In the late 1980’s-early 1990’s, after returning from another of many tours to central Europe, I envisioned and named the theatre a center of Living Culture. Although its meaning seemed clear enough to me, since that time I (and other ensemble members) have spent many a writing moment trying to define that vision to our community, and perhaps to ourselves.

In the midst of repression, rationing, and institutional violence, central Europe of the 80’s was at the same time flourishing with culture. Music, dance, and theatre were a daily part of the fabric of life. Writing, in spite of censorship, flourished. Gatherings, sometimes in secret due to martial law, were part of the community nature.

It seemed to me after experiencing this that something might be missing from the ordinary, daily life in the streets of the place I called home. Could art be an ordinary-extraordinary part of people’s lives or was it relegated to the form of an overpriced entertainment meant for the few who could afford it? Could there be a cultural life defined and participated in by everyone? Could a daily life culture, beyond religion, television, and media, be possible in the US?
Living Culture is impossible to achieve unless it includes everyone

Playing music, dancing, gathering, talking, creating together, and participating in the theatre and other art that is created. On a daily basis, from childhood to death — that is a Living Culture.

Moving to the Farm in Ashfield twenty-four years ago gave Double Edge the possibility to realize this dream of a Living Culture. Our small local community is thriving, with the Double Edge ensemble warmly in the midst of restaurants, businesses, bed-and-breakfasts, music events, theatre, farmer’s markets, dance, and fairs. And our own theatre includes the participation of ever growing members of the town of Ashfield in every way — from farmers to excavators, carpenters to cooks, schoolchildren to graduates, we are experiencing a Living Culture.

This growth has revealed another important discovery. Living Culture is impossible to achieve unless it includes everyone. It cannot be that part of a community, or even part of a society, are excluded from participation. Simply, this means that our outdoor spectacles need to be accessible to the elderly and the mobility challenged. More complexity is involved when people are missing altogether. For our ensemble, this realization meant that young people from underserved public schools in Springfield need access to the arts and that Double Edge should train and incorporate these youth in our Spectacles. It also meant that we decided to renovate a space in one of our barns, named by Nipmuc leader Larry Spotted Crow Mann as Ohketeau, (meaning that which is planted, grows) to give voice to the Native youth who have been disappeared for hundreds of years from our region. It meant creating an Emerging Artist Studio designed to prioritize equity for the African-American creative process, as well as for artists from all underserved economic or ethnic communities.
The complexity of Art Justice reaches its utmost when we try to see the adversity facing women who are not included. Until recently women’s everyday struggles were thought of as something that occurred in other places. At the premiere of *Leonora & Alejandro: La Maga y el Maestro* in Montclair in March 2018, so many people, and many many women, told me they had never seen this situation depicted onstage or in art — a woman mentoring a man, a woman’s magic, a strong woman artist. To give voice to those unheard or ignored or dismissed, this is the beginning of participating in and creating an Art Justice.

*Our soul as a country must be envisioned and redefined.*

In looking back to the conditions that gave birth to Living Culture, it is more than ironic that they reflect many of the struggles that we face today in our own society. Fear — of the economy, of violence perpetrated on women, immigrant children, school children, African Americans, and native sacred sites — and fear of the unknown have dominated our discourse and our lives.

Our soul as a country must be envisioned and redefined. Beyond partisan politics, even beyond government — who are we? Who do we want to be? How do we heal our fears and our wounds? Do we want to imagine a world of justice, a world in which our children are raised with their dreams rather than impossibilities? Do we want a Living Culture filled with Art Justice? Let’s participate, soar with our own sharing of possibilities, cry as we sing, and together renew our culture in each local place, one step after another.

*Travis Coe in Leonora’s World. Photo by David Weiland.*