

Opening Remarks

“Building Peaceful Communities Through the Arts”

Friday October 19, 2007

Speaker: Wendy Colby, Shanti Foundation for Peace
Indira Johnson, Shanti Foundation for Peace
Arlene Goldberg, Shanti Foundation for Peace

Topic: Introduction/ Conference Welcome

Session Notes:

Good morning and welcome – Wendy introduces Indira Johnson
How Wendy met Indira. Wendy comes from a family of artists and was exposed to rich cultural diversity early on. Went to college with many international students. They hosted international nights – dinners, music, poetry.

Reflecting on the panel discussion – we need the advocates and champions in our society to promote the arts in our communities.

Indira Johnson founded Shanti in 1993. Indira comes from a family of artists. Her family has sat with Mother Teresa. She is a nationally acclaimed artist. She knows that the same skills used for art making are the ones used for peace-making. Welcome to Indira.

Indira: Welcome to all. We have come together to listen, learn, and share our ideas on how to build peaceful communities through the arts. We are very pleased to have so many people attending. The emphasis on peaceful is not just the absence of violence. It is more of a strategy. Peace is an action verb. The art that Shanti creates focuses on process. Using hands, imagination and creativity to make art allows us to break down barriers and promote a world of tolerance and peace.

Yesterday generated a lot of good conversation. We want to continue the conversation today.

The conference involved the visions and work of many contributors. Thanks to: Advisory Council, the generosity of Chicago Cultural Center and Jane

Adams Hull House, thanks to sponsors and donors, to community partners who invited us into their communities and shared their ideas. We look forward to continued relationship with these communities. Thanks to Deanna Shoss. Special thanks to the Shanti board and the Shanti Staff, especially Melanie Schikore Andina. Thanks to Shanti artists. Thanks to volunteers.

You all are the ones who are going to make the conference a success.

Background Information on Arlene Goldbard:

Thinking about how place informs our sentiment and our art. Arlene is a writer and consultant from California. She has a book published by New Village Press. Articles published in many journals, has provided advice and council to countless community organizations, media groups, academics, etc. "I was inspired by the things she said related to the challenges we face in our schools. In relation to the policies in place in our schools."

Arlene's speech:

Arlene speaks of how there are many ways to define peace, all of them being true. The conference that we have all come to attend demands more than just an absence of violence, it requires us as artists/activists to embrace a bigger meaning. Shalom, as Goldbard states, signifies wholeness, integrity, and fulfillment.

We want to accept the view that the work of a community artist has the capability to spread peace. Artistic creativity embodies wholeness, regardless of the objective, wholeness is the underlying goal. Like every act, the creation of wholeness must begin in imagination. In the introduction of Goldbard's book, "New Creative Community" she describes how the New York Times describes a riot conflict in France. Artists are adept at pulling back the curtain of denial to expulse what is wrong. Community arts work gives us the insight that it's not pain that moves people, so much as the prospect of peace.

Goldbard shares how brain scans tell us that when we remember experiences, our brains function similarly as when we enact these experiences. Artists know this, thus by allowing ourselves to enter imaginatively into a story our compassion and empathy match the feeling of when we experience a real loss in our own lives.

In her book, Goldbard presents two projects: Akiah Players Theater project in N. California, where participants from all different backgrounds wrote stories that became narrated and developed into a digital presentation and live performance. The production coincided with an important proposal for a housing development and retail park, which would make a huge impact on the rural community

The second project involved artists in L.A. who put on a series of plays at religious houses. The project surfaced many deeply controversial issues, fostering countless hours of community dialogue.

By thinking more and more of community artwork as a spiritual practice. When we make art together, we collaboratively create sacred space. When artists understand our practice as spiritually enlarging, then the practice itself reminds us of our connection, power, despite the people telling us to sit down and shut up. We know that it can be healing for a traumatized person to tell their story as long as there is disparity from the original event. Same is true in healing social trauma. One of the tasks of cultural development at this time is to heal the old social wounds, where people told they were less than citizens or less than humans.

Goldbard states, "the antidote to despair, is the taste of a perfected world, imagining the experience of what it is to feel entirely connected and entirely alive." It can happen when we are most human and most godlike - when we make art. Both science and spirituality point to one of our tasks as artists to promote understanding and compassion so the traumas that divide us can be healed.

We are helping our fellow human beings to imagine, rehearse, find a better life. Shanti's aim is as resonant in the global arena as it is in our own

neighborhoods. To develop growth and action within U.N. nation participants. Even as globalization is shrinking our world, the flowering of our differences, is enriching it beyond imagination.

Fuentes is right to point to the emergence of cultures as protagonists of history. Even the world of commerce is pointing us in the same direction. We see the rise of new forms of entrepreneurialism. For example, the creators of Google did something new.

Next Steps:

Looking at peace in the largest sense, what we need are social and cultural change makers. Entrepreneurs. Cultural expression is a means of emancipation. The process is always as important as the product. Excellence in art, is to a large degree a function of commitment, of presence, when we bring our whole selves to the work, pay attention to not only the images and words of the art, but the underlying principles that inform the work you see at this conference. Shalom, Salaam, Shanti, Peace be with you.

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