



SUNDAY, JULY 10, 2011

## Interview with Bill Cleveland - Part I

Good morning.

"And the beat goes on....."

### The Role of the Arts in Community Building and a Better Society

Published last year, **Bill Cleveland** co-authored / edited the work [Between Grace and Fear – The Role of the Arts in a Time of Change](#) – 30 interviews with a variety of people and perspectives - all centered on this focus: “the role that artists and arts organizations should play in contributing to a more just and sustainable society.”

I think Bill is one of our sector’s better thinkers. An activist, teacher, lecturer and musician, he also directs the [Center for the Study of Art and Community](#), located on Bainbridge Island, in Washington state.

I found the book fascinating and challenging – and the chance to consider the really bigger issues for the arts instead of always focusing on funding, audience development and the more pedestrian tasks we deal with daily - an exciting proposition. Bill agreed to an interview, and we went back and forth over a several month period trying to make some sense of the role of the arts in community development, and building that more sustainable society. One thought led to another, then to another. At the end, we were left with more unanswered questions and ever newer paths of inquiry. Such is the task of discussing the role of the arts in the world.

I tried (as I do in every interview) to play “devil’s advocate”, to

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provoke the subject, and to encourage candor (while trying to let the person say what they have to say in their own words without too much insertion of my own thinking) -- and while much of what Bill had to say made me wonder about things, I found myself more frequently in agreement with him than doubting or questioning his positions and ideas.

I think (and hope) this interview will spur your philosophical thinking about the role the arts play in both responding to, and shaping, our world. We should all spend some time in consideration of the bigger picture, if for no other reason than it helps to frame the more mundane aspects of our work. This is a long interview, and so I am going to break it into three parts and post one part today, another Wednesday and the final entry on Friday of this week. The first part tries to establish some common vocabulary and the context for discussing the role of the arts in world change.

One of the assumptions for *Between Grace and Fear* is that there is a major shift taking place in society's worldview, and that's where we started this interview:

**BARRY:** If a major shift in worldview is taking place, what role might society's arts and cultural resources (artists, arts institutions, and cultural creatives) play -- both in the formation of that changing worldview and in its final incarnation?

**BILL:** I don't think you can point to one thing that art does in response to the shifting sands of human history. The evolution of human consciousness, which I believe has been and is taking place, (albeit incredibly slowly), is very much a three steps forward-two steps back kind of a dance. Art making is an intrinsic part of that boogie -- provoking, documenting, celebrating and reflecting on the pushing and the pulling, which of course, depending on where you stand, can be construed as either going forward or backward.

One of the core questions we asked the interviewees for *Between Grace and Fear* was whether they thought we were entering a uniquely profound period of change, either in the material sense

*Government students should read this as an insight into decision-making as Barry explains how government and groups interact with one another at all levels. Hardball is definitely not a book to collect dust but one to get dog-eared, highlighted, debated and used."*

*Representative Adam Schiff, U.S. Congress, 29<sup>th</sup> District, California*

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or, in consciousness. There was pretty much a consensus that major transformations were taking place.

**BARRY:** But is there really a worldview shift going on? Some might argue that major transformations are taking place in some places, with some segments of society, but not necessarily universally. Also some of the transformations may be movements backwards, not forwards. And isn't promotion of profound changes in thinking one of the roles of art historically? Does art move worldviews or react to them?

**BILL:** Like I said, "*three steps forward, two steps back.*" (That's the glass have full version) For more pessimistic souls it's probably the other way around. When I refer to major transformations I am not inferring any particular qualitative directional judgment to these shifts. I'm just saying that things like the rapid re-structuring of the world economy, the pace and scope of population shifts through migration and dislocation, the impact of technology on communication and knowledge making, the rapid pace of climate change, and the impending water wars are all happening simultaneously and gaining speed. Any way you look at it, millions of people around the globe are having their worldview challenged in some pretty profound ways. Some folks are confused, some are digging in or fighting, some are responding in very creative ways.

Over the last two decades or so I have been privileged to see, first hand, how some of these things have been playing out in the US and overseas. I've seen it in prison systems, through democratic revolution and post conflict reconstruction, and through political and social upheaval. Is it all good? Of course not. Is stuff moving, changing, and mutating everywhere? Absolutely. The greatest impediment to positive change is lack of inertia. Authoritarian dictatorships are inertia killing machines. The second greatest impediment to positive change is missed opportunities when tectonic plates start moving. All I'm saying is that the plates are moving. The question is whether we will be nimble enough to make a new dance or will we just end up on our butts. There are folks in the arts tribe who have

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Barry, you've hit on a big one. I think it is a problem and a growing one since the economy fell apart in 2008. The resulting financial problems caused a radical increase of ED-identified Board...

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Note: I am posting this comment on behalf of C. Reed who had trouble entering it via Safari on the Apple format. If anyone else has experienced similar problems, please let me know. thanks. Barry...

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Barry: I have seen this a lot - too often - in my work with nonprofits over the last 30 years. If we get at the heart of the issue then we have to admit that it's the system itself that is to...

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Thanks so much, Barry, for the mention and kind words. All three parts of my arts funding series are now up at <http://arlenegoldbard.com/category/cultural-issues/life-implicates-art/>.

#### [Barry wrote...](#)

There is a thin line to walk here I think. On the one hand, political success often depends on the ability of a special interest group (and that is exactly what we are) to cultivate and motivate...

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pretty good sense of balance and function quite well in change constant environments.

Whether we are entering a particularly exceptional chapter was another story. Some observed that humans have always perceived their moment in the sun as the great hinge of history. Others pointed to our abuse of the earth and its consequences as epochal enough to make the grade as a singular, if not “the singular moment” in human history. They all agreed though, with our contention that human creativity has been the central mechanism for both the rendering of, and our reflection on, the human footprint.

As to the causes and effects of worldview, David Korten provided us with a useful frame both in our discussions and in his own book “*The Great Turning*”. He posits that over the past five millennia the dominant way of thinking about how the world works has been propagated through a series of stories about how prosperity, security, and meaning are created. These stories, which he calls the Empire stories, favor concentration of power and wealth over more equitable forms of living. There is no escaping the fact that artists have been as much a part of shaping this narrative, as they have been involved in challenging it. One of the major themes that emerged in all of our interviews was that new stories are needed to provide the foundation for new beliefs about the planet and our place on it. Another was that this significant shift in human consciousness is not possible without the participation of the world’s story makers.

**BARRY:** Sometimes I think use of the word and concept of "stories" can be very confusing. It's hard to come up with any consensus on what that necessarily means, and so I wonder if assertions about storytelling are valid, or that the mechanism is truly useful.

**BILL:** You are right, to a point. The words "story" and "story telling" have suffered the same fate as words like "art" and "community." Nevertheless we use them and confusion ensues. So, it might be helpful for me to say what I mean by story. Although I think storytelling, in the traditional sense is a

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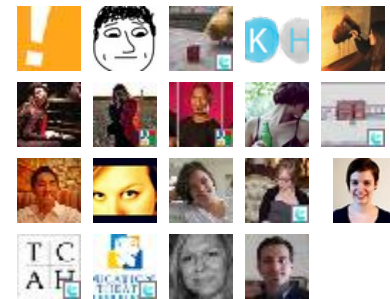
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venerable and powerful art form, when I speak of story I am talking much more broadly. From my perspective, the story is the most complex and powerful form of human information sharing and communication - combining the complexities of human consciousness and character with time and place and events built on, and reinforced by a foundation of assumptions about the way the world works. The web of stories that comprise community or tribal identity is sometimes referred to as a story field. Tom Atlee one of the sponsors of the Story Field Conference describes it as “the frame that defines what we think is real, acceptable, and possible, and directly shapes our lives and our world, often, without our even being aware of it. He is in alignment with David Korten on the seminal power of story in his belief that when you “change the story field of a culture and we change what is real, acceptable, and possible...”

The stories that infuse and influence our lives come in many forms; image, song, conversation, through curricula, worship, holidays, street names, social norms... the list is endless. I sometimes like to point out that everything that surrounds us, animate and inanimate, is connected in some way to the vast web of stories that forms our world view.

The "stories" Korten refers to are Meta stories or worldview constructs (or frames). Here is a short version of his ""Security" construct.

**"EMPIRE STORY:** We depend on decisive, righteous rulers with strong police and military powers to secure our liberty and social order from enemies foreign and domestic and extract retribution from those who do us harm as a warning to other miscreants. Those who oppose the righteous rulers who protect us from our enemies are also our enemies as they threaten the moral and social order.

**EARTH COMMUNITY STORY:** Beware the self-righteous who seek positions of absolute power to impose their personal version of the moral order in the name of liberty. They are prone to use the police and military powers of the state to secure their own power and privilege in disregard of the rights and

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#### ABOUT ME

#### [BARRY](#)

Former Director of the California Arts Council; President of the California Assembly of Local Arts Agencies; Executive Director LINES Ballet. Author (Hardball Lobbying for Nonprofits - MacMillan & Co.; Youth Involvement in the Arts - 2 phase study for the Hewlett Foundation; Local Arts Agency Funding Study for the Aspen Institute; City Arts Toolkit), consultant, public speaker.

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#### SOCIABLE

well-being of others. Retribution against those who challenge them perpetuates violence and strengthens Empire. Social order, freedom and physical safety are best secured by vital caring communities that build trust, share risks, and create resilience in the face of crisis. Healing troubled relationships eliminates the cause of violence and strengthens Earth Community."



# WESTAF

Whether one agrees with his analysis or his alternative "story, this concept of "story" or "worldview frame" is, to my mind a useful way to understand the dynamics and power of belief systems and the role of stories in their development. Stories from history, religion, marketing messages, and most importantly, those that are embedded in thousands of years of art have influenced, and continue to influence, what we believe to be true.

Here are my two versions of the Creativity Story from Between Grace and Fear:

*Empire: Most people are not very creative. This is because creativity is a gift, like being smart or having a talent. It is also kind of magical, and not particularly well understood. There is no disputing that creative people are valuable, but unfortunately they do not have the discipline necessary for strong leadership. This is because they are often unorthodox and unpredictable. It's good for scientists, engineers, and designers to be creative. But learning how to make art or becoming an artist is not very practical or useful. Art can be important, but it's not basic like shelter or food or education. Some artwork can be valuable, beautiful, or inspiring, but it is often so difficult to comprehend that someone else needs to tell us what is going on. All in all, everyday people really don't have much to do with art or creativity.*

This second piece provides the alternative that lens I think is needed to move art and creativity from the margins to the middle of community life.

*Humans are essentially creative beings. Our creativity is*

*naturally occurring and massively abundant. It is also the most powerful of human capacities. By the age of four, every child has employed it to learn the language, symbol, and social structures that they will depend on for the rest of their lives. An arts-centered education is necessary for each person's full development. We use the creative process every time we apply our basic skills to solve problems, communicate complex ideas, and envision the future. We need our creativity to help us build caring, capable, and sustainable communities. Art making too is an intrinsic and pervasive human activity. It is one of the most powerful tools we have for engaging the imagination and strengthening our creative capacities. It is also extremely useful. Art helps us commemorate, celebrate, mediate, communicate, entertain, worship, heal, design, initiate, and learn. Art helps us make sense and meaning in our complex world. We use art to tell our stories, explore the mysteries, and articulate our dreams.*

BARRY: In your conclusion to the book you talk about A Perpetual Revolution. Has it been a revolution or more of an evolution?

BILL: It's been an evolution of course, but then what we call revolutions are usually shifts in the tectonic plates of history responding to long evolving dynamic social, political and economic tensions that have been building up over time. Unfortunately, as our capacity for material change has increased exponentially so has the build-up of historic forces that manifest these abrupt evolutionary moments. We are now at a place in history where the tremors are fairly regular and constant, or perpetual. Our real struggle, of course, is that human consciousness has not kept pace. And the implication for the arts of that is what?

Given the developments in the middle east (Egypt, Tunisia, Bahrain, Syria, Libya etc.) perhaps we need to consider the phenomenon and how what is going on (including such things as China's recent reaction in arresting one their foremost - and outspoken - artists) in terms of global shifts, and whether or not art itself goes through similar phases when there

is an explosion that results in fundamental change.

Our artistic history is a reflection of the history of the world and often provides a powerful alternative lens into the dynamics of human events. But, artists whose work is meaningful in the moment, or over the long haul, are not separate from or immune from the power of transformative events. Artists are citizens, who suffer in famine, lose family members in Tsunami's, and get arrested when they question the authority of depots.

BARRY: As the world becomes ever more interconnected, does the world not increasingly yearn to move towards a more insular, isolated, vivisected way of thinking about things – in part as a defense mechanism? Or does it move more in the other direction – towards community and shared purposes? Again the recent global experience may suggest something different.

BILL: Fear is a powerful motivator. (Just look at our most recent elections) The interconnected world can be stimulating and inspiring. It can also be overwhelming, particularly for those who experience the world as a constant bi-polar struggle between good and evil. When change manifests as political, social and economic intrusions that appear beyond ones control it can be shattering, threatening,--- fear producing. This can be as true for a middle-class Tea Party pensioner as it is for a Waziri tribesman.

You ask, “*Is the world moving towards a more isolated way of thinking,*” Unfortunately, for those who see the world through the lens of those dichotomous Empire stories the answer, increasingly, is yes. People are constantly being challenged to distinguish the “true” and the “real” from the relevant, the incomplete, the out of context, from lies and just plain trash. The interconnected world demands greater levels of perspicacity from everyone in its path. This is particularly hard when your powers of discernment are blinkered by a largely 2-D view of a 3-D world. Interconnectivity also means that there are bits and pieces of many worldviews coming at us all the time. As the pace



and volume of information and actual social, economic and political change increases (exponentially mind you) those historic tectonic pressures mount. Some folks flee or build a firewall of some kind; some huddle with the more like-minded, some switch channels entirely and join Al Qaeda or a militia.

BARRY: And how would you characterize the rise of social networking? Some might argue that the preoccupation with one's smallest tribe (really a tribe of one) while a prime example of interconnectedness, is also the opposite - a move inwardly with the self as the center of the universe and an obstacle to open intersections (*No I don't think I want to "friend you".....*)

BILL: Given the option to imagine that humans are not intrinsically interdependent, some homo sapiens will default to the "I am the center of a universe of my own making" mode. We are, of course doomed, if this delusion becomes the common worldview. But there is hope—great hope. And, believe it or not this is where the arts come in. It's not just me saying this. As we point out in the book, people like Daniel Pink, Paul Hawken, Thomas Freidman and Korten all point to human creativity as essential for changing course. For the most part, the scientists, philosophers, politicians, philanthropists, educators, community leaders, and art folks we interview in the book concur.

Here's why. The growth of a sustainable society needs more people who can navigate the 3-D highway, safely. To do this they need to be skilled in problem-solving, critical analysis, and holistic and systemic thinking. They need to be agile and assertive learners. They need to be able to suspend judgment, play nicely with others, and laugh at themselves. They also need to be both world citizens and as my co-author Pat Shifferd says, also "identify with a particular place or community... to help preserve the unique cultural traditions and natural landscape of that place." In short, we need a heaping dose of the most powerful of human capacities—our creativity. My friend Tou SaiKo Lee, who is a poet and organizer in Minneapolis calls these folks super-heroes---but not in the traditional sense, because he thinks with

a little work all of us can don a cape and leotards.

BARRY: While I couldn't agree with you more, there is a fundamental problem in asserting that the arts are the best / only / even a good path to the instilling / teaching / imparting those essential skills to people. We have made that claim for some time, without any real proof whatsoever. Perhaps if scientists were to argue that the arts are critical to accomplishment in their fields it would resonate better than people in the arts making that claim.

BILL: There is a big difference between how modern society defines "the arts" and the realm of human creativity that I think is essential to the advancement of human consciousness. I do not feel that "the arts" (or any other isolated area of human endeavor) is the answer, particularly in their current state. I do believe that the shift in worldview that needs to occur will require an unparalleled unleashing of imaginative discipline.

Many people who are not artists have harnessed these capacities in the 20th and 21st centuries to build and create amazing things and make a whole lot of money. At this point in time, though, human creativity needs to be applied differently.

We need a dramatic increase in creative horsepower aimed at a wide array of interconnected global issues like poverty, climate change, and HIV/AIDS. To do this we need to be very intentionally cultivating flexible, inquiry-based, adaptive learning capacities of our future citizens, our institutions, and the systems that connect them. It just so happens that the pedagogy needed to support a rapid growth of creative musculature has been around for a long time. A small glimmer of it can be found in what we call it arts education. Before our children enter formal schooling, creative inquiry is how they learn 60% of all they will ever know.

Artists know and understand how to exercise and apply this creative musculature. We don't have to invent a new technology to grow these capacities. It's already here and guess what, many scientists and social commentators are pointing this out. Daniel Pink's book, *A Whole New Mind*, is basically a summary of the

kind of exciting new research that is taking place on the frontiers of brain science, neuro-psychology, and sociology about the untapped potential of human creativity. Physicist Fritjof Capra, one of the pioneers of complexity theory has written three books that cite cutting edge research the biological and physical sciences to argue the creative impulses inherent to both natural and social systems defines what it means to be alive and conscious.

End of part I. Part II Wednesday.


***Don't Quit.***

***Barry***

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