

DESIGN STANDARDS FOR AN EVOLVED CULTURAL SUPPORT SYSTEM

Bill Cleveland

In the beginning there was a Word
The Word, a word,
who knows...,
but somewhere along the line
that Word begat
a Story and
that Story was whispered, and sung,
and gestured and proclaimed
until it gave birth to another story---
a brother story
and then, a sister story
that, given the nature of humans and stories
grew to a family, a village, a tribe,
a continent of stories
all alive in time
to the rhythm of all the story hearts
and all the story souls
beating then, and now
and forever in the world

If you sir
here and now
can feel that rhythm
If you can move your feet and sing
and make contact with the memory-filled universe
of all that telling, and listening, and telling
you are tapped into in the crucible of the signifying, sanctifying
transforming power of stories
Yes ma'am, if you are tapped into that
you are holding a beaded parasol in the second line of all those
story births and deaths
and the change, change, change that comes with them
If you are tapped in to that
well it may just be that you on your way to becoming
a link in the chain of the makers and takers of stories
And if that's true,
if you are tapped into that
then you'd better listen up:

Where do I start
Well, I'll begin with a warning
We all know about stories, right
Stories are fun, stories frolic, stories amuse...
Yes, but
stories are also nimble, tricky, malevolent, and ...
well, you fill in the blank.

Some say if you Hold “the story,”
if you own the story
then you hold the power
Others say, Defining “the story” is defining power.

And that subjugation is story killing

What we do know is that every
individual, every family, every community
is defined by their stories,
and, if we don't tell our stories
we lose our dignity,
our humanity,
our souls,
as in East Germany,
as in Chile,
as in Cambodia.

These particular stories teach us that
tyranny is story subjugation driven by fear
Here's how it works:
One-- Keep them from telling the story
Two-- Ignore the story
Three-- Control the story by altering or editing it
Four-- Romanticize the story
Five-- Simplify the story
Six-- Trivialize the story
Seven-- Buy, then sell the story
Eight-- Murder the story

But, you know, stories do not die.
Just like the blackberry canes that
crowd our lanes and clog our fences

And of course you all know the story about neighbors and fences
Good neighbors ---make good fences and
good fences make for good stories
And as those good stories migrate and join
at the hip
at the shoulder
at the third eye intersection of self interest and common ground
those tall tale partners
become democracy zygotes

Yes, democracy is the art of collective story making.
Democracy says:
“Here is the story to this point—let's decide together, what's next.”

The arts are the tools humans use to craft stories.
Story making is the reason---for art.

Got a mystery, get a Shaman to
stitch it to the rest
of your cosmology
with a story
If you don't, the mystery, unaddressed,
and out of context,
will literally scare you to death

Untold stories are nascent shadows
The shadow grows as the story is smothered,
and
stifled stories,
unpeeled stories,
unexamined stories,
left to fester---
are very, very dangerous.

If you don't examine and tell your own stories
you can't help others tell theirs.
Stories reveal humanity in all its frailty, power, ugliness,
passion ...
you fill in the blank.

Some stories make sense and meaning,
others lie.

Everything in the world is translated for us,
to us, by us
through some story
For good and for ill
Everything we see, hear, taste and feel
has a story attached.
Meaning makes its presence felt
through the story.

Imagination is cold fusion,
generating more power than it consumes
as it chugs along raising the temperature
in the hot house of stories.

Privilege is the ability to manifest one's story, unabated,
to the exclusion of other's stories.
Dignity is the unfettered capacity
to make and share stories.
If you have great material wealth
you can buy the story you think you need
If your story holds great meaning
you can acquire power
out of proportion
to your material status.

Empathy happens when
I tell you my story
and you tell my story back to me
and I nod my head.

Art contains the story, but only just--- for a while

The artist says, "This is how the story goes at this time and this place."
Sometimes the story sticks around
Sometimes it mutates or migrates.
Sometimes it escapes

Improvisation is fishing for fugitive stories
New stories get born
when improvisation and imagination converge
bending time and space wide enough
for story sperms and the story eggs
to find each other and join.

But of course there are no new stories
and all stories are new

Some artists say,
Have a seat while I tell my story
Some artists say,
Have a seat while I tell someone else's story
Some artists say,
Have a seat while I tell your story
Some artists say,
Stand up we have a story to tell

I say
*Once upon a time...*¹

Over the last 15 days I've been thinking a lot about David O'Fallon's questions. Which were, in essence, which aspects of the cultural support system work, which need to be tinkered with, and what systems need to be created anew. My response is informed by my recent experience working some interesting cross-sector arts projects that involved questioning the assumptions, and notions of success that define existing systems and structures in various arenas, like education, community development, human services.

These experiences have reinforced my belief that like many individual humans, most human systems are inherently resistant to fundamental change. The reasons are obvious, most systems persist because they generally work for the people and institutions that create and control them. And, by their nature systems seek to strengthen and reinforce the patterns and influences that brought them into being. On top of this, institutional change is hard. Real change

¹ Poem by Bill Cleveland; Epilogue of Cleveland and Pat Shifferd, *Between Grace & Fear*.

disrupts those old and familiar patterns of privilege and influence. Actual change also requires new learning. Because of this, the people and institutions that are vested in a system will often fight harder to avoid losing power and feeling untethered and incompetent than those who are ill-served by the system will fight to change it. We have also learned the prevailing assumptions and structures that define systems can exert a tenacious grip on the imagination. That proverbial box that we are supposed to think outside of can be a powerful force for maintaining the status quo.

So our approach has been to begin by considering where a constituency or community wants or needs to go as a precursor to considering the structures and processes will be required to advance that journey. These guidelines or design standards then become armature upon which the evolving prototype social sculptures are based.

So my approach to David's questions has been to begin identifying some of the characteristics that an evolved cultural support system might include. These are shared with the caveat that this example of prototype design standards is missing its most important element—namely the critical input of the community that will be most affected by them.

So here they are the ones I've come up with this for the ones that I come up with thus far

Underlying Assumptions:

- Arts-centered learning is necessary for the healthy development and growth of every human.
- We need the arts make sense and meaning in the world and bear sensate witness to those things that are fundamentally beyond human comprehension.
- Robust and pervasive cultural development is necessary for the creation of healthy, equitable, and sustainable communities.
- The development of a worldview that supports an equitable and sustainable future is not possible without the active participation of society's creators.

Design Standards for an Evolved Cultural Support System

Moving forward our cultural support systems should:

Clearly define and aggressively advance equitable access to cultural resources and participation at every level of our society.

Recognize and respond to the overlapping and interdependent nature of local, regional, national and global cultural ecosystems

Advance the development of cultural ecosystems that operate across community sectors and are fully integrated into the broader social, political, and economic landscapes in which they function.

Support and incentivize the development of new, equitable strategies for managing and supporting art making and presentation both inside and outside of the non-profit framework.

Significantly increase both the stability and the creative risk taking capacities of the cultural sector.

Prioritize support for the originating, indigenous creative capacities of individual artists and community-responsive arts organizations.

Be agile, adaptive, responsive and fearless in form and function.

Be respectful of, and responsive to the complex and diverse cultural histories, values, belief systems, and practices that define our communities.

Employ documentary processes that emphasize first voice representation and are contextually sensitive to those different histories, values, beliefs, and practices.

Invest in the advancement of cultural leaders as community leaders.

Commit to clarity of intentions, outcomes, and definitions of success.

Have ultimate accountability to the people and places that bear the consequences of the successes and failures of community cultural development efforts.

Invest in community cultural scaffolding that includes professional development, research, advocacy, building policy development and a sustainability economy.

Recognize, and be responsive to the moral and ethical issues inherent to community cultural development work.

Invest in community cultural infrastructure that includes professional development, research, advocacy, network and policy development, and of course material support.