

**The Footprints and the Giant:
Exploring the Value of the Arts to Communities**

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(this speech is available for download from The Artful Manager web site)

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Thank you for your invitation to speak to you today about the impact of the arts on communities. It's an essential topic any day, but particularly these days, as cities and counties come upon tight budgets and tough choices. And it's a subject that occupies a great deal of my work, for many reasons.

The title of my talk today is "The Footprints and the Giant," for reasons we'll soon explore together. But since all public speeches are supposed to begin with a joke, here's mine. Forgive me if you've heard it before, but there's a point to it:

Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson are out in the woods on a camping trip. In the middle of the night, Sherlock Holmes shakes Doctor Watson awake and says to him, "Watson, look up at the sky and tell me what you deduce." So Watson rubs his eyes and looks up at the night sky, saying: "I see a billion stars, among which there may be a million planets, among which there may be planets much like our Earth, and upon which there may well be sentient life looking back at their night sky at this very moment, wondering if we might exist." After this speech, Sherlock Holmes pauses for a moment and responds, "No Watson, you idiot. Someone has stolen our tent."

The point of that particular joke for today's topic is this: Sometimes we work so hard to see the details in the distance, that we completely miss the essential truth directly in front of us. I'm going to suggest that that's true when we explore the value of the arts to any of us and all of us. There are important details, to be sure, and we'll walk through them together. There are economic benefits, social benefits, educational or personal benefits, and broader civic benefits. These are important. They are compelling. And they

are convincing when we ask individuals and groups to support the arts with time and money. But I'll also suggest that these arguments are really just the details in the distance I just mentioned in the joke. They are effects and not causes. They are the footprints a giant leaves behind, but they are not the giant. Today, we're going to talk a little about the giant, as well.

And, yes, I promise to do all this in the 15 to 20 minutes I've been provided to speak with you. While we'll likely argue about the value of the arts and how they should be supported, we all share a common value for our time. It's precious. And I won't waste too much of yours today.

But first a little background about me, so you know where I'm coming from. I'm the director of the MBA degree program in Arts Administration at the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Business. It's a full-time, two-year degree program, now in its fourth decade, training future managers and leaders of primarily nonprofit and public cultural institutions — theaters, symphonies, festivals, performing arts centers, museums, public television and radio stations, foundations, government agencies, and such. Our graduates help bring arts experiences to small towns and big cities, here in Wisconsin, and across the country.

Now, I realize that to some people, combining 'MBA' with 'Arts' might seem as odd as combining 'jumbo' with 'shrimp.' But you'll have to trust me that cultural institutions are businesses, they are complex puzzles, and they require a mastery of business strategy, financial skill, and social finesse that's often unrecognized. I'm sure that there are cultural managers and board members among you. Be sure to thank them, and thank yourselves, for doing the hard work required of this particular calling.

And as long as we're defining things, let me define what I mean by 'the arts'. It's a fuzzy word, often left undefined. Today, I mean to discuss the arts in broad strokes, as an inclusive concept. Certainly, I mean the traditional nonprofit arts we all could name, such as dance, classical music, theater, visual art, sculpture, and such. But I also mean community or amateur arts like the community choir, the embroidery club, the quilting bee, the amateur theater, the school art program, and the adult pottery classes. And I even mean the commercial side of the creative world — the nightclubs, the recording studios, the live performance venues and festivals, the commercial art galleries, the popular performers you might catch on tour in a local venue.

In short, "the arts" here mean any creative expression or experience available to you within your community — ticketed or free, formal or informal, professional or amateur, nonprofit or commercial, whether you watch it being made or you make it yourself.

You can find these experiences in many places, but for today, I'm primarily talking about art that you experience in person, and not mediated through an electronic box like a television, a computer, or a radio. Not that these aren't important and meaningful. Just that I'm primarily talking about art in the community context.

So, given all that background, what is the value of the arts to communities? Why *should* we consider giving our money, our attention, our time, and even our tax dollars to be sure the arts are in our cities, our schools, and our civic life? Who cares if opportunities for creative expression and cultural experience are diverse, vital, and accessible to a full range of our fellow citizens?

Well, for one, a lot of people *do* care. They are the people that bring the arts to life: the artists, the volunteers, the audiences, the managers, the boards, the donors, the civic leaders. Ask most of these individuals and you'll hear that one art form or another has deep meaning for them, that it connects them, that it challenges them, that it calms them, that it reminds them of important people and moments in their lives, and that it brings them together with people and ideas they enjoy being with. There are many in the room that would say the arts are important because the arts are important to *them*...so important that they want other people to have that same experience, both now, and in future generations.

But for the civic conversation, the praise of enthusiasts isn't quite enough. Some would say that it's great for people to find purpose and meaning in the arts, but not everyone does. Lots of people find purpose and meaning and even escape in fly fishing. But we don't allocate tax dollars or school district budgets for *that*. To expend community resources and attention, for any activity, we need reasonable assurance that the activity serves a public purpose...that it provides a public good.

This brings us to the broader arguments for the arts...the arguments that seek to show the wider public benefits of arts and culture, even to those who never attend. There are a lot of these arguments, but thankfully they come in four main flavors¹:

- Economic
- Social
- Educational or personal, and
- Civic

Let's take them one at a time:

The *economic* arguments for the arts suggest that cultural activities bring economic benefits to a community. They draw audiences, who buy tickets for a show, but also dinner before and drinks afterwards. These audiences hire babysitters. They stay in hotels. Furthermore, in the process of attracting audiences, artists and arts organizations spend money, as well — on lumber and office equipment and staff. Some claim that the vitality and nightlife they bring to a region helps in stalking the elusive "knowledge worker," and the businesses that want to hire them. And arts organizations can be the anchors for downtown revitalization or development efforts, when those same knowledge workers are looking for a place to shop, to kick back, and to live.

¹ This list and its definitions were brazenly stolen from Adrian Ellis and his speech on "Valuing Culture," available on-line:
<http://www.demos.co.uk/catalogue/valuingculturespeeches/>

The *social* arguments for the arts describe their power to gather people together, often across economic or cultural divides. While sociologists like Robert Putnam complain that American's are increasingly bowling alone, the arts are offered as an antidote to this isolation. They build trust and social capital. They reinforce the fabric that's often torn by the competitive marketplace. They foster empathy for different points of view, and give a voice to individuals or groups that might be otherwise ignored.

The *educational* and *personal* arguments for the arts claim the learning or healing power of creative experience. Test scores improve. Creative thinking is enabled. Broken spirits and tired bodies are restored. Minds are refocused and refreshed.

The *civic* argument combines all of the above and suggests that a vibrant cultural life makes for a vibrant civic life — with high economic performance, high inward investment, high educational attainment, and high levels of civic engagement.

There's a great deal of discussion going on these days among advocates and academics about these benefits, about how we can measure them, and about how direct the connections might be between the arts and the outcomes we claim. The Wallace Foundation released a major study this past February, called *Gifts of the Muse*, which explored each of these benefits, and the studies that supported them. The study found that the arguments had merit, but that their connections were under-researched and often over-sold. Instead, the study urged us all to focus less on what art does and more on what art is, and the intrinsic values it provides.

The topic of 'valuing culture' pops up at almost every professional conference I attend these days. As government money gets tight, as personal fortunes took a hit in 2001 and beyond, and as discretionary spending got lean, arts advocates have been struggling for better arguments and clearer cases to ensure their programs and their missions.

And as I've said, this conversation is important. There are hard choices ahead. City councils, county boards, state legislatures, and school boards are increasingly struggling with the math. Even the most eloquent arguments can't boost tax revenues or lower healthcare costs. Even the most convincing connections between arts and learning can't counter the constraints of revenue caps for public schools.

So, what arguments *should* we make, or *can* we make to ensure the vitality of creative experience and expression in our towns and cities? And what arguments can be heard, even, among the current climate of political gamesmanship?

Thankfully, even as we debate and craft our messages and strategies, artists and arts organizations quietly and effectively continue to find a way: they make art happen. While we struggle with semantics and public benefits, artists and arts organizations are gathering communities, forging new works, engaging young people, crafting new things to see and new ways to discover. Regardless of the arguments we attach after the fact, art is about what we do as a community, as individuals, as inhabitants of the same places here in Sheboygan, and in towns like Sheboygan across the country.

I'm sure you're all aware of many such active expressions of art in your own neighborhoods, among your businesses, and in your schools. You're fortunate to have an internationally recognized effort right here in town, in the Kohler Corporation's Arts/Industry program. This effort places working artists in residence in Kohler's manufacturing and design facilities, blending the company's ceramics and metalworking equipment and master craftspeople with visionary independent artists. Each learns from the other. Each pushes the other toward a new way of working and seeing. There are certainly benefits to this interaction, but they are outcomes not causes. The cause is the effort itself, the intensity of the conversation and challenge that creative visions provide, and the relationships such efforts bring.

Another example just happened in my hometown of Monona, just outside of Madison. My daughter is 11 years old, and her school just held an artist residency of its own. A wonderful performer, choir director, community member, and musician brought two middle schools from a common school district together to sing, to prepare for a public concert, and to work together toward that common goal. Again, there were benefits. The pride and supportiveness this event brought to the children was a wonder to behold. But again, these benefits were the effects, they were the impressions left by intense and creative effort among a group of people. These benefits were the outcomes, not the cause.

Which brings us back to the title of my talk with you today: "The Footprints and the Giant." The footprints are the impressions left by something very large, but they are not the thing, itself. Economic impact is a footprint. Social connection is a footprint. Education and personal growth are footprints. And a vital civic life is a footprint, as well. They are easier to talk about because they are the things we can see and measure. But like Doctor Watson straining to explain the night sky, our focus on the footprints can blind us to the more important point. The footprints get larger and deeper only if we understand the giant that leaves them.

Some might be asking what the heck I'm talking about. Others might be wondering when I will stop talking. For both groups, I'll cut to the chase: the giant that leaves these large impressions on our community is the *process* of creative expression and experience, itself. In the making of theater we discover each other and ourselves. In the interaction of artistic vision and personal perspective we make new connections. In striving to express who we are and what we see, we *learn* who we are and what we see. And through creative expression and experience, we have an astounding opportunity to share that effort and that vision with each other.

The arts are not a separate thing from us. They *are* us. The sculpture, the novel, the song, the painting, the performance, the musical work, the poem, the drawing, the photograph are all ways we see each other and ourselves. They are all ways of learning — ways that connect with so many students who have trouble connecting by traditional means. They are ways of reaching across perspectives and backgrounds. In fact, our collective expressions are often what define us long after we are gone. And they are how we know the people, places, and civilizations that came before us.

Art is us. *All of us*. And the massive secret that sits right in front of us is that WE are the giant that leaves such wonderful footprints.

So, once more, back to the formal title of this talk: what is the 'impact of the arts,' and the 'benefit of culture to communities'? The glaring truth is that art *is* community. It is the reflection and expression of what we all do, what we all are, and what we all hope to be.

So, while we're striving to describe the footprints, I encourage us all to focus the bulk of our energies on the giant, before we, like Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson, wake up to realize that someone has stolen our tent.