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*This is the text of a keynote talk I gave at California Arts Advocates' Visioning Retreat,  
"Reframing the Role of the Arts in California," on 13 January 2010 in Sacramento.*

## Sensing The Demand

by Arlene Goldbard

If you have seen the Woody Allen movie, *Annie Hall*, you may recall a scene that made a great impression on me. Woody Allen plays a version of himself, a neurotic, libidinous writer-comedian who desires and mistrusts absolutely everything. In a moment of self-reflection, he imagines returning to his elementary school classroom. One by one, the sweet-faced students rise and in piping voices, announce their future fates. One is a dress manufacturer, another runs a plumbing company, a third is a former heroin addict, now addicted to methadone. It's not that their futures are terrible—most aren't—it's just the poignancy of seeing so much pint-sized potential reduced to the compromises and resignations many of us associate with adulthood.

This is similar to the poignancy of gazing at a roomful of artists and advocates who have spent a lifetime trying to make their case to people who hold power, influence and resources in society. Like the children in Allen's film, each of us has our adult persona, the face we present to the world. But underneath that, from where I stand today, I see a glimpse of who we really are, the essence each of us brings into the world and retains all our lives. We might call ourselves writers and musicians and painters, or artistic directors and development directors and general managers, or dozens of other titles. But if we were to stand in turn and, speaking in our adult voices, describe whatever lit the spark in our younger selves that has fueled our lives ever since, I am certain that every one of us would have profound stories to tell, and there would be great similarities in those stories, despite countless differences in circumstance and identity.

Some of us will have been blessed to grow up in the kind of environment every child deserves, surrounded by loving people who support the process of becoming fully oneself, a fully creative being. Some of us will have come to consciousness in a little world of family or community incapable of truly meeting and receiving us. Those who share this experience may come to say our lives were saved by art, by discovering in our own imaginations and capabilities a sanctuary that no external threat could destroy.

Regardless of our individual stories, behind the choice to live one's life in the arts, as a maker of beauty and meaning or one who supports that process, there is always an awakening that must be characterized in spiritual terms, as an encounter with the ineffable, with something that can never be adequately expressed, but which ignites in our hearts the desire to keep trying. The specifics of these encounters will be known to each of you. Perhaps you were taken for the first time to a theater, a film, or a concert, transported in that darkened space to a time and place markedly different from ordinary life, where your entire being was concentrated on receiving something, where your body, feelings, mind and spirit came for the first time into absolute, coherent focus, and where, when the lights went up, you knew you wanted to return as soon and as often as possible. Perhaps you lifted your own voice in song, or raised a charged brush to

make a mark on paper, and in the moment of creation felt time standing still, with you at its center, completely awake and completely dissolved in the experience.

I am not a musician, but a quotation from the English writer Walter Pater expresses it in a way that seems very true to me: “All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music,” he wrote, “because, in its ideal, consummate moments, the end is not distinct from the means, the form from the matter, the subject from the expression.” Pater was writing about art in the narrow sense, works created with the awareness and intention associated in the last few centuries of western thought with high art. But I think he was also describing an integrated state of being that most often arises from the encounter with the ineffable. Every human being has experienced this. It is the way we feel in the full flow of creativity, when overcome by love, when gazing into the heart of a rose, when standing at the edge of the Grand Canyon or the Pacific Ocean, bathed in the light of the setting sun. It is one of the essential experiences of being human.

Arts advocates have been trying to pour the vast personal and social importance of this experience into containers—into language, slogans, arguments, strategies—far too small to hold it. The result has been almost unbearable frustration at being unable to put our point across. After long exposure to the framework of understanding that insists on privileging material value and things that can be counted, weighed and measured over all other forms of value, we have been reduced to making weak, even desperate arguments that do not do justice to the powerful truths contained in those experiences of the ineffable that set us on our paths in the first place.

As I pointed out at the beginning of this retreat, more than three decades of trying to justify art’s value with flimsy data-based arguments such as the economic multiplier effect, or the relationship between participating in the school orchestra and scoring high on the SATs, have yielded a net loss of more than half the real value of federal arts expenditure.

Accepting the terms of the debate as primarily economic has made it unwinnable. Is there anyone here who hasn’t been to a zillion briefings and absorbed a gazillion pointers on how to argue for the arts’ economic impact, because getting it right will be the golden key to public funding? Do you really think that after all this time, the problem is that we still haven’t discovered exactly the right charts and graphs to hit the jackpot? On this point, we truly do have enough data: It is intrinsically impossible to justify public investment in creativity using these tools, because art’s essence is its ability to engage us fully in body, emotions, mind and spirit, to create beauty and meaning, to cultivate imaginative empathy, to disturb the peace, to enable grief in the face of loss and hope in the face of grief. Trying to explain or demonstrate this with numbers is like trying to describe a rainbow without mentioning color. It is ineffective, discouraging and unworthy of who we really are to keep trying the same failed approach over and over again. If we force ourselves, our trying can’t help but turn half-hearted.

If you disagree, if you feel these are the winning arguments, then I ask you to return to your own experience of awakening. Would you really be doing what you are doing today if the strongest reasons for doing it were the economic impact of people buying theater tickets on restaurant and parking-lot revenues? Would you really be doing what you are doing today if its most significant impact was research results so flimsy you can’t distinguish cause from effect: do music lessons

affect dropout rates, or are the children of parents who push music lessons less likely to drop out for other socioeconomic reasons? No one knows.

If these arguments truly do excite and compel you, then your challenge now is to find ways of telling the same story that can actually excite, engage and mobilize other people. But if you are ready to find something better, as I am, the time is right, because the breakdown of many old verities has created an opening for new truths to emerge. The great James Baldwin said that “The purpose of art is to lay bare the questions which have been hidden by the answers.” That is exactly the opportunity we face now, peeling back layers of conventional and inadequate answers to face the urgent questions at the heart of the matter. What is the public interest in art, and how best to pursue and nurture it?

Let’s start with ourselves, then. It was our good fortune to first encounter the ineffable when our receivers were tuned to exactly the right frequency to truly get the message, and to notice that this was happening, and to remember it, and to make it the center of our lives. Every day, on line at the supermarket, in school hallways, eating lunch on a park bench, we are surrounded by people who have shared these glimpses, whose senses and spirits have been pried open by art in remarkably powerful ways. No matter what else we do, we have got to begin recognizing those experiences as integral and valid parts of culture and essential to the entire cultural ecology, whether they take place in red-carpeted halls, on street corners, in community centers, in front of computers, in church basements, on back porches. The invidious snobbery that has contaminated much of the nonprofit arts sector has done more to alienate potential supporters than any other factor.

The most striking example of arts snobbery I have encountered was at a gathering of arts supporters nearly 30 years ago. The board president of a major symphony orchestra was working herself up into a lather of enthusiasm, describing the wonderful work they were doing in education, primarily sending small ensembles into classrooms. “And some of these children,” she concluded, “had never heard music before!” Even people who harbor such prejudices know they can’t really express them aloud anymore. But the tacit assumption that certain art forms and styles are intrinsically superior is still a pervasive subtext in this sector, and it is time to recognize it as just plain wrong.

In just the past few weeks, for instance, I’ve had a dozen serious conversations about spirituality, culture and globalization stimulated by someone remarking on the film, *Avatar*. A Facebook friend posted her New Year’s Eve ruminations about the music of Leonard Cohen, inspiring a swooning cacophony of testimonies by others whose lives have been changed by his work. I got to post my favorite bit of Leonard Cohen trivia, that his wonderful song “Alexandra Leaving” is an almost line-for-line transposition of Cavafy’s amazing 1911 poem, “The God Abandons Antony.” Last week, I walked down a busy city street eavesdropping on two young women, one of whom was explaining that she was writing a paper that portrayed the “history of the eighties” through the music of Madonna. Then I sat in a waiting room across from a child of six who was staging an amazingly lively play starring two dolls and a plush watermelon with eyes.

What we know in every cell of our bodies and learn every hour of the day is true. The essence of being human is to make art. We do it in red-carpeted halls and ramshackle huts, at every moment

of history, every time we mark the unfolding of our lives. Even under harrowing conditions, in SuperMax prisons and concentration camps, people save precious crumbs or scrape up clumps of mud to make sculptures. They scratch on prison walls with rocks or the burnt ends of matches. I am awestruck to think that Herbert Zipper, the founding director of the National Guild of Community Schools of the Arts, led a clandestine orchestra in Dachau. When human history began, our ancestors circled their fires, turning their backs on the darkness to share stories of the hunt, the trek, the storm and their meanings. Today we sit in neat rows in darkened multiplexes, warming ourselves by the light of much busier and more complicated stories. But underneath, we are the same.

The philosopher Denis Dutton has argued that human artistic creativity is rooted in our development during the Pleistocene era. It turns out that these big brains that create pleasure, make possible a remarkable and intense range of emotions, enable stupendous feats of imagination, use storytelling as a path to problem-solving, and allow us to create beauty in so many forms—our big brains are also a favored trait for sexual selection. When seeking mates, our earliest ancestors valued innovation, dexterity, grace, and other forms of skillfulness associated with art, which may be why there seem to be more and more artists in each generation. This is also good news for countless starving artists looking for love in a time that otherwise values earning capacity. Don't give up: evolution is on our side!

In 1958, the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard coined the phrase “desire path” to describe the paths that people naturally make in walking from one place to the other, as opposed to the roadways that have been made for us. You can see these most easily in the snow: in the absence of predetermined paths, people's feet track the evidence of their desire, sometimes taking the most direct shortcut between two points, sometimes meandering past an especially beautiful prospect or a beloved natural feature. When the snow melts, a gap becomes evident between planning and the wishes of the human heart. The hubris of modern times has been to imagine that the looping meanders and rough edges of human desire can be supplanted by the imposition of an artificial order that seems, in the Olympian space of the conference room or laboratory, ever so much neater and more efficient. The smartest planners are learning now, half a century after Bachelard coined his term, that an organic approach is far superior, taking time and investing attention to allow the lines of desire to emerge before the paths are laid.

As usual, when new truths emerge in other disciplines, they have almost always been articulated first by artists. Half a century before Bachelard, in his most famous work, the Spanish poet Antonio Machado wrote lines that carry the same deep wisdom. Translated into English, they are:

Traveler, your footsteps  
are the road, nothing more;  
traveler, there is no road,  
you make the road by walking.

Despite vast pressure to persuade us to walk a social path in which punishment or profit or machinelike efficiency are our collective priorities, in actuality, our desire path, the road we have made as individuals and communities, is the path of art. All around us, people are living out the truth that has given shape to the lives in this room. Every day, in every corner of this country, nearly every life, nearly every waking hour, is saturated with music, stories, visual imagery, and conscious movement expressing the intrinsic nature and overwhelming resilience of human creativity.

The cumulative result of millennia of human creativity embodied in art-making is a repository of wisdom, social imagination, empathy, beauty and meaning that is essential to surviving the crises our society now faces. It sustains us through difficulty and inspires us to make change. It provides the container, the matrix, for all human knowledge. And right now, we really need to get to know each other. We need to share our stories and dream together how to change the big story of our collective fate. We need the skills of imagination, improvisation and renewal that can be learned more fully and deeply through art than by any other means. And we—the people who have made art our life's work—need to be able to express, embody and convey these truths without hesitation or embarrassment.

You know Hans Christian Anderson's tale, "The Emperor's New Clothes"? It's actually based on a much older fable that emerged from the ferment of Arab and Jewish culture in medieval Spain. In the original, the con artists responsible for the emperor's costume say that the clothes are invisible to anyone who is not actually the child of his or her father, so the social pressure to see more than a naked man was intense. Anderson lightened the story a bit, recognizing that general peer pressure would suffice to silence most people. All of us understand what happens when you are told over and over again that what you know to be true is just your imagination: you start to take that doubting voice into yourself, you start to hear its echoes whispering in your own ear even when no one else is around. You start to believe its whispers more than the evidence of your own body, emotions, mind and spirit, like the courtiers in the tale of the emperor's new clothes. You begin to lose the courage of your convictions.

Take a minute to let yourself feel the weight of that frustration, that self-doubt. Where do you feel it? For me, it pinches like a pair of shoes long outgrown. The remedy is to step out of our old thinking, a container too small to hold the truth that needs telling now, and to walk on.

Now, think how good it would feel to step into a way of understanding and speaking about the public interest in art that is fully commensurate with our truths. Our power to persuade is at its height when there is absolute congruence between what we know and what we say. Many of you are visiting legislators this afternoon. Imagine how it would feel to make even a subtle shift away from repeating the same old and weak arguments, toward representing the much larger and deeper truths that animate your work.

If anxiety arises when you consider that prospect, I invite you to reflect on its source. The great Brazilian educator Paulo Freire contributed tremendously to our understanding of these dynamics, how we are persuaded to internalize self-defeating messages, and how we come to mistake them for our own ideas and feelings. He described a phenomenon he called "fear of freedom," in which people are afraid to let go of beliefs that no longer serve them, because the prospect of living without them creates too much anxiety, often because they have been persuaded there is nothing else. When you consider letting go of the old arguments for the arts, the ones that have failed us over and over again despite our steadfast loyalty, what happens? If a voice in your head says, "We can't abandon the way we've been doing it for all these years! We'll be defenseless!" you know that old, impacted, disabling beliefs are standing in the way of your bringing your full gifts and your full power to your chosen task, and it is time to break through.

We have a good deal to learn from spiritual traditions about how to do this, especially because every wisdom tradition is filled with stories about standing for the truth against even the most powerful opponents. I like the way Rebbe Nachman of Bratslov, the great 18th century teacher,

put it: “A person needs holy arrogance, holy chutzpah. He should be bold as a leopard against the people who are preventing him and mocking him. He shouldn’t subjugate himself before them, and he shouldn’t be embarrassed in front of them at all.” I’ve had some amazing discussions with powerful people that started by asking them to remember the first work of art—a song, a book, a film—that moved and inspired them to see the world differently, even in some small, personal way. Our interactions with such people tend to be constrained by social roles: everyone knows what they should say and repeats their prescribed lines dutifully. What if you showed up as yourself this time? What have you got to lose?

I am very glad that you want to tackle this question, because we need new frames equal in potency to the stories they will hold. In cognitive linguistics, a “frame” is one of the conceptual schemes that organize our thinking, coloring the meaning of words, images, and other information. Frames are embedded concepts—constructed of words and images, metaphors and parables—that shape our perception and therefore, our opinions. The meanings of facts change depending on the frame, so that the same piece of information can be seen as essential or irrelevant. In the political arena, most frames incorporate moral appeals. The debate over reproductive choice, for instance, evokes two principles many people hold sacred: personal self-determination and the sanctity of life. Embedded in each frame is the implication that adopting that position makes you a good person, while the opposite opinion is morally questionable.

Charlotte Ryan and William Gamson have written a great deal about the use of framing in influencing public opinion. “A frame is a thought organizer,” they write. “Like a picture frame, it puts a rim around some part of the world, highlighting certain events and facts as important and rendering others invisible. Like a building frame, it holds things together but is covered by insulation and walls. It provides coherence to an array of symbols, images, and arguments, linking them through an underlying organizing idea that suggests what is essential—what consequences and values are at stake. We do not see the frame directly, but infer its presence by its characteristic expressions and language.”<sup>1</sup>

Everything we know about the centrality of story, the universality of artistic creativity and its roles in human and social development is demonstrably true, yet we are still laboring under the social superstition that says art has nothing to do with the serious problems we face, that creative work is trivial and negligible, meaningful only for its commodity-value. Open the arts section of any major U.S. daily: if you eliminate the reviews and announcements, you will find that this is the main focus: which TV shows drew the most viewers and sponsors, which movies and plays earned the largest box-office revenues, which songs sold the most copies, which performers made the largest fees. We are trapped in an economic frame. If all you have is a cash register, everything looks like a sale.

But the big frame we need now is this: that art is the secret of survival, that if our resilience, creativity and future sustainability are riding on the stories that shape us, we had better invest in our collective capacity to create and share stories.

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<sup>1</sup> William A. Gamson and Charlotte Ryan, “Thinking about Elephants: Toward a Dialogue with George Lakoff,” *The Public Eye Magazine*, Fall 2005

Many people are approaching this now in their own ways and their own communities. I am eager to work deeply on this with anyone who wants to give it serious attention, so I invite you to call on me.

Before I close, I want to tell you about a couple of experiences along these lines. Last May, I helped to organize a group of artists and organizers to come together as part of a White House Briefing on Art, Community, Social Justice, National Recovery. After our conversation with administration officials, we adjourned to another location to hold working group sessions about what to do next. I convened a working group on cultural policy. Group members gave ourselves a challenge we have been working on ever since. We knew that hearing the word “policy” makes many people want to lie down for a little nap. It conjures endless boring documents in which every detail is spelled out, like the boilerplate in a contract. But our goal was to wake people out of that somnolence. We challenged ourselves to use plain language to concisely convey the compelling necessity of a bold new investment in culture and community.

We asked ourselves this: what if instead of following the defensive strategy that has kept art and artists marginalized for so long—instead of making ourselves smaller or trying to camouflage ourselves as a way to improve tax revenues and test scores—we spoke and acted as if art were the secret of survival and sustainable community? As if the cultivation of personal and social creativity were an absolute necessity for any healthy society? As if art were the essential way to teach the imaginative empathy and social imagination that underlie cultural recovery, without which no lasting economic recovery is possible?

Our collaboration produced a new policy proposal entitled “Art & The Public Purpose: A New Framework.” The Website promoting it is at [www.newculturalpolicy.org](http://www.newculturalpolicy.org). Please go to the site and download the Framework to see one attempt at generating a new frame for this debate. By gathering individual and organizational endorsements, circulating the Framework for discussion, and encouraging people to place the topic of art’s public purpose front and center, we hope to call attention to a story that needs telling: that our own creative actions may be precisely what’s needed to strengthen democracy now. It’s early days and we are still finding our way to push this out.

One point of the Framework calls for a new WPA, a public service employment program supporting art’s public purpose through jobs for artists in schools, prisons, hospitals and all kinds of constructive community settings. This year, 2010, is the 75th anniversary of the Works Progress Administration, part of FDR’s New Deal. Some arts groups have begun to use the anniversary to call attention to artists working in public service. For instance, WomenArts (formerly the Fund for Women Artists) is dedicating its annual day of action to this theme. If you go to the Website—[www.womenarts.org](http://www.womenarts.org)—you’ll find historical information, resources for teachers and communities, and soon, a new play that can be downloaded and performed by anyone, weaving together voices of women artists of the WPA with contemporary women artists.

I especially love the idea of using a play to tell this story. I am certain that the most effective actions we take to establish new frames for this debate will make full use of our artistic creativity such that, as Walter Pater wrote, “the end is not distinct from the means, the form from the matter, the subject from the expression.” Instead of repeating half-hearted arguments or trying to cram our truth into containers that cannot hold it, if we will bring all we know and all we are to this effort, that can turn the tide.

Even mundane things can be lifted up if undertaken with a sense of larger purpose and meaning. We could look at this effort as some people have, as “rebranding” the arts, or as becoming better marketers and better lobbyists. But that would deprive us of the opportunity this moment presents, to be part of a seismic shift in human history, in which the things that have been shunted off to the margins—beauty, meaning, reflection, creativity, facing loss and finding resilience—in which these important things will be given their true value. Forms of work not previously recognized as having social utility will emerge as worthy, in part because the old jobs are disappearing, necessitating a redefinition of work. New creative technologies will emerge to seize public attention, and older technology will be repurposed, but not forgotten. Whatever happens, art will foreshadow, portray and interpret it, lifting countless lives from the merely bearable into beauty.

We can’t predict how things will morph over the next decade or two. But because so much is unknown, if we come to the fore with energy and vision, our ideas can have influence. I don’t think there is one right answer to the inquiry we are undertaking. We need to engage many questions, generate many ideas, to experiment, make mistakes and learn from them. I hope to have dozens of mind-blowing conversations about these essential questions, to clear out all the cobwebs and the old answers, and with others as excited by these challenges as I am, to come at this task with fresh energy and vision.

“This is the most important experience in the life of every human being,” Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, “something is asked of me. Every human being has had a moment in which he sensed a mystery waiting for him. Meaning is found in responding to the demand, meaning is found in sensing the demand.”

I’m honored today to address a roomful of people whose course in life has been set by sensing and responding to just such a demand. It is clear that something is being asked of us now, and if we accept the challenge, I know that we will be equal to it.

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