

A R L E N E G O L D B A R D
W W W . A R L E N E G O L D B A R D . C O M
C E L L : 4 1 5 - 6 9 0 - 9 9 9 2 A R L E N E @ A R L E N E G O L D B A R D . C O M

This is the text of introductory remarks I offered at California Arts Advocates' Visioning Retreat, "Reframing the Role of the Arts in California," on 12 January 2010 in Sacramento.

The writer James Baldwin has been a huge inspiration to me this past year. I'm inspired by his steadfast persistence, despite tremendous obstacles, in knowing and being himself. He saw possibility everywhere, but no one would call him a Pollyanna. It takes courage to face loss, as he expressed in *Nobody Knows My Name*, writing, "Any real change implies the breakup of the world as one has always known it, the loss of all that gave one an identity, the end of safety." To move on, Baldwin knew, we must leave something behind.

We are here in our shared identity as "arts advocates." We have time to look hard at what that means and to move past even cherished notions that no longer serve. I've been asked for a few words to help open this retreat. My subject is embracing willingness to let go of whatever impedes real change.

Baldwin described himself as a witness, an identity many artists share. "In the church in which I was raised," he said, "you were supposed to bear witness to the truth. Now, later on, you wonder what in the world the truth is, but you do know what a lie is." Artists know how to see through illusion. It's not easy to turn that gaze on ourselves, but doing it together should help.

What false premises do arts advocates need to release now? About 30 years ago, mainstream U.S. arts advocates committed to a desperation strategy focusing on justifying arts expenditure through weak economic arguments and secondary benefits. Facing threat, chameleons change complexion to convince predators that they're really just oddly shaped leaves. Just so, many arts advocates abandoned the importance of free expression, the personal and social need for beauty and meaning, the social value of cultivating our intrinsic human desire to create, focusing instead on convincing opponents that art is really a clever strategy for raising test scores and tax revenues.

Mozart is good for babies, they said. Kids who play in the school orchestra are less likely to drop out—there's no separating cause from effect here, as those whose parents have more education are both less likely to drop out and more likely to join the orchestra. Mainstream advocacy groups have spent vast sums trumpeting the "economic multiplier effect," in which every dollar spent on theater tickets generates more dollars on parking and restaurants, multiplying jobs and taxes. This is true, as far as it goes. But the arts have no special claim: buy tickets to a dog show or nude lady mud wrestling, and you get the same result.

At every arts advocacy workshop, experts say we have to speak the language of legislators and corporations to succeed. Really? How's that working out? In constant dollars, the 1980 and 2009 NEA budgets were each \$155 million. But the FY 2009 budget should have been more than \$400 million just to equal the spending power of 1980.

We need to stop pretending that the debate over arts support is about budget cuts. Politicians consistently contrast spending on cultural development with things like school lunches or healthcare for the indigent. If you accept this frame for the debate—are the arts a good expenditure of funds compared to other public purposes?—it makes sense that arts advocates have been so focused on proving that arts funding is a productive public investment, not a net loss. But look at the numbers. It can't be about money per se, because the total allocation for the California Arts Council represented less than one-one thousandth of one percent of the state budget, a penny out of every \$100,000. It is less than one one-hundredth of one percent of state expenditure on prisons and associated costs alone.

When politicians say we can't afford arts funding, they are really trying to purchase public-opinion insurance as insulation against opposition to other, smaller cuts they will make in more popular public services. In symbolic speech, they are saying, *We lopped the head off all the really unnecessary things like arts before even trimming the fat from medical care or education.* And arts advocates have gone along with that pretense by failing to point out that it's not about school lunches, that our national priority is more punishment than nourishment. The U.S. has over seven million people in prison, on parole or probation, by far the highest number and higher incarceration rate on the planet, with the total of state spending alone equaling around \$52 billion.¹ Well over \$8 billion of that is California state funds. The National Priorities Project² calculates that the U.S. has spent more than \$952 billion on wars since 2001. That's roughly equal to two annual NEA budgets a day, seven days a week. The real question is who we are as a people, and whether we want to be known for our prodigious ability to punish, or our prodigious creativity—but that debate hasn't yet surfaced.

Unsurprisingly, sticking with these weak arguments hasn't reached those who don't have a direct stake in the cause. Arts advocates are seen as beneficiaries lobbying for their own interests. To have a chance of succeeding on that basis takes tremendous capital, either to buy political clout or command vast marketing resources.

The alternative is to assemble an interest-group so encompassing that almost everyone feels engaged. We'll spend these days talking about how to do that. But first, I hope we will support each other in letting go of what no longer serves us, making space for real change.

#

¹ Pew Center on the States, *One in 31: The Long Reach of American Corrections* (Washington, DC: The Pew Charitable Trusts, March 2009), 11.

² <http://www.costofwar.com/>