

Eloquent Absence: Aesthetic Education in the United States

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Abstract

Aesthetic education resides in the land of vanishing arts, as art program are being relegated to minimal status despite the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), (2001) naming them core subjects and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), (2015) stating they are vital to a high quality education. Because the arts are neither tested nor funded, they become vulnerable in a world driven by a market economy, fueled by math and language arts and secondarily by science and economics. Amidst a growing body of research which points to the effect the arts have on students' academic, college success and civic engagement, this paper examines the questions, "How have we arrived at this perilous point of absence of the arts? And most importantly, what value do the arts hold for the student within the formal educational system, in the work world, and in life in the present and in the future?"

Keywords: Aesthetic education, the arts, state testing, isolationist, instrumentalist and social justice views

1. Introduction

Arts programs nationwide are being relegated to minimal status if not abandoned, despite a variety of studies, articles, conferences, and symposia that speak to the value the arts bring to the academic and social achievement of the individual. This comes despite the federal NCLB's (2001), acknowledgement of the arts as a core academic subject and the federal ESSA (2015) which emphasizes the arts. Given content standards, it seems there must be testing. At present only math and reading are funded and tested with science soon to follow. District resources are being funneled to test preparations, practice books, Saturday practice sessions, workshops, and staff development in teaching strategies so students would be more successful in the kinds of questions high stakes state tests ask. 48% of the American public say there is too little emphasis on the arts in elementary school, 36% agree on the high school level, and 56% support arts and music as a higher priority than standardized tests. Yet the gap between the rhetoric of popular opinion and the reality of what the family expects for its children is as real as the similar gap for politicians (Gould, 2007). Like field practitioners and theorists who contend the arts teach higher order thinking skills, administrators believe there are distinct advantages for students being exposed to arts education, e.g., creativity, problem solving, unveiling new talents. However, to some, if these advantages become distracters, and where test scores become linked to job security, salary or school funding, the arts seem easily cut.

1.1 The Value of Aesthetic Education.

What value, then, do we as a people place on the arts or on what this paper broadly calls aesthetic education as loosely defined in Schiller's terms. Schiller argued, from a somewhat transcendental, Rousseau an position, that man's freedom was lost in the Enlightenment and that his totality, that is the balance between sense and reason achieved through aesthetic education, could revive this loss (Schiller, 1795). Far from being an abstract theory for Schiller, aesthetic education, was necessary for the cultivation of the good citizen.

“Aesthetic education is essential to one’s very humanity, pointing to the very redemptive power to unify our being and ultimately rebuild the social and political community” (Saperstein, 2004, 12). Although Schiller never intended his ideas to be consigned to measurable goals and objectives, his notion of aesthetic education will serve our reference to ‘the arts’. Aesthetic education becomes a conceptual approach to learning. It uses skills and dispositions along with shared principles and procedures helpful in developing the capacity for refined, enlightened aesthetic experiences. Such experiences give impetus to realizing a civilization’s interplay between sense and reason, and among beauty, nature and morality. In responding to the question of the value of aesthetic education, this paper will examine the isolationist view of ‘art for art’s sake’ or ‘the value of art lies in art itself’ outside the realm of conceptual thought, rarely intersecting with other intellectual disciplines. The instrumentalist view or learning through the arts, presents the arts as being valuable only because of their transferable skills with particular attention to what has been referred to as “Flat World Skills” of the 21st century (Friedman, 2006). In the framework of valuing the arts, we must examine the arts for whom? If we as a people believe in education for every young person, in leaving no child behind, then we must acknowledge the grave disparity that poverty presents and the absence of the arts magnifies.

A 2006 Center on Education Policy Study in Washington, D.C. found 71% of school districts surveyed had reduced instruction time in various subjects in elementary school for more time in reading or math. Music and art were totally eliminated. 97% of these children were low income. Philadelphia city schools with a \$304 million budget shortfall, completely eliminated art and music programs. Los Angeles and Washington, D.C., among others has followed suit (Fang, 2016). The reciprocal relationship between the student and the school, the family and the community becomes the realization of the optimal self, operationalized through opportunities for all students to grow creatively, cognitively, socially, communally, collaboratively, critically and hence culturally. In this author’s recent work with the Chinese government, the Chinese request for instruction for their teachers concerning how to teach to these skills, was of utmost importance. This comes from a country who scores the highest in the world on the international PISA reading and math tests. Yet, they see their students struggling in the ‘flat world skills’.

2. Isolationist View of Aesthetic Education

A long held view of art implies that art has intrinsic value and that beauty needs no defense for being. It would seem doubtful that anything desired ultimately for its intrinsic good is possible apart from the pleasure derived from it. Intrinsic value would, therefore, refer to a state of mind and not to the object itself. The aesthetic experience would have intrinsic value rather than the work of art itself. The arts have often been referred to as a universal language. However, such universality resides not in the artwork but in one’s intrinsic and extrinsic capacity to respond. The aesthetic experience becomes a phenomenon, a process oriented happening. It is directed from the creator to the created to the perceiver; it is actively participatory with regard to perceiver investment. Its aesthetic worth or intrinsic value would embrace originality, craftsmanship and expressive sensitivity. Because the aesthetic experience is a cultivated process formulated on opportunity, all people are capable of being moved aesthetically because all feel and think. It becomes the purpose of aesthetic education to act as a catalyst that affords the accessible arena for such experiences. The ‘why’ of any experience is the very nature of aesthetic inquiry for it concurrently intensifies self awareness. As seen in Figure 1 the degree of awareness is directly proportional to the degree of aesthetic sensitivity and attendant meaning. Self Awareness Artistic Experience Demands and precludes Action and choice.

Figure 1. Self awareness and the arts

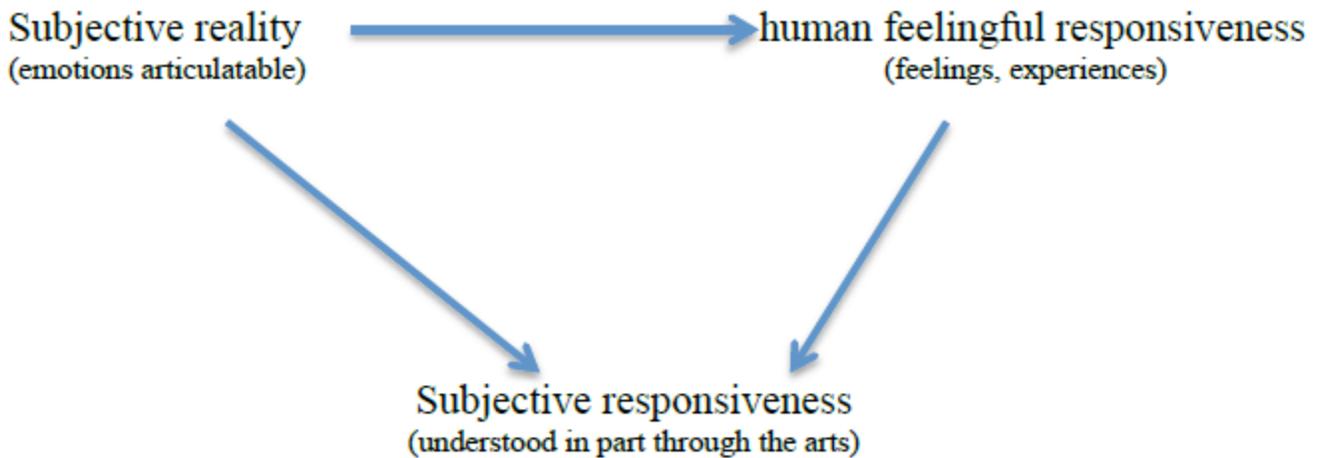


2.1 Theoretical perspectives.

Given Figure 1, teaching becomes the freeing of the student to the sensitivity within, whether it be aesthetic or objectively authentic. It could represent a variety of theories.

The mimetic theory states that art in its universality is what it rationally reflects. The external reality theory holds that art is the picture of humanity's struggle for survival, time immemorial. The expressivity theory maintains that art becomes a mode of communication, the form of feeling, the enablement of introspection. And the formalistic or objectivistic theory whose thrust lies in the super reality of art, states that art exists in the ways to which the perceiver reacts. There is a depth of research given to this graphic representation in the 1960's and 1970's that is worth examining. George Santayana (1968) establishes arts as 'prima facie' and in itself is good and cannot be doubted. Aesthetic sensibility affects every thought, qualifies every allegiance and modifies every product of human labor. According to Hausman (1975) aesthetic education draws us not only into ourselves for a look at self identity, but allows a released freedom with which to view the whole of reality and therefore to conceive it. In his early thinking Bennett Reimer (1970) held that art works arouse feelings through experience rather than through the conceptualization of it. He held that that which makes art work good is the extent to which it embodies human 'feelingfulness' on the commonality of humankind. His initial thinking could be illustrated as below in Figure 2: Subjective reality human feelingful responsiveness (emotions articulatable) (feelings, experiences) Subjective responsiveness (understood in part through the arts)

Figure 2. Reality and responsiveness



Therefore, the 'why' of art is to make objective the subjective or human responsiveness. In light of this, it becomes the educator's responsibility to sensitize the human feeling through the development of responsiveness to aural and visual experiences. About the same time Alvin Toffler suggested it was wise to study the arts because it served whatever values were held highest by the society (1970). In essence, these aestheticians saw art as that which makes us human and connects us. The arts are our major means of educating that most characteristically human dimension subjectivity to an awareness of ourselves as feeling creatures in a world we know largely by feeling it. Another member of this group was R.A. Smith (1971, 2006) who maintained aesthetic education was a legitimate area of distinct instruction given its principal objects of study, its works of art, and its functions. Interestingly he held that art spoke to our commonality via the discourse of our differences. Art augmented our consciousness to and of the world around us.

Yet there were those writing at the same time who shared the general philosophy but who did not support Reimer's view of the unconsummated, conceptual presentational symbol which expresses the shapes and patterns of human feeling (Stubley, 2003). Rather he advocated for the immediacy of the sensuous experience without or before the mediation of concepts. It was felt that this view of aesthetic education opened the way for students to experience a more complete and richer way of relating to the world. This was both an affective and a cognitive experience. To educate the student for art was to educate for the development of the student's ability to experience the immediacy of sensuous movement as he/she engaged actively in a dialogue with the world. A representative member of this camp, Herbert Read, argued AE would educate those senses upon which consciousness and ultimately the intelligence and judgment of the human individual are based. The human personality is only integrated when the senses are brought into harmonious and perpetual relationship with the external world. Therefore, the most important function of education is concerned with the psychological adjustment of the student's subjective feelings and emotions of the objective world, the aesthetic sensibility being fundamental.

Read's colleague, Viktor Lowenfeld, believed the student not only learned through her/his senses but the senses were the main intermediaries through which life became richer and more meaningful. Therefore, if a student is not taught to penetrate into these experiences, life will remain superficial. The transition into the instrumentalist view is Reimer's later third edition of his *Philosophy of Music* (2003). Stublely (2003) argued the potential of music as symbol was not "a matter of its patterns and forms being isomorphic or analogous to those of human feeling, but rather to the way in which those patterns and forms engage our thinking by drawing attention to the way life feels as it is lived" (6). The preclusion to this is Damasio's (1999) thinking of the body as the foundation of all thinking.

3. Instrumentalist View

Today, the arts are often defended for their 'transfer potential' both to the environment and the culture of the school as well as to the individual student. A study commissioned by the Arts Education Partnership with financial support from the U.S. Department of Education and the National Endowment for the Arts, showed 65 distinct relationships between the arts and social and academic outcomes.

All of them fell into six major categories: reading and language skills, mathematic skills, thinking skills, social skills, motivation to learn and positive school environment (Critical Evidence, 2002, 10). Transfer potential could be examined through a three tiered lens, that of helping young people be successful in other disciplines in school, in their work following school and in life in general. 3.1 *School Success chema Thinking*. Cognitive researchers have demonstrated that all learning is connected. Constructs or schemas come from new knowledge being connected to prior understanding or experience. The concept of transfer refers to learning in one context that assists learning in another or potentially different context. Multiple studies have demonstrated the more arts classes high school students take (Weinstein, 2010), the higher their math (Helmrich, 2010) and verbal SAT scores (Deasey, 2005). Catterall (2002) cites a national study of 25,000 secondary students involved in the arts whose standardized test scores exceeded those of non or low arts students. Music instruction spurs the development of spatial temporal reasoning necessary for mathematical skills along with the study of proportions patterns and ratios. Looking through an integrated cultural lens, the arts comprehensively affect the school itself and its community in positive ways. There is growing evidence that schools that have comprehensively integrated the arts into their curriculum, have enjoyed heightened outcomes in collegial collaboration and partnerships with the family and community in addition to increased student outcomes (e.g. *A+ Schools Program in North Carolina*, Deasey, 2002). A+ schools were schools that outperformed their peers both locally and statewide on the Academic Performance Index. The teachers in these schools also value, "art in education, arts integration and teacher collaboration" (Hendrickson, 2010, 11). In a five year research study of sixty Oklahoma schools, those that were A+ schools based on eight criteria all had integrated the arts into the daily life of the school, both to augment other curricula content and for art's sake (Barry, 2010). NCLB widened the arts gap experienced by marginalized people in poverty.

Where arts education is present these students demonstrated the greatest gains in transfer of learning and achievement, in developing problem solving skills, and in developing important social and life skills of self discipline, self respect and self efficacy (Center on Education Policy, 2006). A 2006 study by the Arts Education Partnership, *Third Space: When Learning Matters*, found Title One schools often places where students and staff alike are discouraged, where failure is prevalent and where dreams have died they were revitalized and transformed into exciting cultures of possibility, hope and success. A VH1 Save the Music Foundation grant that allowed some New York City public schools to purchase electric guitars and keyboards, saw positive results in the connections these young musicians made with their reading, math and science (Whitmore, 2007). The ESSA speaks to improving a school's climate and states students should be able to access high quality comprehensive learning supports. Although this speaks in part to school psychologists and nurses, it also speaks to what are frequently called 'specials' physical education, drama, the arts and music. Arguably those who teach the specials know their students on an affective as well as on a cognitive level. They work with the socio emotional aspects of students whom they come to know more deeply. Often when students who had experienced a lapse in school time due to juvenile justice issues, were reintegrated into the daily operation of the school, they were first put in their music, photography and art classes.

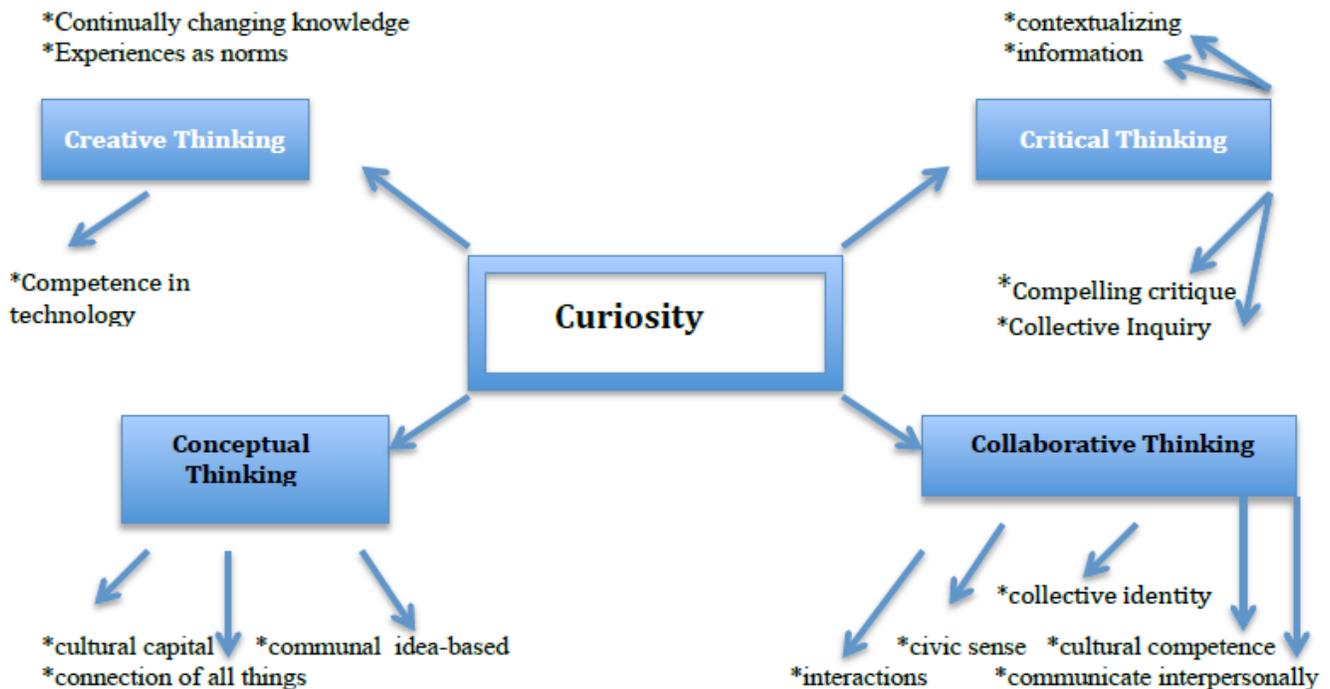
The ESSA Crosswalk contends all students including high performing students, English language learners, students with special needs, those who experience barriers to success and those with disciplinary issues, should have access to the creative arts as well as to rigorous, high quality curricula in all areas.

3.2 Work Success Flat World Skills.

The conceptualization of the diverse skills that the arts help shape in students is poignant in light of the national interest generated by Friedman’s (2007), Flatworld thoughts. Gone. Are the jobs that defined post WW II. Gone. Are the factories, blast furnaces, oil refineries, machine shops and car assembly plants. According to Friedman, these and thousands of other jobs have been automated, digitalized or outsourced. These are the jobs that can be done for a fraction of the cost in India or China, jobs that no longer exist in the America of this author’s youth.. Never before have so many people had the same access to knowledge; and if knowledge is power, the vertical hierarchy of big business and the CEO world has flattened out into the horizontal possibility of access, opportunity and success. Unlike other pivotal moments in the history of civilization, this one is poignantly critical because of its speed, attendant lack of time for ‘catching up’, and the changes it demands. In this age of globalization, teaching to these high stakes tests, teaching discrete pieces of information and perpetuating a protected body of knowledge are not enough to equip our students to function and celebrate life in the 21st century. Through aesthetic education and parallel to Friedman’s call for new workers to function together, students must experience being a member of a collaborative team of critical and creative thinkers (Peppler, 2014). Figure 3, A Paradigm of Curiosity and Creativity, reflects the conceptualization of aesthetic education’s roles in the new 21st century world.

Paradigm of Curiosity and Creativity

Figure 3. Paradigm of Curiosity and Creativity



When the arts are part of a student’s education, studies have demonstrated Friedman’s skills of critical and creative thinking as well as problem solving and reasoning increase (Perpich, 2016). Further Dunbar (2008) found that through visual arts studio classes, students’ mindful attributes such as imagination, close observation, focus and articulation in decision making were enhanced. Heath, 1999; Larson & Brown, 2007; Stevenson, L.M. 2011; DeMoss, K. & Morris, T. 2002, Larson, R., & J. Brown, 2007 all found the arts intensify emotional development, self awareness, self efficacy and self confidence which in turn increase academic achievement.

3.3 Collaborative Work.

This is not to reduce education to a skill level, but to acknowledge students as they embrace the ambiguity of the world of learning as a natural state, a platform from which they can springboard to become entrepreneurs necessary for the 21st century. The success of the individual resides in his/her ability to synergistically function within a collaborative team, one whose guiding principles are:

- *curiosity rather than conformity
- *critical thinking that positions information contextually
- *information founded in collective inquiry and compelled by social critique
- *conceptual, idea based thinking and learning
- *learning that realizes the connections between all things
- *learning that situates concepts and new ideas culturally
- *creative thinking that embraces the constant and rapid change of knowledge
- *creative thinking that is experienced as a normal state
- *competence in the arts and in technology for new ideas and solutions
- *collaboration as new ideas are generated through collective identity,
- *communal interaction
- *interpersonal communication
- *civic sense of responsibility that fluidly moves from one culture to another with respect and ease.

A 2006 report of the New Commission on the Skills of the American workforce stated, “the best employers the world over will be looking for the most competent, most creative and most innovative people on the face of the earth and will be willing to pay them top dollar for their services” (7). The report pointed to the skills of innovation, selfdiscipline, organization, flexibility and adaptability as valuable work skills.

3.4 Life Skills

This new democratization of knowledge bears witness to the deep and abiding human need to participate and to make one’s voice heard, a need that aesthetic education has long addressed. Throughout our students’ lifetimes, they will be compelled to engage in the social competencies that have been developed as habits of mind through their AE experiences. The supreme sense of imagination that is too often lost in formal education, is perhaps protected through AE and nurtured throughout these students’ lives because it is the essence of growth and life long learning.

Historically, through such work as that of Gottschalk (1971), Broudy (1971) and Dewey (1934), we have apologetic defense of AE through its transference qualities, its psychological power to help shape character and personality, and the enhancement of our own aesthetic responses. Through AE we gain insightful historical information, perceptive views of human nature; and we are entertained. Having looked at both views, perhaps there is viability in both. The challenge to the isolationist view is simply that the arts are an analogue to other human endeavors. And the challenge to the instrumentalist view is that knowledge is its own reward apart from its apparent utility. Is aesthetic education then, dangerously irrelevant? Or is the degree to which students need to understand and learn about the arts founded in their own experiences gained in the popular culture. Or is it incumbent upon formal education to structure more formalized yet more relevant experiences? Further, why is it that even though 93% of Americans when surveyed say the arts are important for a well rounded education, and even though NCLB has positioned arts as a core academic subject, important in its positive effect on other disciplines and vital in its own right, the arts are the first cut in tough financial times? (May, 2005 Harris Poll) With the Every Student Succeeds Act that replaced NCLB, more equitable attention is being paid to local and state control over testing and evaluation. Yet with the march to a national curriculum and of late a push back by many states, the erosion of the arts has been undeniable and disturbing. The Aristotelian claim that the aesthetic experience relieves tensions and quiets destructive impulses is not as encompassing as the new century requires. The Kantian view that the aesthetic experience resolves lesser conflicts within the self, while helping to create an integration of harmony must be added to the ‘new 21st century community’.

And Herbert Read's (1955) persuasive observation that the arts have been the means by which a people have been able to comprehend the nature of things on a step by step progressive basis no longer enough to survive in the 21st century.

4. Social Justice Viewpoint

In 2009 2010 music education was universally available in public elementary schools and in 94% of secondary schools. Yet embedded in these numbers is the fact that there was one music teacher for every 1000 students. Only 81% of secondary schools with a population under 500 students were offered music compared to 98% of secondary schools with 1000 students or more. Therefore, over 2.1 million students across the country had no music education. As a discipline, while other content fields were beginning to feel the edges of the common core and state testing movement, the general public enjoyed the richness of the arts as they marched across fields, sang and played their way through auditoriums and displayed their works in a variety of venues. But it was the arts for a few. We have been practicing minimalist arts education. As early as fourth grade students are auditioned for performing choirs and by middle school, where general music is becoming obsolete, students turn to other electives, before their talents have a chance to even be developed. Students in fifth grade are given band or orchestral instruments based on the instrumentation needed to complement the full consort. Rarely do students have the opportunity to experience the world of theatre until their later middle school or high school years. It is the exception that all students who 'go out' for a play find themselves performing. Dance classes are nearly non-existent and only visual arts attempt to draw in a broader constituency. Are we preparing young people to be creative, to pose answers to questions that have yet to be asked or has the importance been placed on performing well in competition, on securing arts scholarships? And what of social justice? Are students denied an equitable educational experience because of their zip code? The longitudinal study "Arts and Achievement in At Risk Youth", suggests that the lower socio economic status (SES) students benefit from high quality art education. Yet, the number of schools that serve children and families in poverty are using arts integration rather than music classes. A 2012 report from the National Education Association showed a direct correlation between high levels of arts engagement and lowest socioeconomic quarter of student who graduate, who complete calculus, who exercise their right to vote, who do volunteer work and who finish a bachelor's degree.

Wendell Berry contends, we are becoming an insular 'extractive society; as we begin to realize that, contrary to our old logic and expectations, we have in fact been "weakened by our power and impoverished by our own wealth." Perhaps as a country we are practicing the 'competitive economics of extinction'. It took some thirty years for Reimer (2003) and his followers to see the arts held the potential for listenership, 'functionalist' roles for which aesthetic education should be preparing young people (e.g. the neuroscientist, education theorist, ethnomusicology, anthropologist, cultural critic, listener). Yet there is still an eloquent absence of connection to the world in which young people so fluidly and disconnectedly move. By its very essence aesthetic education produces community. It calls us not only to the sharing of that which we all value, but to that for which we all search. Our students live in a diverse world that looks nothing like the experiences of the teachers who stand before them or who write about aesthetic education. These millennialists have been thus far defined by sophisticated, antiseptic non involvement, despite email and cell phones. Yet, these discrepancies can be reconciled by the very goals of art education that are implicit in the general goals of American education itself: democracy, egalitarianism and the attainment of individual potentials. Whether they be the skills needed for the 21st century or the positioning of ourselves within the vast worlds of meaning (Bowman, 2003), each of our yearnings for the more fulfilled life continue to bear witness to the need and importance of aesthetic experiences rather than for its reduction.

5. Conclusion

As I walked the eerily quiet streets of Lakeview, Louisiana, following Hurricane Katrina, I happened upon the only person I saw during that four hours of walking and searching through neighborhoods for anyone who needed help. In the shadow of her storm ravaged \$500,000 home, with all of her earthly possessions washed out in a muddy heap on what was once the sidewalk, I asked if I could help. "No, I'm just looking for a painting my father did. It captured who he was. It was my greatest treasure." She did not come back for the Tiffany crystal chandelier which hung askew in her ruined entryway or the Chippendale living furniture now crusted with mud and debris or her expensive entertainment system that lay buried under bent CD's, broken dishes, and armless porcelain dolls, or even for what books could be salvaged from her 5000 book library.

She came back for a painting which she now held tenderly on her lap and gently rubbed the baked mud away. The painting represented the world of her father. It held the meaning of a world that was once safe for her. It was no surprise that many of the people who chose to respond to the devastation in the Gulf in the wake of the storm, were artists and musicians. They are in tune with the feeling side of whom they are and embrace it for it is familiar. But are we as a people losing our compassion, that part of us which reaches out to another and attempts to understand their experience, their plight, at the very least their perspective? Given the nation's response to the People of the Storm, I would say, 'no', we are not, but we must persevere in teaching the arts to our young people, teaching them to dance their math, to see their music, to sniff the winds of history, to turn their backs on the cultural amnesia that looms before us. For the arts is a completion, an affirmation, an explanation of the unique "I" and the individual "Other". Aesthetic experiences are the manifested chronicle of a people, the celebration of their lives and what they held valuable, the ultimate voice that speaks for them long after they are gone (Dewey, 1934). "Only through art can we get outside of ourselves and know another's view of the universe which is not the same as ours and see landscapes which would otherwise have remained unknown to us like the landscapes of the moon. Thanks to art, instead of seeing a single world, our own, we see it multiply until we have before us as many worlds as there original artists" (Proust, 1948).

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