

This talk was given May 9, 2015 at Arizona State University in Tempe, at the Fourth Biennial Symposium on Entrepreneurship and the Arts, presented by the Pave Program in Arts Entrepreneurship in collaboration with the UW-Madison Bolz Center for Arts Administration.

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It's creative; but is it beautiful?

Diane Ragsdale

Good morning. Thank you, Linda, for the invitation to speak today. It's great to be here.

So we're gathered at this symposium to discuss creativity and new venture creation; and as my contribution to this conversation I want to talk about *beauty*. This is motivated by the fact that I have just finished teaching a 12-week course in beauty at the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Business.

It's been an extraordinary experience, made possible primarily because of two individuals. The dean of the Wisconsin School of Business—Francois Ortalo-Magné—who has been encouraging faculty to think about beauty, as a virtue, and how it might be incorporated into the curriculum; and Sherry Wagner Henry, who asked me what kind of course I wanted to teach as part of my visiting guest residency, said, “Yes” when I pitched her on a course in aesthetic development and ethics, and who succeeded in getting buy-in from the powers-that-be. So, thank you, Sherry!

This is a talk in three parts. Why I'm teaching a course in beauty to 22 undergraduate business majors, what we've been doing in the class (that is, its methods), and why I think those of us concerned with such things as creativity and new venture creation may need to give beauty some consideration. Before I launch into beauty, however, I have a brief preamble on creativity.

A Brief Preamble on Creativity

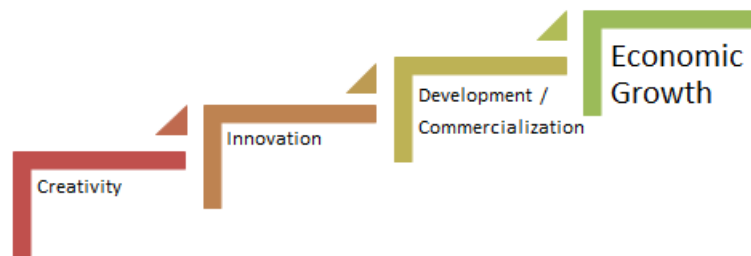
So, I moved to the Netherlands five years ago to marry a Dutchman I had been dating long-distance, and to work towards a PhD. I was accepted into a cultural economics program at Erasmus University in Rotterdam, and, as sometimes happen in graduate programs, I was almost immediately put to work as a lecturer. One of my first teaching duties was to design and teach a new course called *The Creative Economy and Creative Organizations*.

I had a steep learning curve. I brought home a stack of books and articles and spent the summer after my wedding poring over them, learning much more than I ever wanted to know about the knowledge economy, the creative economy, the creative industries, creative cities, creative clusters, creative entrepreneurship, the relationship between creativity and innovation, and how to foster, harness, manage, and (most importantly) exploit creativity in organizations.

(Creative placemaking was just entering the lexicon or that might have made its way onto the reading list, as well.)

And as I delved into these texts I kept encountering a particular argument—really, a justification for creativity.

And it looked something like this:

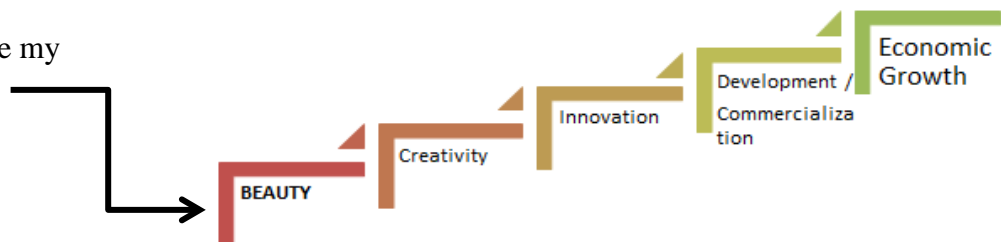


A quick sidebar—The title that I proposed for my course was *Approaching Beauty*. This proved to be a hard sell. And, at one point, it was suggested that if I could get beauty out of the title and replace it with creativity it would get greater uptake from students and faculty. No doubt it would have.

Creativity is not a hard sell in business schools these days. National and local governments, policymakers, and the business world value creativity because they buy into this model. Creativity is going to help us find innovative ways to sustain new ventures and old ones ... dying industries and cities ... and a broken economy.

But I pushed back on letting creativity creep into the title because this model troubles me—and I wanted, if at all possible in the context of a business school, to avoid hitching beauty onto this creativity bandwagon.

I didn't want *this* to be my argument for beauty.



Part 1 – Why beauty in a business school?

To be honest, I hadn't given beauty much thought before I began designing this course. But, y'know, I don't think I'm alone among arts and culture types in not spending much time considering beauty. As professor of aesthetics and English, Elaine Scarry, argues, beauty has been banished from the humanities (by which she means the conversation about beauty, not beautiful objects themselves).

And if *we* find it awkward to talk about beauty it's no wonder, really, that it was an awkward concept to approach in a business school.

Indeed, there is this funny expression I quite often see on people's faces when I mention that I've been teaching a class on beauty in a business school. And what quite often comes out of their mouths afterwards is: "*Why?* How do you think this going to help them, exactly?"

When I began getting such questions I knew that I would seem incredibly naïve a bit bonkers if I said something like, "Isn't a life with beauty better than one without it? Don't we all need beauty?" ... And so I fumbled around saying things about living in an aesthetics business era and the growing importance of beauty in the design of products and services.

And people would nod and seem to buy it; but I'd get this uneasy feeling in my gut--like I was betraying beauty behind her back.

I knew this wasn't why I felt the course was important.

I got tired of being asked why and not having an answer I felt good about so I started digging into the academic literature to see if others had tried to make the case for the importance of aesthetics, or beauty, for business leaders, in particular.

And I was surprised and delighted to discover that, over the past couple decades, while we in the nonprofit arts have been kneeling at the altars of Michael Porter and Clayton Christiansen and taking courses aimed at strengthening our business skills, business scholars have been penning articles and books with titles like *Leading Beautifully* and *Aesthetics as a Foundation for Business Activity*.

Here are a few more I came across early in my literature search.

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- Adler (2011). *Leading Beautifully: The Creative Economy and Beyond*
 - Dobson (2007). *Aesthetics as a Foundation for Business Activity*
 - Dobson (1999). *The Art of Management and the Aesthetic Manager*
 - Koehn & Elm (2014). *Aesthetics and Business Ethics*
 - March, J.G. (2013). *In Praise of Beauty*
 - Taylor (2013). *The Impoverished Aesthetic of Modern Management: Beauty and Ethics in Organizations*
 - Waddock (2014). *Wisdom and Responsible Leadership: Aesthetic Responsibility, Moral Imagination, and Systems Thinking*
 - Winston, J. (2006). *Beauty, Goodness and Education: The Arts Beyond Utility*

In broad brush strokes—very broad—here some of the propositions or arguments for beauty and aesthetics that I found in those papers.

The world is in a state of crisis due to a range of systemic problems—poverty, environmental degradation, economic instability, chronic disease, hunger, drug addiction, war. These problems persist in spite of the application of great scientific minds and new technologies. Solving these problems requires a different way of seeing and thinking.

- We need leaders who can approach problems and systems intuitively and holistically;
- who have the courage to see reality objectively and who feel compelled to help repair the world;

- who are unconstrained by pragmatism and who have the vision to imagine radical, beautiful solutions;
- who can forego short-term gains in order to achieve long-term paradigmatic change;
- and who have the character to pursue excellence for its own sake rather than for the byproducts (most notably material wealth) it sometimes produces.

As Sandra Waddock puts it in her papers, we need wiser, more responsible leaders. And, for this, among other things, we need beauty.

Underpinning all of these arguments for the value of beauty or aesthetics for business, rests the more essential argument that beauty is important for human cognitive, emotional, and spiritual development. In a sense, this is where the beauty course sits. At its heart it is a course in human development.

We are asking ourselves the question that the novelist Iris Murdoch asked herself in her essay, *The Sovereignty of Good*. And we're following her lead in pursuing the answer.

Her question: "How can we make ourselves better?"

Her answer: While bettering the self was once the domain of religion, in a secular age, *beauty* is the "most obvious thing in our surroundings" to help us "move in the direction of unselfishness, objectivity, and realism."¹

Murdoch calls this process *unselfing*. She gives the analogy of walking down the street and being totally unaware that you are self-consumed until something beautiful—say a bird—hooks your attention and draws you out of yourself—alerting you to your self-absorption and awakening you to your surroundings generally.

Elaine Scarry, whom I mentioned earlier, builds on Murdoch's work. Her term for this *unselfing* is *opiated adjacency*, which is rather esoteric way of saying that beauty knocks us into the margins—revealing that we are not the center of the universe—but that the experience of being in the margins, of being lateralized, of sitting on the sidelines (as Scarry puts it) is *pleasant*.

Scarry makes the case that while lots of things knock us into the margins and lots of things bring us pleasure—beauty is perhaps the only thing that does both. Beauty, Scarry argues, fills you with something besides yourself. It's a starting point. It inspires imagination and creation. And, she argues, it stirs us to locate truth and advance justice. It makes us want to live better.

So, as I mentioned earlier, the title I proposed for the course was *Approaching Beauty*. I succeeded in keeping creativity out of the title; but, in the end, beauty was nudged out as well. It went into the catalog as *Aesthetics and Business*.

¹ Murdoch, I. (1991). *The sovereignty of good*. London: Routledge. As cited in Winston 2006, p. 285.

And I get this. Aesthetics is now associated with concepts like design and design thinking—which are all the rage in business schools these days. Beauty, on the other hand, sounds both frivolous and subversive.

This beauty course is not frivolous.

It probably is subversive.

I interpret these proposed and actual title changes to be an effort to, in a sense, put beauty in service of business—just like we’ve done with creativity. And while this is a valid aim for a business school sponsoring a course like this, as I suggested earlier I’m actually endeavoring to do the opposite.

I’m trying to put business in service of beauty.

I don’t really care whether this class helps them get a job within three months of graduating. I’m trying to give students a different way of seeing and relating to the world, a different way of valuing people and objects, a different way of living.

At the heart of it I am trying to get them to pursue the questions:

What is excellence?

What is beauty?

And what does it mean in my life, in my work practices, to pursue these for their own sake?

PART II: How are we approaching beauty, exactly?

Speaking of beauty for its own sake, I want to share one of my favorite early moments in the class. Each week I generally bring in a guest artist or scholar.

Tara Austin
Orchidaceae #4.
Oil and Acrylic on Panel.
2015



The second week I brought in a graduate student from the art department, named Tara Austin, to do a drawing workshop with the students. The goal was to encourage better skills of observation. At the end of the workshop Tara talked about her work, which is inspired by beauty in the natural world. At the moment, she is doing a series of abstract orchids.

← Here’s an example.

Tara showed slides of her orchids and asked if there were any questions. The first business student to raise her hand said something to this effect:

So, you said that you are only painting orchids. And, I mean, do you think this could be a problem? I mean, maybe people don't want orchids, orchids, orchids. Maybe not that many people like orchids—maybe some like other kinds of flowers. Or something other than flowers? I mean, I just wonder, are you thinking about this?

Tara paused for a second and then replied,

Um. That's a really interesting question. No, I'm not thinking about that, actually. I'm painting orchids at the moment because they are really interesting to me and so I guess I will keep painting them until I'm ready to move on to another idea.

After the fact, as I reflected on this moment, I thought it was quite brilliant. A quite reasonable question from a business school student: *Is there sufficient demand for orchids? Do you know your market? Do you think you may need to diversify?*

And a quite reasonable answer from an arts student: *I'm interested in the idea for its own sake; right now, I'm not thinking about whether there is a market for orchids.*

And I couldn't have architected a moment to better convey the different logics or rationalities of the market and art, or what art for art's sake, or research for the sake of research, or exploration for the sake of exploration, or excellence for the sake of excellence are really all about.

Much of the course is structured on the assumption that it is valuable simply to put business school students in the same room with artists: to experience how they approach their work, how they see the world, how they bring shape to things, and why they do what they do.

It is neither an arts appreciation course nor a philosophy course. At its heart, it is a practical course with three basic components: Discussions on the nature and function of beauty in today's society (led by me and a range of scholars and artists); Curated and self-directed aesthetic experiences (in art, nature, and everyday life); and the documentation of these experiences in a beauty portfolio.

The beauty portfolio concept comes from Howard Gardner—from his book *Truth, Goodness and Beauty Reframed*. In his 2011 book, Gardner basically redefines beauty as the property of *experiences*. He asserts that beauty is subjective and that “to be deemed beautiful an experience must exhibit three characteristics. It must be interesting enough to behold, it must have a form that is memorable, and it must invite revisiting.”

Gardner argues that students need to be educated in the three virtues and that, with regard to beauty, in particular, they should be encouraged to keep a portfolio of their experiences and reflect upon the factors that have lead them to consider one experience to be beautiful and another not.

Student Michelle Croak



Is that grey? Or white?
Where does the sky start and end?
Will winter end soon?

The sun surrenders
As deep purple streaks the sky
Through dark, bare trees.



Student Jacqueline Lee

To help the students in this process each week I made one or more portfolio assignments. So, for example, after the drawing workshop I mentioned earlier I gave them the assignment to watch a sunrise or sunset, to pay particular attention to shape and color, and to document the experience in two ways: in a Haiku and in a drawing.

← Here are two of the submissions.

I gave this assignment both so students would put to use the drawing workshop they had with Tara Austin, but also to prepare them for them for an upcoming visit to the museum of contemporary art, where I would ask them to spend 30 minutes with a single artwork.

Here's a photo of a student doing just that. →

I wanted to give them practice in staying present and engaged with a relatively static aesthetic experience of some duration.



Another assignment was to create something in response to the artwork with which they sat for 30 minutes and to write an artist's statement.



Narayan Mahon
Dividing Wall #1
From *Lands in Limbo*
Madison Museum of
Contemporary Art exhibition

Student Lyndsay Bloomfield's
response to the work.

Fortune teller made with a page
of the homeless newspaper,
Street Pulse, featuring an
obituary and poem of Tim
DeDeyne.



One student spent time with Narayan Mahon's piece *Dividing Wall #1*, one of a series of photographs documenting people in five countries that are currently unrecognized as a result of geo-political strife. Mahon's series is called *Lands in Limbo*. This particular piece shows a young boy whose home happened to be just on the limbo side of the dividing line.

← Here's Mahon's piece (top) and the piece created by the student (below it).

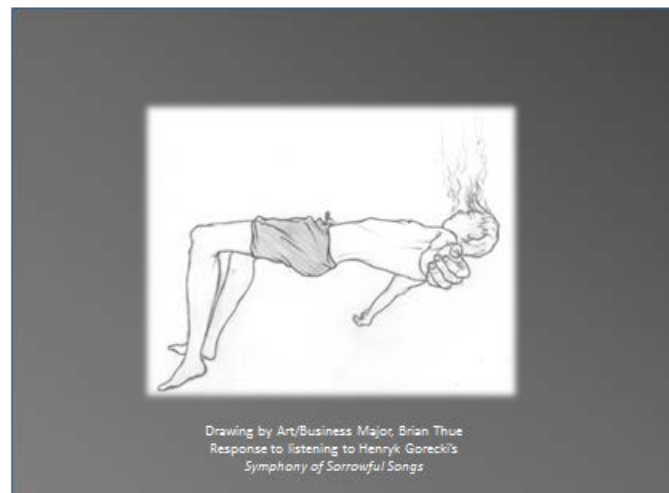
It's an old fashioned fortune teller made with the front page of the homeless newspaper. The page features the obituary of a man who had been incarcerated earlier in life and a poem he wrote, which speaks of redemption and loneliness being lifted.

So this student made a connection between this photograph of a boy and the state of limbo in which the homeless live in Madison, as well as the twists of fate that can land someone in that state. She primarily wanted to capture the hopeful idea that limbo need not be a permanent state and that one's fate can change for the better.

Another week I asked the students to watch a [TED Talk by the renowned conductor, Michael Tilson Thomas](#), who discusses how to listen to classical music. I then asked them to sit quietly, do nothing, and listen to a beautiful piece of classical music of their choosing, lasting at least 40 minutes, and to document the experience.

A majority of students commented after their listening experience that they had never done such a thing before and how soothing, clarifying, inspiring, or energizing it was.

Here's how one student documented how he felt after listening to Henryk Gorecki's *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs*.



We talk quite a bit about anxiety in the class and the pressure the students feel at school. I note that there is nothing anxious in this drawing. If anything, it seems quite transcendent. (He is an artist btw, a bit of an outlier in the class.)

Another week, inspired by Rebecca Solnit's book *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (which is essentially about the relationship between getting lost and the creative process) one of our guest artists, a writer named Lynette D'Amico, gave the students the assignment to get lost and to record the experience in some way.

A handful of students (out of a class of 22) chose to lose their smartphones for a day. I want to read the poem that one student used to record one such experience.

No signal.

I lost my friend Siri yesterday. I lost my friends Chris Martin, Taylor Rice, and Kanye West whom I talk to almost everyday. I ached to hear my friend cry out “Turn left in 300 feet”. But, it was quiet.

Silent.

Then I heard it. The faintest rustle of the trees. The deep bellowing of my breath. The laughs coming from an unknown place up the street.

Then I saw it. The blinding sun piercing across the vast sky. That night I saw the same sky splattered with perfectly sporadic specks.

Then I felt it. Above the ache for my simulated friends on my 5.44 x 2.64 screen, I was a present in the present. A gift of the hour. The hour, in turn, a gift to me. It was a symmetry I hadn’t found before.

A peacefulness.

One week they listened to and reflected upon two *This American Life* episodes with Mike Daisey, the storyteller who tried to open the world’s eyes to the injurious labor practices behind our beautiful Apple devices. The episode was an excerpt from a one-man show he created based on his experience of visiting the FoxConn factories in Shenzhen, where Apple products are made.

Here’s how one student responded to hearing Daisey’s show.

I thought about this winter break and how I was annoyed when I ordered my new iPhone that the ship date was TBD ... Reflecting on this experience, it didn’t even cross my mind that there are workers making these phones. Daisey talked about how when there’s a new Apple product it’s not uncommon for workers to work 18 hour days. It made me feel guilty for being annoyed that there was a wait for my new iPhone.

I realized it’s people like me ... that cause [Apple’s] manufacturers in China to feel pressure to work their employees overtime to meet demands like mine.

So this student for the first time saw herself in the system.

I used the second Mike Daisey *This American Life* episode—the one in which he admits that he made up some of the direct experiences he claimed to have had in China—to discuss the difference between truth in art and truth in journalism.

Finally, for two weeks I gave them the assignment to identify examples of the following (from real life, not their Facebook feeds).

**A beautiful decision you made
A beautiful decision made by someone else
A beautiful business decision
A beautiful act you witnessed
A beautiful solution to a problem
A beautiful story in the news
A beautiful social or cultural trend
A beautiful response to a public wrong
A beautiful conversation
A beautiful person
A beautiful business person**

And a week later, after reading Claudia Rankine’s beautiful book-length poem, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, in which she documents everyday acts of racism, the students were given an opposite assignment: to observe and document a way in which people in their world are *injured*.

(By the way, Elaine Scarry makes the case that, etymologically, the word that best captures the opposite of beauty is *injury*, not ugliness.)

So these are some examples of what we’re doing—I’ve also shared quite a bit on my blog, [Jumper](#).

The class shifts back and forth between what ASU Dean Steven Tepper calls ([in an article in the Chronicle of Higher Education](#)) “me-experiences” and “bigger-than-me experiences”. Students undergo, reflect, document, and often create in response to what they have experienced.

And how did it go?

Well, midway through the term a guest artist visiting the class asked the students what they had learned from the course, thus far. Here are some of their responses.

- I do things I wouldn’t do.
- I look at things harder.
- I see other people’s points of view. I think, “There might be more going on here so I won’t jump to a conclusion.”
- I am re-evaluating relationships in my life.
- I am asking whether I’ve had the emphasis on the wrong things.
- I am thinking about homework differently—how to make it creative, not anxiety-provoking. How not to approach homework with dread.
- I’m trying to focus on the process, not the product.
- I am slowing down.

The last one is significant. Many students have remarked on a new ability to be present in life, to pay attention to what is around them.

At the end of the term, I asked the students to tell me what they would say to a friend who asked, “What’s that beauty class about”?

One student said: “It’s about forgetting about the fucking ROI for two seconds, stepping back, and realizing that there is a greater purpose to life than your damn material equity.”

Another (the one who is studying to be an artist) said: “It’s transforming us into people who care.”

Perhaps my favorite comment came in response to a question posed by Polly Carl, who has been quite influential in my learning and thinking about beauty and this course. Polly gave a lecture on Rebecca Solnit’s *Field Guide to Getting Lost* (which I mentioned earlier). In her terrific book Solnit talks about the origins of the word lost. She writes:

The word “lost” comes from the Old Norse los, meaning the disbanding of an army, and this origin suggests soldiers falling out of formation to go home, a truce with the wide world. I worry now that many people never disband their armies, never go beyond what they know. Advertising, alarmist news, technology, incessant busyness, and the design of public and private space conspire to make it so.

After sharing this idea from Solnit, Polly asked the students, “What disbands your army? What takes you beyond what you already know?”

And the first student to raise her hand replied, “This beauty class disbands my army.”

And I thought, yes, this is the value. We need beauty in a business school because it is only by placing ourselves on a different path that we are likely to encounter these different parts of ourselves, and different ways of being, doing, and knowing the world.

But do we need beauty only in business schools? Or do we need it across the academy? In engineering schools, medical and nursing schools, journalism schools?

And what about arts administration programs?

That’s who I originally pitched as the target group for this course because, for a long time now, I’ve been skeptical of programs that are focused almost exclusively on developing the business skills of future arts leaders, and rarely, if ever, focused on the why of art. ...

Don’t we need beauty, too?

Part III: How does beauty matter for us?

Perhaps in the arts we assume we have beauty in the bag; but I'm not so sure we do. It seems to me we are as in need of beauty as the business school students.

Why?

Because the dominant lens through which progress and success are measured in our culture-at-large, and our specific fields, these days is economic.

It is not hard to identify evidence of this:

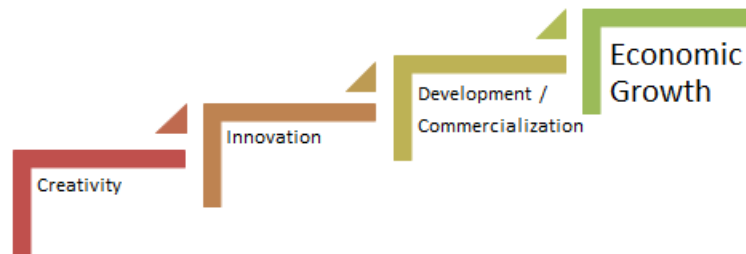
- Artists and risks are problematized rather than seen as inherent to the process of creativity.
- There is decreased willingness to support exploration that does not lead to an exploitable asset.
- Neither artists nor arts organizations are trusted by foundations and government bodies; we must justify our worth and account for all pennies in advance of spending them.
- There is interest in our numbers but not our content.
- Excellence has become conflated with money, power, and prestige.
- Capital projects capture a preponderance of attention and resources; donors want to put their names on buildings but have little attention for sustaining the art and culture inside them.
- Economic arguments lead and our focus is on figuring out new ways to make the arts not only pay their way but contribute to economic growth.
- Bigger is still perceived as better. Moreover, we enable and encourage institutions to grow and perpetuate themselves, even at the expense of art, artists, and community.
- We are encouraged to talk about our value propositions but not our values.
- We forfeit longer term intangible gains for shorter term ones that can be measured. It takes time for artists to mature, time to create great works of art, and time for the value of the arts to individuals and society to be realized. Yet we fail to turn attention to this longer term horizon.
- We spend an inordinate amount of time and energy focused on *administrivia* and too little focused on purpose.
- Board members find it awkward and intimidating to talk about the art.
- There seem to be many more administrators than artists in most arts organizations.
- Finally, we pay lip service to, but fail to take the radical steps that would be needed to address the systemic inequities in the distribution of resources and opportunities on our stages, in our administrations, in our boardrooms, and in our engagement with our communities.

So, yes, we need beauty.

We, too, need to make ourselves better.

Conclusion:

I titled this talk: *It's creative; but is it beautiful?* before I really knew what I was trying to capture with these words. Over the past few weeks, I've figured out what the title means to me. In our enthusiasm to figure out how to exploit our assets, how to create new ventures and sustain them over time, let's not get so caught up in this model:



... that we fail to stay true to ourselves

... that we fail to uphold our different way of relating to people and objects, our different way of seeing the world, our different way of being, doing and knowing.

As Jeanette Winterson says, “Art is a different value system.”

Let's take on board that (at least some) business types want (need) what they think we have ... excellence for its own sake, the ability to approach things intuitively and holistically, courage, vision, imagination, empathy, consciousness, hope, justice, truth, goodness, beauty.

Let's take stock and make sure we still *have* these things ...

... and that we still *value* these things.

Thank you for your kind attention.