



photo by Elisabeth Perez Luna

And so it begins....

My preparation for attending the grand opening of the new Barnes Foundation on the Parkway in Philadelphia began almost as immediately as I left the Foundation seven years ago. At times, reading articles, talking to former employees, or hearing the rantings of hypocritical neighbors and “friends,” would make my anxiety level wane or intensify. For this special weekend, I ordered fancy dresses, bought my plane ticket, and invited two friends to accompany me: one for each of the two gala celebrations.

It started with a Friday morning, 11 o'clock dedication and light refreshments. As I entered the downtown campus, I walked through what I imagine is a security checkpoint for future public visitors. Once inside the gates, the first name I saw on the wall was Neubauer Court, named for Barnes board vice chair, and president of Aramark, Joe Neubauer. The towering Ellsworth Kelly's sculpture of two rectangular shaped slabs of metal crowns a reflecting pool alongside the inner building façade. A modest, uninteresting array of Japanese maples flanks the courtyard walkway to the entrance of the building. It's only after making that turn towards the front door that you see the name, “The Barnes Foundation.”

Upon entering the building I walked into a grand hall, filled with well-wishers, billionaires, politicians, bloviates, and board members. It was hard to imagine how many different types of greetings I would receive, but they indeed ran the gamut. There were lots of hugs, and more awkward moments than I care to count. One of the board members' wives asked me how I was doing, with the taint of pity in her voice. When I told her I was doing just fine and that I was finishing up my book, she asked me if the book was good. I said yes. She asked if it was accurate, and I said yes. When she asked me if it was angry, I asked her what could possibly have happened to make me mad? I moved on.

One of the event staff showed me to a seat in the front row, and said I could sit there if I wanted. I put my things down, but on my way over to the refreshments, I saw a reserved seat with my name on it, front and center of the doors to the gallery. Board president Bernie Watson passed me, and I extended my hand to shake his. I think he was as surprised as I was at my gesture. I saw docents, former staff members, and lots of supporters and friends who said they knew this all started with my work. I thanked them then went in the front and took my seat for the start of the program.



Bernie Watson at the Dedication May 2012

"Well it's finally here. The Barnes is finally in the city of Philadelphia where it belongs." Those words echoed as the program began, and

it still seems a strange sentiment. The Barnes has always belonged in Merion. Its circumstance required its relocation. That circumstance was not bankruptcy. I shared that fact with a reporter a few weeks before the opening, and he told me that I had dropped his jaw. Bankruptcy was not the reason we filed the petition to move the Foundation to the city. At the time the petition was filed, the Barnes Foundation had a cash surplus and we had no debt - none. But, saying so made the rescue so much more gallant.

Why? Pray Tell....

The reason for the Barnes Foundation move on to the Parkway in Philadelphia was simple. The same Indenture – the very same document that freezes the Barnes Foundation collection in time also said very plainly, very specifically that if the Barnes Foundation was not viable in Merion, the collection should go to a Philadelphia institution. Barnes' letters to and from colleagues and friends spoke of his interest in having the Foundation more accessible to common everyday working class people after his death. Barnes worked tirelessly to invite Philadelphia schoolchildren to the Foundation, only to be rejected by school system officials. By 1930, over 100 school districts and universities were using Barnes' pedagogy as a basis for their programs. Girl's High and Barnes alma mater Central High school, where the only two in Philadelphia who used the Foundation's collections. In a letter Albert Barnes wrote to his friend and colleague John Dewey, he worried that in an attempt to re-create the program once they were gone, people would set it in stone, make it rigid, and thereby destroy it. He was right.

The negativity from neighbors and former students was never about where the Barnes belonged. It was merely that it didn't belong only to them. There was no greater example of hypocrisy than their constant harangue. None of them ever read the Indenture or Barnes' Will. One even testified to that in court.

All of this tumbled through my mind as I sat there listening to speech after speech after speech. An announcement was made that Lincoln University would be signing a resolution after the dedication to finally create a collaborative program with the Barnes Foundation. After my seven years of praying, wishing, urging, and cajoling collaboration I still find it hard to believe. There were words from board members, the mayor of Philadelphia, funders, and so many others I lost track.

Gov. Rendell was sitting two seats down, brimming from ear to ear. I looked around the room, for some mention of Dr. Albert C Barnes' ideas, his vision, his image – anything that talked about the founder and why he created such an amazing institution, but there was nothing. I heard his name mentioned three or four times during the speeches, and wondered if anyone would use some of John Dewey's

words from the original opening of the Foundation in 1925. When Dewey sent Dr. Barnes a draft of the opening remarks, Barnes sent them back and told Dewey to, "... mention the Negroes. I want people to know I'm serious about this business."

Dr. Neil Rudenstine, former president of Harvard University and Barnes Foundation board member took the podium and acknowledged the hard work of the staff. He was the one that said to the audience that the work of relocating Foundation came as a result of my work and asked me to stand. I appreciated the acknowledgment, but it did nothing to lessen my anxiety. It seemed that hours had passed, and I had no idea actually how much time the speeches took, but when Derek Gillman took the podium for the second time he asked the board members to join him.

Instead, they all came down from their seats on the dais and stood directly in front of the patterned metal gates that now are the entrance to the gallery. I noticed, during the speeches there four brown fingers sticking through the opening nervously anticipating the time when the gates were to be opened. As the board members stood there, the gates swung open and four trumpeters played a rather pretentious salute that reminded me of something from the Queen's Jubilee. I entered behind the trustees eager to see what the galleries looked like; to see the way that light now cradles the amazing masterpieces at the



Barnes.

Brown Fingers

For all intents and purposes everything is the same. The room relationships on either end of the new gallery were changed, for the

installation of classrooms and increased natural light. The old thermostats were removed, albeit unnecessarily so. After the renovation early 1990s, the old thermostats were put back on the walls for continuity's sake. It really didn't matter. I walked through the galleries visiting old friends, my mind and my heart full of memories. The weekend was just beginning.

The Party is Just Beginning

That evening, the Benefactors' Gala began at 6 PM sharp. I arrived to the front gates with my good friend Lonnie Graham. He wore his Nehru jacket – authentic from India, and I wore a simple yet elegant bright red dress. A photographer was positioned just inside of Neubauer Court, flanked by a staff member taking down the names of all the entrants. On this second visit to the galleries, I looked more closely for the things that seem to be missing. The list was getting longer.





Angelica Rudenstine in the Changing Exhibition Gallery

The changing exhibition gallery was now open, and it contained an amazing display of archival materials documenting the life and times of Dr. Albert C Barnes. There were his writings, and publications. The de Chirico portrait of Albert Barnes was there along with catalogs, journals, and other accounts of how and why Dr. Barnes created the Foundation. I wondered why these things were off to the side in the smaller gallery, and not a main feature in the entrance hall outside of the main gallery itself. As I walked through the galleries, benefactors and docents took the opportunity to eavesdrop, to learn more about the Foundation. I mentioned a few of the student works in the collection, which seemed a surprise to the Barnes' education director. And there were other things that seemed a bit off.

Lonnie and I returned to the Main Hall, to cocktails and hors d'oeuvres. Deputy Attorney General Larry Barth admired Lonnie's Nehru jacket. I assured Barth with his movie star good looks and 6 foot four frame he could pull off anything he wanted to wear. It wasn't long before we were ushered into the tented pavilion constructed along the entire length of the building in which dinner would be served. Beautiful flowers adorned every table, and place cards were at every seat. The evening's program was hosted by news anchor Brian Williams. There were more speeches by Neubauer, and Watson. Norah Jones was the evening's entertainment.

During the opening remarks, a video was played. It showed a young woman sitting in a research setting as though she was working. A male voice with French accent talked about Dr. Barnes' trips to Europe in the summer, and his support of students and their families. The voice described Albert Barnes' amazing generosity, in buying houses, farms, cars, clothing, medical treatment and other necessities for his workers and students. The video included images of receipts, proving his largess. The video ended with the voice saying that whenever someone heard anyone speak ill of Dr. Barnes, they should please bite him in the leg. Upon the strain emerged the image of Fidel, Barnes favorite canine best friend. To this day it cofounds me why so many speak of Dr. Barnes in hateful malicious ways. Philadelphia Magazine called Barnes a monster and an empire builder – but then we are in an age where the media just makes stuff up. Nothing I read in seven years, no words from those who knew him would support such ridiculousness. Was it that bad that a man in Philadelphia in the 1920's abhorred elitism and bigotry?

We were seated on the front row, but far off to the side so we watched Jones performed on the Jumbotron. I waited until her set ended, and made my way back to the ladies room. When I emerged, a gospel choir was finishing their performance. When I returned to my table, I leaned over and asked Lonnie who they were. He said he didn't know. He couldn't remember. I asked rhetorically why there

would be a gospel choir performing at the dedication when Dr. Barnes spoke adoringly about his admiration for and love of Negro spirituals. Lonnie said whoever put the program together probably didn't know the difference. I agreed.

The next day, starting at 8 AM was a symposium on the “Artist and the Collector.” Dr. David Driskell and artist Moe Brooker were two of the illustrious lineup of speakers. I reminded Moe when I saw him at the dedication Friday morning that I remembered our first conversation about Albert Barnes when he told me that Barnes’ pedagogy was useless. He laughed and said he remembered. I planned to attend the symposium, but I couldn't. What I didn't see were the names of people who personally knew Albert Barnes, or students of the foundation who had in their careers become quite accomplished in the field of fine art. Bill Wixom for example, Director Emeritus for the Cloisters studied at the Foundation during Dr. Barnes’ lifetime. I wonder if he had even been invited. I wondered if Fannie Williams had been invited. Williams attended the New Jersey Manual Training Institute for Colored Youth and often sang Negro spirituals at the Foundation for Dr. Barnes in Merion. When I last saw her, at 95 she was still quite lucid, driving her car and wearing high heeled lace up shoes.

That second evening again began at 6 PM sharp. This time supporters paid \$3000 per couple to attend. I was accompanied to this event by my good friend John Bernard, who is also my investment counselor. John flew in from Detroit for the event, impeccably dressed in his designer tux. We walked through the galleries, for John's first visit. Dinner was held in the same pavilion with the same menu of filet mignon as the night before. I still can't believe someone asked John if he would show them to their seats. The evening's emcee was a reporter from the Today Show, and evening's entertainment consisted of performers from the Pennsylvania Ballet and the Opera Company. They showed the same video of Fidel and the same speeches took place. During dinner, three students from the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts took to the stage with paint boxes and easels to paint while we dined. By now I was exhausted. There was a noticeable dearth of brown fingers...

I returned to The Four Seasons and in my room was a plate swirled with pink and yellow colored sugar, beneath five pieces of handcrafted chocolate. One included the image of the new Barnes logo, and another smaller piece contained the image of a Gauguin painting from the collection. It was quite the dedication – but was this what Barnes meant he said the Barnes is for the common man?

Things Amiss

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inside of the entry alcove of the building. The strip is about 2 inches thick and includes a quote by Dr. Barnes and his name. That's it. There is no bust, no plaque, no image of Dr. Albert C Barnes. I was told that once the changing exhibition is taken down, the de Chirico portrait of Albert Barnes would be moved into the entrance hall. That exhibition will be in place for 10 months. But what would have been wrong with including some permanent memorialization of the founder of this great institution?

There was a glaring omission that makes me cross. It has to do with Dr. Albert Barnes' views about African art and its place in understanding classic aesthetic elements. Dr. Barnes wrote passionately about the importance of African art to the development of European painting. We're not talking about African art and modernism. Barnes said that were it not for the arts of Africa, the art of Europe would have died in the 15th century. He made his views apparent in the original building in Merion.

On either side of the entrance to the building were ceramic re-creations by the Enfield pottery works of African masks from the Barnes' collection. It was the only place in this country where you entered a major collection of European and American art through an African aesthetic lens. Derek Gilman assured me that African masks were being etched into the metal doors, but were not yet ready. But there was more.



Parkway Building Entrance

Along the inside of the main gallery room in Merion, Barnes installed a frieze, with African masks every five feet. When Henri Matisse delivered *La Danse*, he insisted that Dr. Barnes take down the frieze because he said it distracted from his mural. Dr. Barnes refused. The design complemented the iron railings inside and outside of the Barnes gallery building that included an African mask in the center below a Grecian urn, flanked by classical scroll designs. Dr. Barnes was making an important statement. He was saying to his audience that African aesthetic belonged on the same plane, and was as important as Greek and Roman classical design. These elements are missing from the new building.

During the evening of the second gala, I asked several people why those elements were not included, but there were no good answers. It seems no one quite knew why they weren't there or why they were there in the first place. It seems no one understood they had any importance beyond decoration. I saw the architects walking through the building, and I introduced myself. I told them I thought the building was quite wonderful but that I had a problem with the removal of the African art in the places where Barnes initially installed it. The architects nervously explained to me that the new design in the frieze below the mural was based on Kuba cloth, and that the stone patterning in the entrance hall reflecting that of kente cloth. I asked them if anybody knew that, or if there was anything in the building that would tell people that's what they were looking at. They told me there would be a brochure later. Their answers did little to calm me. Quite the reverse.

I asked them if anybody picked up on their subtle reference to African textiles. Barnes' inclusion of African art as a permanent fixture of the building was not adornment. It was not decoration. It was a unique, still controversial but very specific statement. Now it's gone. One of the architects told me that designing for the new building was like walking a tight rope because there were so many things they had to keep in mind and so many details they had to slavishly adhere to. I told them I understood, but they also understood when they took the commission that would be the case. That's no excuse.

This last observation may seem petty, or too slavish to detail. I was accused of that by one of the attendees, and it's an accusation I'm quite comfortable with. It seems to me the greatest danger always was removing Albert C. Barnes from the Barnes Foundation. The collection and his ideas are intertwined. One did not happen without the other. It's still important, because Barnes' ideas about learning to see, about understanding aesthetics, as a way to reinforce the need for cultural equity are profound. They are lessons we still have not yet learned. I always suspected the foul denigration of Barnes, even after his death was a way to discount him as a man, to then discount

his ideas as “quirky”, a word I have grown to despise.

In Dewey’s opening remarks in 1925, he suggested that if everyone was capable of making great beauty how could one man look at another as inferior. Barnes’ insistence on the Foundation's access for working class people and African Americans should have been front and center – maybe as emcee, or art student, or trumpeter. Just those brown fingers as the board members strode in to the gallery in front of everyone (even though I'm sure they had been in the galleries before the dedication.)

I keep milling over in my mind whether I'm being reactionary, or petty, or a bit catty which is not my intention. But I think my concerns have merit. Yesterday I received a letter from one of the former guards at the Barnes Foundation, who has been writing me ever since I moved to the West Coast. He said he is always grateful that when I led the Foundation I allowed all of the security guards to attend classes for free as long as their attendance did not interfere with work hours. The letter I received included a very poignant observation.

In it, he said he was anxious about going to the downtown Barnes and that what he saw went beyond his expectations. He said based on what he had read, Dr. Barnes ideas are lost in the shuffle. "Regards for the so-called common man is lost. The Foundation will now become a paradise for the rich." I hope he is proven wrong.

Dr. Albert C Barnes and his ideas are eternal. Great art should shift your worldview. It should make you see people, events, and things in a new light. It should enhance your curiosity, ask questions and become fully engaged in the moment. The analysis of great art, of the plastic elements of light, line, color and space can and should lead to the development of critical problem solving skills. It is true that great artists sometimes make really bad art. It is also true that there are thousands of unnamed artists who make masterpieces.

Knowing the difference is more important than rushing into the gallery to recognize the name that sounds familiar, to then step back and admire the painting or sculpture after having learned it was made by a “master” who is only known to be so because of name recognition. Beyond art aficionados, collectors, historians, and the other art elite, working-class people need not be treated as though they don't understand what they're looking. The Barnes Foundation was about bringing around an understanding of what makes it great, in a way that would help our broader society. Maybe I am slavish to Dr. Barnes’ ideas and his vision, but then that's why the working title of my book is, "Defending the Dead." It seems someone still has to.



Merion Building Entrance

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