is true in healing social trauma. There are many sore spots in the global cultural matrix, old bruises where people have been told they are less than full citizens of the world, even less than fully human. One of the tasks of cultural development in this time is to help heal those injuries.

I am inspired by work such as the Documentary Project for Refugee Youth, mentioned in *New Creative Community*. It was designed as a collaboration among young refugees, the Global Action Project, the International Rescue Committee and other community organizations and artists in New York City. The twelve young refugees who make up the project's core group were from Sierra Leone, Bosnia, Burundi and Serbia. In September 2001, the group began working together to share and understand their own experiences, collect testimonies from others, learn photography, write and create powerful short films. Here's how one participant described the healing and empowering impact of this work on her own life:

I felt like there is no person who suffered more than me. But then, talking to other people and finding out that it's not just me, that it's half the world. Before I didn't know there were so many conflicts and wars, and now that I know, and have the opportunity to do something about it, I want to let other people know.

Rebbe Nachman of Bratslov, the great 18th century teacher, said that "The antidote to despair is to remember the world to come." This is a paradox: how can we remember what has not yet happened? He meant it this way: that the antidote to despair is a taste of a perfected world, imagining the experiences that remind us what it is to feel entirely alive and connected. This can happen in those peak moments that evoke our sense of "radical amazement," in Abraham Joshua Heschel's wonderful phrase: standing at the edge of the ocean or Grand Canyon, holding a newborn, staring into the heart of a rose or the eyes of the beloved. It can also happen whenever we are at once most human and most godlike: in the flow of creativity, when—as Paulo Freire said—we speak our own words in our own voice, when we name the world, when we proclaim our desires and visions. When we make art.

Both science and spirituality point to one of our tasks as artists and cultural activists: to help generate the conditions for deep social healing, to use our aesthetic and social creativity to create containers for loving witness, to promote understanding and compassion so the traumas that divide us can be shared and healed.

When we make art ourselves, and when we teach, support and invite others to dive into the ocean of creativity, we administer an antidote to the epidemic fear and despair we can catch from the daily news. We are helping our fellow human beings to imagine, rehearse and prepare for the world of beauty, connection and meaning we all wish to inhabit.

What higher work is there?

The Shanti Foundation's call to this conference speaks of "diverse, collaborative and healthy communities" exemplifying "nonviolence and inclusion." This aim is as resonant in the global arena as in our own neighborhoods. Consider that when the United Nations was formed in 1945, there were 51 member nations; today there are 192, nearly 50 of which have joined in the last 30 years. This growth is almost entirely due to former colonies and sub-national groupings taking their place in the family of independent nations, from Viet Nam in 1977 to Eritrea and Macedonia in 1993, Tonga in 1999, and Montenegro last year. They may not all be models of civil society (who is?), but their existence is solidly grounded in the right to culture enshrined in the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Even as globalization—with both its positive and negative effects—is shrinking our world, the flowering of our differences is enriching it beyond imagining. This idea was expressed so beautifully by the novelist Carlos Fuentes twenty years ago that his lines have become a sort of prayer for me. Fuentes said that ours is an era of "the emergence of cultures as protagonists of history," necessitating

a re-elaboration of our civilizations in agreement with our deeper, not our more ephemeral, traditions. Dreams and nightmares, different songs, different laws, different rhythms, long-deferred hopes, different shapes of beauty, ethnicity and diversity, a different sense of time, multiple identities rising from the depths of the polycultural and multiracial worlds of Africa, Asia and Latin America. ...

This new reality, this new totality of humankind, presents enormous new problems, vast challenges to our imaginations. They open up the two-way avenue of all cultural reality: giving and receiving, selecting, refusing, recognizing, acting in the world: not being merely subjected to the world.²

² Carlos Fuentes, *Latin America: At War With The Past*, Massey Lectures, 23rd Series, CBC Enterprises, 1985, pp. 71–72.

Fuentes is right to point to “the emergence of cultures as protagonists of history.” The question of whether they are protagonists in a tragedy or triumph is not settled. But if we understand peace in its largest sense of wholeness, then every person in this room, with our aesthetic and social imaginations, with the potential to understand culture’s role in bringing about pluralism, participation and equity—the goals of cultural democracy—has a role to play in settling that question on the side of triumph.

Even the world of commerce is pointing us in the same direction. Today, we see the rise of new forms of knowledge economy, new forms of entrepreneurialism shaped in part by a commitment to global cultural citizenship. The people who started Google, for instance, were not trained to do so in a university or apprenticeship. Indeed, when they began to spin their dreams of social and commercial connectivity, no one could have trained them to create what had not yet been imagined. Today we see new public-private partnerships such as the Ashoka Foundation, named for an Indian emperor who 2300 years ago was so appalled at the waste and slaughter of war that he embraced Buddhism, made nonviolence official public policy, and dedicated himself to healing the land and people. Ashoka’s goal is to engage both businesses and philanthropies in supporting social entrepreneurship in many realms, including the arts, with the goal of making everyone a changemaker.

Looking at peace in the largest sense, I hope you will agree that what we need now are social and cultural changemakers, entrepreneurs of meaning who know how to look deeply, understanding, as Dr. Martin Luther King said, that “Everything that we see is a shadow cast by that which we do not see.” In the community arts work I have mentioned this morning, and the work you will see and discuss later today, culture is a crucible for social transformation, one that is almost always less polarizing and enables deeper connections than other social-change arenas. And cultural expression is a means of emancipation, not a primary end in itself: the process is as important as the product. At its best, the key aims of this work are to deepen self-knowledge in relationship to community, to help develop a sense of agency, to create full cultural citizenship. It may seem surprising that work undertaken with these primary aims so often produces something beautiful and moving. But consider that excellence in art is to a large degree a function of commitment, of presence. When we bring our whole selves—heart, mind and spirit—to the work, it soars.

As you look at and discuss this work during the balance of the conference, I ask you to keep something in mind. Pay attention not only to the images and words used to describe projects, but to the underlying principles that inform the work. Ask yourself this: if this work were freed from the too-small box I described at the beginning of my talk as “nice but inconsequential,” if people could really take in all that it is and all that it does, if—as funders like to say—we could take it to scale, if millions of people could experience in their own bodies, minds and spirits the full reality of cultural citizenship, how big and powerful could the resulting social transformation be?

Shalom, Salaam, Shanti. May peace be with you.