

Art can transform our culture

By Bob Morse Ashland Culture of Peace Commission

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Transformation emerged as a theme when a group of artists gathered to explore how art activism inspires a culture of peace. Representing the spectrum of art expression (musicians, painters, songwriters, etc.), they dialogued about growth through art — the audience's and their own.

A poet and singer who teaches psychology helps people access their inner voice. While instructing art, a visual artist guides students toward a new way of being, uplifting them from banality and expanding their horizons so that they understand more than just their actions.

A musician known for performing in the park recognizes that natural settings are conducive to transformation because the environment welcomes individuals and families, the housed and the unhoused. A dance- and theater-trained street performer explores through intuitive, unscripted movement what it is to be human.

Inclusivity has been a foundational value for the Ashland Culture of Peace Commission as expressed through an openness to all points of view and an invitation to those from whom we've felt separate. Transformation toward a society which supports peace involves both shifts in individuals' perception and attitudes and shifts in systemic thinking and behaviors. Art can reflect the world as it is and can powerfully communicate how the world could be.

A Southern Oregon University class on art as activism encourages students to move out into the community and move out of their comfort zones. Not unlike the Ashland Culture of Peace, they go forth with the intention of inquiry, the tool of listening, and the goal of empathy.

They spend time with, say, members of the LGBTQ community or at a domestic violence shelter. Their task is to listen for what's needed and, in time, respond with a creative action, perhaps an art event on the Plaza.

Institutional structure can thwart listening, while listening fully is a form of digestion. Be it in word, music, or film, listening eliminates strangers. Re-telling the story back to the original speaker builds empathy.

Studying art as activism, these students discuss the interplay of art with race, ethnicity and ability, while examining both the ecological and cultural components of sustainability. Through the lens of art, they are shining the light on aspects of our society which have separated us, at times violently so. A culture of peace is built upon all aspects of sustainability.

Art is also a means for listening to ourselves, at times without words. Body- and movement-centered performance art both reveals unseen truths and supports our becoming strong enough to hold all the truths that exist. A class on "our lives as a work of art" reflected how we each have the gift of our personal expression and the means for removing our own set of obstacles which block us from truth.

Art is broader than this personal journey; art stems from and informs relationships. In the process of creating, the artist is deeply connected with the medium, such as the painter with his canvas. When we're able to relax and let go despite any situational discomforts and release judgment, then grace arises.

Artists speak of "touching the invisible world" through art, as well as being touched by performing, feeling blessed when people just show up to "hear the music" being produced.

Yet art is the expression, the process, and not the product. When we fall in love with what we're here to create, we're in the presence, and we feel blessed.

The process of creating art brings the artist face-to-face with a succession of obstacles, while holding the intention that something informative, perhaps something beautiful, will emerge. Indeed, the artist who consciously inserts beauty acts upon faith that everyone who's connected with the art event will be blessed by this beauty. Art creates a web through such encounters.

But amid the creative process, there is a “not knowing,” as the artist is fully immersed, fully present. How might elected officials govern if they were to adopt the creative process with this reliance on the here-now and its confidence that the outcome would be beautiful? Might this be part of governance within a culture of peace?

Creating art is very aligned with peace. Creating at the level of the soul accesses connection with all others who are creating peace.

Artists involved in this conversation/interview: Jennifer Longshore, Irene Kai, Daniel Sperry, Zan Nix, and Candace Younghans. The interview was co-facilitated by Amy Blossom.

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