

On Life and Meaning

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Episode 31 – Robert Bush – Culture for All

A Barbaric Yawp

And now a personal word,

Robert Bush's passion for the arts is real and exciting. His love for the arts overflows as he shares what art means to him. You can hear the jazz fusion and see the contemporary paintings on the wall as he describes the art that he loves. Robert is moved by what he does and the citizens he serves. He is leading the Arts & Science Council with a joy that inspires.

But there is something about administering the arts that is very strange. Arts administration is an internal contradiction: it is business management that seeks to support and encourage artistic expression. It fulfills a bureaucratic function: writing plans, issuing budgets, transferring monies, charting metrics, and advocating policy ... about the arts ... about human creativity ... about the very activity that seeks to drive a spike into management.

Art is resistance. Art is rebellion. Art is, as Walt Whitman and Robin Williams cried out, a barbaric yawp. Art is an unbinding. It is spray paint. It is monumental design. It is melody and harmony and rhythm. It is anger. It is sorrow and gratitude and love.

Yet arts councils create a world in which artists and innovators must fill out applications for grants, keep spreadsheets, send invoices, align with community needs, and report outcomes. It is a weird thing, arts administration. All of it kills—and sustains—culture for all. This begs the question: what is culture anyway?

In 2014, Joshua Rothman wrote a piece for the *New Yorker* entitled “The Meaning of Culture.” In it, he noted how confusing the word “culture” can be, that it has many definitions and is more than the sum of its definitions. Rothman referenced the critic Raymond Williams who wrote that “culture” has three very different meanings: there is culture as individual enrichment, as when we say someone is cultured; there is culture as a community's particular way of life, as when we describe a city's culture as corporate or daring or gritty; and then there is culture as an activity, as measured by the museums, concerts, festivals, and public art encouraged by a ministry of culture like the Arts & Science Council. Rothman noted that each time we use the word “culture,” we incline toward one or another of these meanings: toward a culture that makes a person more

insightful and expressive, toward a culture that includes a person in a group, or toward a culture that invites a person into a venue for a display or a performance.

Culture gets even more complicated: the use of the word “culture” in culture is constantly evolving. Culture once meant the progress of civilization, and later culture was the opposite of the rational rules and efficiencies of civilization. Once it meant the bottom-up expressions of a people. Later it meant the top-down agendas of institutions. What does it mean to have a culture of transparency or a culture of accountability? What is high culture? Or low culture? What does multicultural mean?

Rothman ended his reflection on culture with what culture, however defined, and all ministries of culture, are ultimately about: a good life, a life in which we express and appreciate human creativity in full. Rothman wrote that culture represents a wish, a wish that “a group of people might discover, together, a good way of life; that their good way of life might express itself in their habits, institutions, and activities; and that those, in turn, might help individuals flourish in their own way.”

This is the work that Robert Bush is engaged in: creating the conditions in which each of us, all of us, can flourish.

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