Social Artistry

by Jean Houston

The Leadership Dilemma
Thirty years of work throughout the world with leaders in the fields of industry and government, education and health have convinced me that too many of the problems in societies today stem from leadership that is ill prepared to deal with present complexity. This is not just a matter of inadequate training in the realities of global change, but even more tragically, a lack of human resourcefulness: too many leaders have been educated for a different time, a different world.

Few are prepared for the task of dealing with the complexity and chaos of today when the usual formulas and stopgap solutions of an earlier era will not help. What is worse is that leaders all too often avoid working co-creatively with their constituents, thus continuing models of dependency and social apathy.

Worldwide, societies are crying for assistance in the transformation of their citizens, organizations, and institutions. New ways of looking at leadership are required, as well as new methods of developing human beings eager to serve humanity.

The Need for Social Artists
We must begin to help people, citizens and leaders alike to bring new minds to bear upon social change. In this way it is hoped that we can rise to the challenge of our times and ferry ourselves across the dangerous abyss that separates a dying era from a 'born' one.

The work of social artistry is evolving and open-ended, striving to provide a dynamic balance between inner understanding and outward expression. The social artist is one who brings the focus, perspective, skills, tireless dedication and fresh vision of the artist to the social arena. Thus the social artist's medium is the human community. She or he seeks innovative solutions to troubling conditions, is a lifelong learner ever hungry for insights, skills, imaginative ideas and deeper understanding of present-day issues. Above all, the social artist is one who is always extending their own human capacities in the light of social complexity.

What follows are other qualities and capacities that characterize the social artist and inform his or her training:

A Planetary Citizen; Comfortable in Many Cultures.
The social artist is trained to move comfortably between cultures, capable of understanding and honoring another's belief systems, cultural styles, tribal and national stories and rituals. Social artists learn to be informed on world issues in the context of different cultures, and not just from the point of view of a particular nation or policy. In terms of human development this requires high sensory development and a polyphrenic nature, plus a willingness to keep plunging deeper in order to tease out the elements of the emerging story. She learns to see trends and the emergence of new patterns from apparent chaos. Discussion of what these are inward and outward sensory development.
Polyphrenic Nature.
The social artist presents a model for a constantly learning society. Yet he is devoted to the preservation of vital elements in a people's culture, their shared genius, while consistently open to new ideas that can sustain and enrich an emerging planetary culture.

A Seeker of the New Cultural Story
The social artist learns to help members of the culture or organization to preserve the genius of the culture even as they help move it into the new story. In countries with huge immigrations coming in to upset the given cultural styles, the new story has to do with appreciating the diversity and complexity of the 'new brew'. This means deep appreciation and cross cultural understanding of the stories of the representative cultures. Together they make for a whole new story. Often the larger picture or story will help the movement out of a static reality. This is where the consideration on an overarching story or new myth is of great importance. The social artist can hear all the stories and divine the elements of the old which will be needed to help create the new.

The social artist is open to the fact that the membrane between cultures, between worlds, between old and new ways of being is breaking down. In the past, migrations and diffusions allowed for gradual changes and exchanges between cultures and identities. Now nothing is gradual; in certain regions of the world we are watching a speeded up movie of strange multicultural mitosis and their stranger spawn. Cultures thousands of miles apart now in the force of the meeting, a new genesis is occurring, occasionally a melding of genes, but more often, a mingling of previously divided worlds which, thrown together, undergo a sea change into something rich and strange.

What results is not merely a hyphenated amalgam, Afro-Asian rock music or Chicano-cyberpunk art, but rather hybrid sounds for hybrid selves, a malleable, syncretic fusion that is generating its own cultural matrix. For human beings, the complexity of this not-yet-definable culture is providing sufficient stimulus to call forth latencies in the human brain-mind system that were never needed before, like bacteria learning to breathe rather than die when the culture of oxygen came in or, closer to home, the ways in which children absorb the mysteries of computer wizardry with ease while their parents struggle to master the basics.

This breakdown of the membrane I am describing is not merely cultural fusion; it is the joining together of geographies of the mind and body that had never touched before, weaving synapses and sensibilities to create people who are fused into the world-mind with its unlimited treasures, its empowering capacities. The social artist is able to relate to this quickening charge of cultural mitosis and stays abreast of the ways in which it is occurring from food, to music, to literature and theater--the very lineaments of culture--consciousness is remaking itself.

Several years ago, I was working in New Zealand to help empower a more cohesive and coherent national sense within the society in the wake of the government's abdication as the godfather of all social programs (more about this visit is described further on.) The country's situation was both static and chaotic. One evening a group of Maori social activists recreated the story of the creation itself, as Maoris knew it, and also the awakening from dormant flesh of the human female. Most of the Pakehas, the Anglos, had never heard it, and had certainly never seen it. It stirred something vivid and deep within all of us. An essence of Maori legend reveals the
power of desire, focus, and the potent, precise, intense, laser-like expenditure of energy required in order to bring something worthwhile to life. It was an immense teaching for all of us, and ignited a pilot light within the participants yearning to create their new society.

It wasn't the details of the myth that mattered; it was the energy of creation that these Maoris were willing to tap into and reveal that both taught and inspired us. Suddenly we Anglos got a glimpse of the Mana, the Spiritual Power, that is available to the Maoris in the rocks, soil, sea and air of this country. That immediately enhanced the feeling of profound respect for the Maori and set up a deep desire to help preserve their culture. Herein was the possible origin of a new story with the potential for increasing gender equality and creating partnership programs and mutual cooperation.

A Paradigm Pioneer
As a paradigm pioneer, the social artist is able to see trends and the emergence of new patterns out of apparent chaos. He or she demonstrates that different times require a revolution in management styles. For example, the social artist has the tools to help people to work in collaborative networks and move away from hierarchies and power structures. He or she is one who helps cultures and organizations move from patriarchy to partnership, from dominance by one economic culture or group to circular investedness, sharing and partnership.

The social artist shows even the most hierarchical and bureaucratically based organization that the inevitable movement in a world as complex as ours is to circular organizations. The successful new or renewed organizations will look like a series of circles everywhere. Often the most potent training for this partnership pattern comes from indigenous societies wherein members work together in a webbed network to find creative solutions. The understanding is that while each person knows how to work a problem, yet seeking the answers through many means and together results in answers that are not only consensual but also rich and playful. And it is organized as a webbing of interconnected circles.

The Joys of Lifelong Learning
The social artist presents a model for a constantly learning society, consistently open to new ideas that can sustain and enrich an emerging planetary culture. He or she helps, to create, wherever possible, new models of education. In our work around the world my associates and I have found it necessary to work both intraculturally as well as transculturally. In our transcultural work we try to speak to that which is potential in every human being regardless of local and cultural conditioning. We speak to the yearning that we find in everyone, whether the one who yearns is peddling a rickshaw in Delhi or running an oil company in Dallas. Thus, we try and offer liberating thoughtways that launch understanding, motivation, and problem solving beyond their constricting cultural and even instinctual preconditioning.

Using story, art, and metaphor to frame a complex array of processes and techniques designed to bring forth potentials latent in most people, we show them that they have a natural access to capacities like being able to think with many different frames of mind--visual, verbal, kinesthetic, interpersonal, subjective, intuitive, logical-mathematical. This includes capacities that improve the physical use of the body and that enhance memory, writing, creative expression, problem solving. Given education and opportunity, we find that most people are able to make
remarkable improvements in their functioning and learn new ways of being in a relatively short period of time.

If anything, this is more true in so-called "developing" countries where we find that people are closer to their innate potentials because they have not yet been shuttered by education and social objectives that inhibit and coerce their natural capacities into "approved" tracks and templates. Wherever we have worked we have found the possible human is just beneath the surface crust of local culture and that consciousness and the possible society is not far behind.

Bangladesh offers an example of this approach. Early in1993, we responded to an invitation from UNICEF to work with over a thousand leaders in Bangladesh. In the world's eyes, this is considered to be one of the most tragic of countries, a nation relentlessly afflicted by flooding, poverty, illness, and futility. But Bangladesh is also a world of metaphor, of high and low theater, of great poetry and music, and of a people deeply engaged by each of these activities. Talk to a rice farmer, and you find a poet. Get to know a sweeper of streets, and you discover a remarkable singer. In the various meetings and seminars that we gave in Bangladesh, we found that participants were remarkably responsive to our methods of learning new ways of being. Indeed, many seemed to have this knowledge as a kind of second nature and spoke to us about how for the first time they were being affirmed in what they had long sensed they already knew. It was as if the "imported" culture from the West (mainly England) had dropped a curtain over their more natural artistic thought process and modes of expression. One fellow told us that he had always felt that in his studies he had been made to operate as if he had his hands tied and his lips taped up. Now he felt free for the first time, and his capacity for thought and ideas was blooming. Certainly the participants were filled with plans for how they could apply this kind of work in human capacities to their various endeavors in health, education, and social welfare and, with the regular help of my team setting up new curricula and training in methods calculated to celebrate both the human potential and the culture rather than further calcify it.

To date, these innovations have affected tens of thousands of schools in Bangladesh, with special emphasis on educating and raising the status of women. I think of the Hindu women singing to us at the sweeper colony and especially of the young woman there with shining eyes. When we asked her what she wanted most in the world, she replied, "I want an education! I want to learn so many things and I want my children to learn. I want to spend my life learning." In many other cultures this young woman would be highly educated and pursue a career in lifelong learning. Why not in Bangladesh as well?

In our intracultural and educational work we try to discover the main stories, myths, legends, and teaching tales that underlie the spirit of the culture in which we are working. Then we present these myths and stories as the backdrop upon which to weave our work in human development. We find that people go further as well as faster and deeper if their learning is attached to a story, and most especially, if that story is a key myth of their culture. Thus in India we have worked with the Ramayana and the life of Gandhi; in Australia with certain Aboriginal creation myths; in England with stories of Percival, Gawain and the search for the Grail. In Bangladesh we tried to use the poetry of Tagore and other Bengali poets.
One feels instinctively that a new story is needed, for the old stories no longer speak to the current reality. And yet the old stories seem to rise again and again in fractal waves to give power and portent to the culture. What is needed, then, is for the stories to be re-mythologized and rewoven in the light of today's necessities. This has always been the job of culture, to discover again and on a deeper level the meaning and relevancy of the once and future story, for without story, a culture becomes denatured and demoralized.

Evoker of Laughter and Life-Advancement.
The social artist knows when to be a humorist, fool, a comedian. He or she can break out of the usual projections and expectations and present a world of the absurd. I have always found it useful to learn half a dozen jokes native to the society in which I am working as well as those joke or comic stories that are universal. Thus by encouraging such variety of expression, the social artist encourages people to celebrate the new possibilities in creative expressions and all manner of life affirming, life advancing actions---music, songs, humor, dances, rituals, and myths of possibility to be played out, performed, and celebrated.

Building community in the new millennium requires that we create social theater to tell the New Story of a world in transition. A student of mine in a small town in rural Georgia, where life had grown static and in a state of decline, with deep polarities and resentments between the black and white residents, took the disparate and dissenting stories of her area's local history and created a pageant called Swamp Gravy in which everyone in the community participated. This has had a most beneficial effect on the community as a whole, leading to much more cooperation and friendliness between the various groups within the community. This idea has been replicated with students of mine in Detroit and Chicago, as well as other places.

The Social Artist is Always a New Kind of Healer.
Healing involves the mystery of change, of transformation, and of the incredibly fluid nature of our body, minds and psyches, and by extension, of our societies and cultures. We live in a world that is ripe for healing, and this is ultimately what motivates the social artist to take initiatives. What the social artist knows is that we are built for healing. The nature and process of healing, the varieties of the healing experience for both persons and societies seem to be the very condition of our humanity, the training ground for our social unfoldment.

The critical issue here, and the one that distinguishes the great and inspired social artist compared to the ordinary run of the mill one is the mystery as to whether they regard healing as redemptive or creative, salvational or evolutional. All manner of fundamentalism are generally redemptive in their philosophies and liturgies. One is always trying to fix the old Adam. Or, if one cannot, then one assures one's followers of ultimate fixing on another plane after death.

In our traditional medical technology and healing practice, the emphasis is almost entirely on the redemptive. This redemptive mode is carried over for jihad and defense, or even, pre-emptive strikes. One has to take on all manner of extreme measures to fix the fallen state. The evolutional state works on an entirely different basis for life and for healing. There is somewhere to go, there is something to become. Even illness contains within itself the notion of deconstruction leading to a higher reconstruction, chaos leading to cosmos. Healing is wholing, the move from a limited condition felt in a most painful way through a process leading to the creation on a new level of a
higher order of mind, emotions and physical being. Something changes, the wounds in the body or of the society are experienced as doorways to higher consciousness and more evolved forms.

The Social Artist Respects the Uniqueness of each Person
The social artist as healer is the one who helps people to ignite their potential, and does not take the credit for the ignition, or otherwise people continue in the old dependency models and are led like sheep. The really good social artist-healer is an evocateur who shows people how to access their inner wisdom and knowledge. It is a form of healing that moves us beyond the polarities of left vs. right, or us against them, and promotes cooperation, understanding, and networks of mutual aid. It is above all, compassionate listening, a major training for the social artist. Here are the words of a social artist, Cheravon West, who is an evolutionary healer deeply involved in Head Start and other education for minority peoples in inner city Chicago. She is a powerful African-American woman, knowing not only the genius of her own roots, but also willing to expand to other cultures for mythic allies and wisdom.

"There are those who are going to be with you, there are those who are not going to be with you. And if they are not with you, it's not because they hate you, it's not because of anything, any malice. It's just because it's what they're going through, and you have to go on. And so you reach deeper. You reach deeper into yourself, and you touch that place that God has put there for you, that center. And you call upon your allies. And you have a realization that there is a healing that needs to happen. And the healing is an ancient healing; it comes form the center of the Earth. And it's necessary, when you've been put in this position, to then facilitate that healing. It's the healing of you, and it's the healing of this planet, and it's the healing of the universe. And it's why we're here. It's why we're on this planet."

The Social Artist as Contemplative Creator
The social artist is one who participates in the art of new creation. Herein, we are called to explore the mystery of the interface between engagement with external realities and embrace of the inner journey. Creative social artistry, is contemplative, a vital synergy between inner and outer realities necessary to transform organizations, institutions, paths of possibility, as well as visionary endeavors, and, in so doing, unleashing the human spirit of both those who compose the endeavor and those who are served by it. It is an activity of extraordinary balance, a tension in repose. It is a space of exquisite silence and of extraordinary service. In such a state one has access to remarkable creative ideas, world making patterns. Beneath the surface crust of consciousness, creative ideas and solutions are always there ready to bloom into consciousness.

Entry Level Consideration: A Model from New Zealand
The first comprehensive program in Social Artistry was developed and shared in five locations throughout New Zealand. The participants were self-selected leaders, coming from all levels of society, seeking to devise programs for their individual townships and areas. They fell into several discrete groupings: people from the civil society seeking to address inequities in education and health care; business leaders wishing to find means of increasing and supporting the well-being and ongoing learning of their stakeholders; government officials at both local and national levels finding ways of moving from a welfare state to a more cohesive system of shared-governance; Maori elders and spokespersons striving to awaken deeper understanding of their
conditions in their European neighbors, while preserving and sharing the profound richness of their culture.

As people spoke together, both in shared interest circles, and in circles across lines of interest, their first hurdle was to surpass the initial goal of getting a huge government or corporate grant in order to do the work they wanted. Facing the realization that neither the government nor the corporate society was capable of funding their work, participants then realized that they needed on-going communities of teaching and learning in order to achieve both greater simplicity and greater effectiveness in their projects.

Many participants realized that this series of meetings marked the first occasion of their learning what others were doing, often in the same field, though in a different city or community. In many cases this streamlined their efforts, as a group interested in education was able to assist the health and healing sector with educational modes, while the discoveries of those working in health helped the educators see how essential good health is to education. Therefore offering opportunities to share information about individual and group projects, goals and discoveries across many interest lines becomes a primary necessity for sharing ethical responsibility and working toward solutions that will achieve the millennium goals and others that stretch beyond 2015.

After that initial meeting, it becomes a matter of training in the capacities to move across cultural lines; to become comfortable developing and implementing innovative strategies; to focus on larger, more inclusive, evolving patterns; to generate continuing enthusiasm for the group's endeavors; and to continue working, unfailingly, on one's own physical, psychological, cultural and spiritual condition. Ongoing meetings with the avowed goal of learning and teaching more intensively are similarly required if burnout is to be prevented and new skills developed. Ancient Greeks called this process Politeia: in which an active, engaged and informed citizenry creates and maintains its community and mutually fulfills societal goals.

The primary entry levels of the Practice of Politeia are individual neighborhoods, communities, organizations, though many such practices have spawned others to create the sense of Politeia at broader, more populous levels. Social artists working in decentralized governance are trained to provide the model for a Politeia of Participation, offering means by which all members of a community are invited to enjoy the opportunity to influence the political and economic institutions that affect their lives, while simultaneously growing a sense of personal responsibility for fulfilling their needs and wants.

A Politeia of Rediscovery seeks to rekindle spontaneous generosity with special emphasis on honoring the capacities of others. Here the social artist is invited to notice the life patterns of things too often taken for granted and to pay attention to those concerns which call her to high service. She seeks to encourage awareness of the human life stream, finding ways of equalize access to the best possibilities in: gestation, birth and parenting practices; nutrition, health and fitness; community life, education, arts, and sciences; as well as our ways of growing old and dying well.
A Politeia of Creativity activates the artistic process as a means of recharging imagination and expressing communal dreams. A Politeia of Healing seeks to move beyond polarities, competitiveness and confrontation into modes of cooperation and understanding, providing networks of mutual assistance through compassionate listening and dialogues of fairness to address critical issues and move beyond wounding and hatred. A Politeia of Celebration encourages music, songs, humor, dances, ritual and mythic enactment to be played, performed and celebrated. Building community today requires a social theater to demonstrate the New Story of the world in transition.

A Politeia of Hope encourages the ever-refreshing attitudes of wonder and gratitude, recognizing the power of even devastating problems to reveal depths of compassion and connection that can astonish us into remembering what is possible. Within the Politeia of Hope, the social artist is trained to never give up, to maintain belief in the infinite creativity of the human being, and to persist in taking positive action no matter what the forces of entropy and negation may proclaim.

In all of these ways and more the world server as social artist become servant, friend, and co-participant in the great game of life, turning followers into world servers and creating the field in which one can abandon oneself to the strength of others. The social artist helps remove the obstacles that prevent people from being all they can be, thereby enabling them to realize their potential. The world server as social artist is a listener and listens to the ideas, needs, aspirations and wishes of others and then helps them achieve it. To this end, participants of the present social artistry program, now in its second year are invited to create and fulfill a specific project, one that will focus their human development while enabling social change. Ultimately, it is about all of us together co-creating the ever unfolding reality as stated so powerfully by Teilhard de Chardin:

"The outcome of the world, the gates of the future, the entry into the super-human, these are not thrown open to a few of the privileged nor to one chosen people to the exclusion of all others. They will open to an advance of all together, in a direction in which all together can join and find completion in a spiritual renovation of the earth."

We are at that stage where the real work of humanity begins. This is the time and place where we partner Creation in the recreation of ourselves, in the restoration of the biosphere, and in the assuming of a new kind of culture--what we might term a culture of kindness--where we live daily life in such a way as to be re-connected and charged and intelligenced, to become liberated in inventiveness, and very engaged in our world and our tasks.

Now there is a quickening, an almost desperate sense of need for this possible human in us all to help create the possible society and the possible world if we are to survive our own personal and planetary odyssey. Today, community participation and the empowering of grass roots development is essential to transforming the quality of life in societies everywhere. It is through work at these local levels that hope is generated for new and effective ways of shared governance. As Kofi A. Annan has said, "Good governance is perhaps the single most important factor in eradicating poverty and promoting development." It has been my experience that working in social artistry at both local and individual levels lays the foundation for good governance.
About the Author

Dr. Jean Houston, scholar, philosopher and researcher in Human Capacities, is one of the foremost visionary thinkers and doers of our time. She is long regarded as one of the principal founders of the Human Potential Movement. Thirty-six years ago, along with her husband Dr. Robert Masters, Dr. Houston founded The Foundation for Mind Research. She is also the founder and principal teacher of the Mystery School, a program of cross-cultural, mythic and spiritual studies, dedicated to teaching history, philosophy, the New Physics, psychology, anthropology, myth and the many dimensions of human potential.

Her work has been the core of a great many teaching-learning communities throughout many parts of the world. In 1984, she created a national nonprofit organization, The Possible Society, to encourage the creation of new ways for people to work together to help solve societal problems. She has worked intensively in 40 cultures helping to enhance and deepen their own uniqueness while they become part of the global community.

Her PBS Special, A Passion for the Possible, has been widely shown. Her book drawn from the program was published by Harper San Francisco in August of 1997. She is also author of numerous other books including The Possible Human. A powerful and dynamic speaker, she holds conferences and seminars with social leaders, educational institutions and business organizations worldwide.

In 1985, Dr. Houston was awarded the Distinguished Leadership Award from the Association of Teacher Educators. In 1993, she received the Gardner Murphy Humanitarian Award for her work in psychology and the INTA Humanitarian of the Year award. In 1994, she received the Lifetime Outstanding Creative Achievement Award from the Creative Education Foundation. The flowing year, she was given the Keeper of the Lore Award for her studies in myth and culture. In 1997 she was made a Fellow of the World Business Academy, and was given the Millennium award in 2000.

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