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## Each Generation Must Act as a Cultural Bridge to the Next

**By Chung Park**

UCF Forum columnist

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Our passed-down stories give a sense of belonging, purpose, place and greater meaning.



(Photo by Vidar Nordli-Mathisen at unsplash)

Of the many things that I thought about during a pandemic — from fear of contracting the illness to instability as an employee to broader societal concerns — my mind kept returning to what our thoughts and actions reflected about our Culture.

As T.S. Eliot states with such melancholy in his poem *Ash Wednesday* — “Because these wings are no longer wings to fly / But merely vans to beat the air...” and as historian and

writer David Fleming points out in his remarkable *Dictionary for the Future and How to Survive It*, Culture has essentially become “merely decorative rather than structural.” Too many of us see Culture as something external to human beings, “merely decorative,” without any end other than entertainment.

Although our society conflates the two, entertainment and Culture are two distinct things. Music, theatre, poetry, literature are all part of the Culture, but they are not its totality. Without a context in Culture, art becomes mere entertainment.

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Writer and agrarian philosopher Wendell Berry, the man I consider to be the conscience of America, describes culture this way:

“...a communal order of memory, insight, value, work, conviviality, reverence, aspiration. It reveals the human necessities and the human limits. It clarifies our inescapable bonds to the earth and to each other. It assures that the necessary restraints are observed, the necessary work is done, and that it is done well.”

The first sentence states the obvious — however poetically. The next reminds us of something the marketers want us to deny. The final two ground us and remind us of our responsibilities. From my perspective, a culture like the one Berry describes can only happen effectively at a local level. In a society obsessed with scaling this may seem a radical notion, but familiarity can only emerge within a small circle. Genuine trust that acting in your own interest does not necessarily come at the expense of your neighbors can thrive only in the presence of familiarity. In a world of ever-diminishing natural resources, cooperation remains infinitely plentiful and necessary if we intend to help one another flourish.

The primary means of conveying Berry’s culture also opposes our societal understanding of how we inherit and absorb it. Storytelling and physical modeling transmit the vast majority of cultural memory. In other words, Culture is primarily passed down through generations “by rote,” a phrase that has taken on some negative connotations.

I often pose the following scenario to my students through a story. I ask them to imagine a young child asking his grandfather how he came to America. I ask them which they would prefer: being pulled onto his lap and told about the weeks it took to travel in the third-class cabin of a ship across the Pacific, with vivid descriptions of smells, sounds and hunger, a sly grin spreading across his face as he recounts smuggling heirloom seeds sewn into a jacket lining. Or the other option I give them is: “I self-published a book about it. Get it on Amazon.”

Although a book on Amazon might provide the same information efficiently and satisfy an immediate answer to the child’s question, it is hasty. Transmitting a culture by telling a story shouldn’t be hasty. It takes time, and it is these stories that entrance us. Bespoke

and tailored to the ones the storytellers love, stories give a sense of belonging, of purpose and place, and greater meaning.

The written word alone cannot adequately convey Culture. The way Grandpa's tempo races while recounting a moment of danger, the agonic ponderousness when he names his hometown, the improvised onomatopoeia when he recalls seeing San Francisco's bright lights for the first time...These things simply cannot be conveyed through written words, at least not with the degree of specificity that immerses someone in a culture.

Culture's exceeding fragility becomes undeniable when one that took hundreds or thousands of years to build disappears in the flash of an historical eye. Each generation acts as a cultural bridge to the next, and an entire culture can vanish when one generation's stories remain untold.

The market economy tells us that culture is bought in a store, not made by ourselves and our neighbors. We need to push back, if ever so gently, on that notion.

In fact, our UCF students do create things with their hands, voices and feet. My faculty colleagues do pass on a culture through the stories we tell. After months of quarantine, we clearly need conversation and each other's examples, not merely the written word. The UCF Symphony Orchestra is grateful to our administration for understanding this, supporting it, and taking the extraordinary step of allowing us to hold safe rehearsals in the Pegasus Grand Ballroom.

These rehearsals have granted us a drink of cold water after a trek in the desert. Desperate to continue drinking from the spring, we rehearse like our lives depend on it, already familiar with the sting of being removed from each others' presence and ever mindful that it may be taken away from us again.

We refuse to take these fleeting moments for granted this year, and I hope that the preciousness of our time together remains imprinted upon the core culture of the orchestra throughout my time here.

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