

SPEECH TO THE BARING FOUNDATION ARTS EXCHANGE DAY AT THE
BATTERSEA ARTS CENTRE 20TH OCTOBER 2009

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The Baring Foundation began to fund work under the theme of arts and refugees and asylum seekers in 2004 starting with six grants made that year. Since then it has awarded grants to 55 different organisations totalling £3 million. The last group of recipients will have funding to work with until 2012 and six years down the line we have made grants to every region of England and to Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland.

The outcomes of this work have been charted in several ways...the publication we commissioned with the Arts Council and Paul Hamlyn Foundation offered an overview of the possible impacts of the work. And your annual reports to us provide myriad accounts of outcomes against your objectives and of opportunities that some regular core funding has enabled you to take up.

I hesitate to reduce the scope of your achievements by trying to sum them up in this short time, as some may have remained undocumented – and some may have been grossly exaggerated! But it is clear that your work has had many positive effects on the lives of individuals, of communities, of your organisations, on policy makers and on the artistic landscape in general

Today we've seen... how individual young people have learnt specific artistic skills, as well as how to work together, to understand each other better, to make themselves understood and to become active citizens within many different fields of work and life. Your reports tell of the qualifications and routes to employment, that have been achieved by young and adult participants in your work –how it has built people's confidence, self esteem, language skills, combated depression and isolation and made people safer.

Not just young people, but many adults have found their way through the acute challenges of being newly arrived in Britain, by finding a sense of place and acceptance as a starting point to building a new life, through the spaces that arts organisations offer. As one young man, in Sheffield told me - , after being dispersed to that City after his exile from the Ivory Coast – “Finding Sheffield Live, was, more important than food or shelter.”

Communities dealing with change and massive social and economic challenges, all of them encountering people of many different ethnic and cultural traditions- that have had little contact or truthful awareness of each other, have been brought together in safe, creative, celebratory ways, finding a space in which a dialogue can begin about how people can shape the environments in which they and their families live together.

Participation in the arts can be a powerful process for people to regain a sense of place and identity, when they have been at their most disempowered. It can change the mis-understandings and mis-information of one cultural group about another; your work has fostered empathy and a respect for difference by its ability to be a holding

frame for different histories, different futures and a current process for exploring human possibilities.

Professional policy makers and service providers across housing, education, health and many other aspects of society, have been able to understand the realities the needs and the aspirations of communities with much more subtlety and authenticity than their vantage point often offers them.....I have recently spoken to a Community Cohesion Officer whose response to a participatory play about the changing cultural communities in the Black Country, was to say that this had captured more powerfully in one project what her community cohesion programme had been trying to do for three years. She wanted her whole department to see it and learn from the insights it provided and the directors of all the other council departments too. We have discussed today how the important cross sectoral partnerships that you create – make for better and more relevant services and better informed decision-makers.

Arts organisations have themselves been strengthened. In some cases by the added capacity to make further funding applications, in others by gaining additional skills and time to take stock of their organisational development. Very often depth and strength has come from the relative security of three years funding enabling genuine and long-term relationships with partners and participants and nurturing a new professional arts workforce enriched by the skills and knowledge of many new artists from many roots and backgrounds. As we heard this afternoon, new organisations and new types of organisation are growing up because of these experiences.

Between you, you represent differences of form, of processes, circumstances, cultural identities and roots, but it is clear from the discussions today that you all have a strong sense of purpose, girded towards positive outcomes. ... If one broad purpose connects us, it may be that we want to create spaces and secure resources and circumstances to enable people to find their own expressive voice, and to have it heard, freely and in safety.

I am wary though, as a funder, of funders being too direct in defining what other people's aims should be and assessing them on whether the outcomes matched the aims. Over the recent period, the context for the arts has been dominated by other people's plans, objectives, targets and a demand for evidence, a plethora of pilots testing hypotheses as if we are the same as NICE the body that licenses drugs - of course, if public or charitable money is being allocated then the fundamental questions – was it value for money? and – for whose benefit? are legitimate and essential.

But there remains a dilemma and a paradox, and I love dilemmas, which is why I am hopelessly addicted to the arts (or is it the other way round?). For me the really interesting things about the arts –are unpredictability, surprise discoveries, new insights, unusual points of view, and especially their ability to enable us to see and feel the contradictions of our lives and those of others and to say to politicians and tabloid journalists – “it's just not as simple as that”.

John Holden of Demos put it this way:

“... there is a difficulty with the language of outcomes: artists and institutions do not see themselves as creating outcomes. Cultural experience is the sum of the interaction between an individual and an artifact or an experience, and that interaction is unpredictable and must be open.”¹

But nearly 200 years before Demos, the poet Keats gave us the phrase Negative Capability. He was striving to understand and explain the poetic and creative mind...and said it was the state in which a person *“is capable of being in uncertainties’, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason’*²

Negative Capability is now much used as a concept within business theory... ..with business gurus and academics seeing it as a necessary attribute for leaders leading successful organisations “at the edge”, a model allows leaders to hold that space of uncertainty.... for new thoughts; not a leader that is forever changing her (or his) mind, nor one that doesn’t have an idea to rub together, but one that makes space for the best possibilities that all can bring to an organisation’s business.

The ability to stay in the place of uncertainty in order to allow for the emergence of new thoughts or perceptions; - that is what an artist does and that is what art does for its audiences...as much as for its makers. That’s what makes artists exceptional leaders.

Psychologists have taken up the phrase and linked it strongly with empathy...but empathy is not to be confused, I think, with assuming that one knows what another is thinking or feeling or needing.

I’ve spotted some blogs which are pinning the Negative Capability concept to Barack Obama’s leadership..... ..linking it to the fact that he is a rare example of a US President that loves reading literary fiction and the plays of Shakespeare and arguing that this lifelong love has shaped his propensity for empathy....as he says in *The Audacity of Hope*:

“It is at the heart of my moral code and it is how I understand the Golden Rule — not simply as a call to sympathy or charity, but as something more demanding, a call to stand in somebody else’s shoes and see through their eyes.”³

So as the next phase of uncertainty hits us, we may be tempted to further constrain our work to hard outcomes, but our best energy needs to be harnessed to the peculiar role that the arts offer. It is possible to argue that sports or cookery or renovating dry-stone walls can lead to many of the outcomes we claim for the arts – team work, self esteem, community cohesion etc. but the unique qualities of the arts are their ability to enable us to encounter unpredicted, uncertain, mysterious, open-ended, and often irrational experience...to walk in the shoes of others....without, as Keats puts it... ‘irritably striving after fact or reason.’

I’ll finish with the words of an immensely inspiring teacher, Dorothy Heathcote, whom many of you will know, or have been trained by or have at least heard of.

¹ <http://www.demos.co.uk/publications/culturalvalue/>

² from a letter written to his brothers George and Thomas on the 21 December, 1817.

³ *The Audacity of Hope*, Barack Obama, pub Canongate Books Ltd. 2007

Dorothy's teaching reference books are almost entirely drawn from novels and biographies and poetry; her real genius is her ability to hold a whole class of children in a state of readiness to look for new thoughts.

She was talking of her admiration of people who manage and raise funds for arts when "*the funds are being sacrificed to the god of war*"...she commented that the benefits of a long teaching life are that she is able to perceive cycles – and she noticed that "*sport and weaponry are on the front burner at present!*" She said:

"All through living memory and records, the armourers shops and the mints have continued their beatings and hammerings of metal on metal , no matter what devastation they bring to embellishment, design, the writings of poets and playwrights and the healers from within science and botany.

The amazing thing is that amongst all the din and shouting, the still small voice of creative reasonableness keeps sounding through the yammerings of the mediocre aggressive mindless noise and musak.

*History tells us that in the long run the poets' songs (including scientists who also sing) shine like a silver thread for all of us to attend to if we will."*⁴

Your work is that silver thread - keep spinning!

END

⁴ www.bigbrum.org.uk (speeches and messages of support)