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Values and Ethics of Community-Based Arts Practice

Values and ethics aren't carved in stone. Like so many things worth having—excellence, love and democracy, for instance—they emerge from collaboration and negotiation, from real-life experience. That's why the values and ethics shaping our work depend on who we are and what we are trying to do: what's right for one set of people and circumstances may be very wrong for another.

The ability to size up each situation and respond with skill and flexibility is key. That comes from practice. Thinking and talking about values and ethics strengthens our self-knowledge and ethical "muscles" to handle future challenges. Engaging with these questions, we become more present, skillful, and creative. Then, when ethical challenges arise—as they inevitably will—by knowing ourselves, by together exploring meaning and value in the situation at hand and achieving common understanding of what's at stake, we can find mutually acceptable resolutions and move on.

Five Things to Remember About Ethical Challenges

This workshop is structured around five principles:

- (1) The most important ethical self-knowledge artists working in community need is to know their own values and commitments, to whom they are accountable, why, and how.
- (2) The most important ethical capacity artists working in community need is awareness, the ability to sense an ethical challenge before it erupts into full-scale conflict.
- (3) The most important ethical aim artists working in community must master is bringing out the full complexity of a situation, including all of its contradictions and ambiguities.
- (4) The most important ethical skill artists working in community need is the ability to engage everyone in an ethical challenge in a way that is enlightening to all, that uplifts the moment into true learning and creates maximum possibility.
- (5) The highest form of resolution is one that redefines issues so that everyone feels heard, respected and included in the outcome. We tend to think of resolutions as "you win, I lose" or vice versa. Some conflicts have to be settled that way, but much of the time, there's a resolution that allows all to feel respected.

Self-Knowledge: Who Are You and What Do You Want?

Whether you see your own work as education or as art-making, as community organizing or even as spiritual practice, how you approach it will depend on why you are doing it:

* Have you chosen this work to make a living, to develop and express your own gifts, to help others, to change the world, to gain power, to share power, or for other reasons?

- * Do you see your work as awakening awareness, healing injury, creating capacity, making meaning, making beauty, getting a job done, or something else?
- * Do you see your working relationships as peer partnerships, as student-teacher (or teacher-student), as selfless service, as serving your personal aims, or something else?
- * Are you most like a griot, a magician, a gardener, a rabbi, a coach, a role-model, a tutor, a parent, a clerk, or someone else?

There's no need to settle on a single answer. But each person's unique constellation of answers makes a huge difference in how that individual feels and connects with others.

Have you had the experience of performing the same action for two very different reasons, completely transforming the way you feel about it? Compare peeling potatoes for minimum wage in a cafeteria kitchen with making dinner for the person you love most in the world. Compare the drudgery of folding, stuffing and stamping a mailing you care nothing about with the fun and excitement of sending out invitations to your child's graduation. Even ordinarily tedious acts are lifted up when they are undertaken with higher intention. What are your highest intentions?

Just so, "working with communities," can have very different meanings. Often, there's a default assumption: "the community," "the artist" and "the educator" are assumed to be known quantities. The artist "plugs into" the community the way a power source plugs into a wall-socket. We develop protocols for plugging in: for instance, adopting a community assessment process involving meetings and petitions to ensure that a mural doesn't go up on a wall where it is not wanted, that images they find offensive are not imposed on those who will look at them every day.

These same processes can be carried out as an odious duty or as an embodiment of higher love. When you know yourself and know your own motives and intentions, you have more power to ensure that your actions embody the intentions you value most. There's lots of room for variation in both identity and in practice. But there is one absolute: every person you work with deserves to benefit from your full presence and highest intentions. No matter what a phenomenal artist you are, if you can't "work with the community" as an expression of love and respect, you should find another place to invest your talents.

What Are Your Values and Commitments?

Do you know our own values and purposes? It's easy to think so, but look deeper: do you have a vague notion, or real clarity? To be effective, artists working in community need to know exactly where we stand. Certain core values are typical of this work, and it's easy for these to bump up against countervailing dominant attitudes. For instance, here are some value statements that can lead to values conflicts or ethical challenges (these are discussed in the chapter of *New Creative Community: The Art of Cultural Development* on "Theory from Practice"):

- * *Critical examination of cultural values can reveal how oppressive messages have been internalized by members of marginalized communities.* People come to know themselves

through participation in community arts work, and sometimes that knowing makes them want to stand up and speak out. Some listeners won't like hearing what they say.

- * *Live, active social experience strengthens our ability to participate in democratic discourse and community life, whereas an excess of passive, isolated experience disempowers.* Community arts work can be a rehearsal for other forms of social action and democratic participation, so it can be perceived as a kind of social agitation.
- * *Society will always be improved by the expansion of dialogue and by the active participation of all communities and groups in exploring and resolving social issues.* Not everyone wants all of us to take part in setting society's direction. When community arts work helps to raise marginalized voices, those who believe that a good citizen is a silent, compliant citizen may object.
- * *Self-determination is essential to the dignity and social participation of all communities.* When members of marginalized communities use community arts work to assert their own rights and aspirations, the powers-that-be may feel anxious.
- * *A goal of community cultural development work is to expand liberty for all, so long as no community's definition of "liberty" impinges on the basic human rights of others.* In a culturally diverse society, conflict can arise over conflicting definitions: traditionalists may say that men and women should sit separately at an event, preserving each gender's decorum; but egalitarians may object, countering that separation impinges on their rights of association.
- * *A goal of community cultural development work is to promote equality of opportunity among groups and communities, helping to redress inequalities wherever they appear.* Injustice is often a strong motivator, but some resource-providers may not like drawing attention to problems or pressing for redress. They may want all messages to be positive, skipping over what's wrong.

What do these principles mean to you? Do you agree with these statements, or do some seem wrong? What are the core values that drive your work? Use some quiet time to make notes, returning to them from time to time to see if your feelings have changed.

Spotting Ethical Challenges

While all of us are connected, everyone is unique. We see the world through individual lenses shaped by experience, capacity, and belief. Therefore, human beings in community present almost unlimited potential to generate ethical challenges. When a conflict or challenge arises, it isn't a mistake or failure; it's an inevitability. Expect it; embrace it; learn from it. But don't feel you have failed if it happens.

A common pitfall of collaborative work is to carry a fear of making mistakes into a realm that thrives on trial-and-error, pushing away signs that shouldn't be ignored. Often, our bodies are more reliable guides than our brains to what's happening. If you pay attention to your own responses, when you perceive an "oh-oh" feeling in the pit of your stomach, you will welcome it as an early alert rather than telling yourself it's nothing. The earlier

your awareness is engaged in an evolving ethical challenge, the less likely it will escalate into a full-scale drama.

Here are a few common types of ethical challenge that come up in the context of community cultural development practice:

- * ***Freedom of expression.*** Probably the most common challenge, this typically arises when an artifact or performance features content that makes someone uncomfortable. The discomfort can worsen when that someone has significant power to affect a project's fate—a funder, an organization's executive staff or board members, a politician, a media personality, or an advocacy group. How do you balance the legal contract you have with a funder or employer with the unwritten moral contract you have with community members? This is a key question for anyone working in community: to whom are you accountable?
- * ***Personal boundaries.*** Intimate material often surfaces in community cultural development work. Participants may be asked to share their life stories or their deepest feelings about the way a problem affects themselves, their families, their communities. The artist who works in community is responsible for ensuring that no one is coerced into a premature or unprotected intimacy, while simultaneously helping to create a respectful climate and caring container for anything that people do choose to share. How do you balance openness and confidentiality? Protection and expression?
- * ***Identity.*** Even the nicest people may be surprised to find undigested bits of prejudice clinging to their speech. What happens when one group's vocabulary includes names others find objectionable? What happens when the members of one group adopt a moral code that another perceives as harmful, as when young people brought up to abhor same-sex relationships are involved in a project with gay or lesbian kids? What happens when the members of one group have ideas about how women or children should behave that seem too restrictive to other community members?
- * ***Artist's role.*** Where is the line between your own right to creative expression and the imposition on others of your personal ideas or aesthetics? Some artists try to be invisible facilitators, assisting participants without making their subjective influence felt; others see their own training and skill as paramount in shaping a project; still others see the main point as reciprocity, an equality of exchange and sharing. How do you balance these considerations?

Practicing Ethics

The next time you hear about an ethical dilemma or challenge in working with a community, take some time to explore it fully. Singly or in a small group, focus in turn on each of these questions, stopping only when you feel satisfied that you understand the issue in a very full way and feel equipped to work with others on it:

- (1) ***What is the issue? Who are the parties in conflict?*** Describe the issue even-handedly from the perspective of each party, without spinning or favoring any position. Try to

describe it such that each person will feel fairly represented (rather than caricatured) by your account of his or her perspective. What is primary for each party, and what does each party see as secondary or irrelevant?

(2) ***How does the issue look through the lens of your own values and commitments?***

Do your own feelings lead you to prefer a particular way of seeing the issue? Is there anything you might be missing because it conflicts with one of your own pet theories or core beliefs?

(3) ***List any and all observations you can make about the issue, going above and beyond whatever has been said by the parties in conflict.***

Imagine yourself as a visitor from another planet: how does the issue look to your newbie eyes? Does it resemble any other type of situation? What might the people involved be missing? What are their blind spots or biases? Include everything you can think of, even if some of your observations are directly contradictory. Can you see a way to reframe or redefine the issue so it's less polarized?

(4) ***List all possible resolutions to the situation, whether you like them or not.***

Consider the implications of each: how each might affect the community, how each might be perceived by the interested parties, how each feels to you when you try it on for size.

(5) ***Finally, spend some time devising ways to share all of this information with the people involved.***

How can you help ensure that the issues are explored to the fullest in the fairest possible way? This might call on your creative skills: Can you storyboard it? Create a Forum Theatre around it? Create a web dialogue? Call on respected people to represent certain elements of the controversy in a public meeting? Turn it into a spoken-word slam? How can the issue become an opportunity for everyone to learn more, understand each other better, and create the best possible outcome?

Good luck! May you always know who you are, choose your actions with compassion and care, and inspire others to do the same.