

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 reveals what art means to him. You can hear the jazz fusion in the air 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 seeks to express truth and beauty and justice. It 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.

Which 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 notes how confusing the word culture can be, that it has many definitions, and that it is more than the sum of its definitions. Rothman references the critic Raymond Williams who writes 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 the 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 notes that each time we use the word culture we incline toward one or another one of these meanings: toward the culture that makes you a more insightful and expressive person, toward the culture that includes you in a group, toward a culture that invites you 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 'multi-cultural' mean?

Rothman ends 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 writes 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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