

KEYNOTE SPEECH FOR DUNBARTON OAKS CONFERENCE, 2 JUNE 2022, Washington, DC

Cultural Capital: Philanthropy in the Arts and Humanities Today

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Cultural Philanthropy: Can we measure its impact? Should we have to?

For me, as for many of you, this is the first “in person” conference since the emergence of the Coronavirus pandemic three years ago. “In person” has taken on a new meaning for all of us, as has “virtual” and “hybrid”. Indeed, only part of my audience is physically in this room at Dunbarton Oaks this evening. Others are viewing this on computer screens away from the beauty of DO, and not necessarily on the evening of June 2nd. Everyone in this room has been vaccinated and boosted (a newish verb), and many of you are masked. We are probably reasonably protected against the pandemic virus.

But at this moment in human history we can hardly say that we are “safe”. Safety has become a relative concept, since we have long since accepted the fact that we live in a state of perpetual threat. Just a little over a week ago, on May 24, an 18-year-old young man shot and killed nineteen students and two of their teachers, and wounded seventeen others, at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas. But how, you may ask, is the Uvalde tragedy connected to tonight’s discussion of philanthropy? Well, as I was working on my remarks over the Memorial Day weekend, the *Washington Post* published an article (5-28-2022) with the headline: “Maker of rifle in Texas massacre is deep-pocketed GOP donor.” It reported the owners of the firm that manufactured apparently used in Uvalde are “giving to candidates and committees at the federal and state level aligned against limits on access to assault rifles

and other semiautomatic weapons,” which “shows how surging gun sales during the coronavirus pandemic have empowered manufacturers to expand their marketing and political advocacy . . .” We have to recognize that “giving” is not necessarily either safe or benevolent. As Robert Putnam has warned us, there is also a dark side to civil society.

Ironically, a little over twenty years ago, on 3 October 2001, I was also giving a keynote address, in College Station, Texas, about 230 miles drive from Uvalde, on the occasion of the 125th anniversary of Texas A & M University. We were then still reeling from the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, and I began by quoting the poet, W. H. Auden:

Defenceless under the night
Our world in stupour lies;
Yet, dotted everywhere,
Ironic points of light
Flash out wherever the Just
Exchange their messages:
May I, composed like them Or Eros and of dust,
Beleaguered by the same
Negation and despair,
Show an affirming flame.

W.H. Auden, Another Time: Poems (New York: Random House, 1940), pp. 98-10

I then asked:

Dare we imagine that even Auden could emerge from the negation and despair of September 11, 2001, to show an affirming flame? I cannot, and thus my remarks tonight necessarily reflect something of my own despair, uncertainty and irresolution in the wake of the terrorist attack.

I feel almost as much at a loss for a positive message in 2022 as I did in 2001, but poetry again seems appropriate.

On the same day that the *Post* published the gun philanthropy article, the *New York Times* published a poem entitled “Hymn for the Hurting” by the now-famous Biden inaugural poet, Amanda Gorman. The opening stanza is:

Everything hurts,
Our hearts shadowed and strange,
Minds made muddied and mute.
We carry tragedy, terrifying and true.
And yet none of it is new;
We knew it as home,
As horror,
As heritage.
Even our children
Cannot be children,
Cannot be.

The poet concludes:

May we not just grieve, but give:
May we not just ache, but act;
May our signed right to bear arms
Never blind our sight from shared harm;
May we choose our children over chaos.
May another innocent never be lost.
Maybe everything hurts,
Our hearts shadowed & strange.
But only when everything hurts
May everything change.

It certainly seems to me, and I would guess to most of you, that “everything hurts”. Alas, Amanda Gorman is right to say that the hurt is now universal. She concludes (hopefully?) with the wish “may everything change”. Of course! But how? The poet argues that we must “choose our children over chaos” and protect the “innocent”. But how? The question for this evening is to what extent and in what ways philanthropy can facilitate our wish to “not just grieve, but give”?

In the history and culture of the United States, the institutions and practices of philanthropy have been one of the principal mechanisms for the protection of our young, impoverished and sick fellow citizens. The question I long-ago proposed to address for this conference was how we could know if cultural philanthropy would enhance the arts and humanities, but I now have to wonder if that question is broad enough? Nevertheless, this is a brief keynote address, not a dissertation, and I might as well see how far I can get by focusing on the social and political roles of cultural philanthropy.

Let us begin with a reality test. Here we are at one of the best known and most beautiful examples of pre-World War II American cultural philanthropy—Dunbarton Oaks. The reason we are

here is that several years ago DO initiated a very interesting, student-oriented program to map cultural philanthropy in DC. Therefore our first question ought to be what Robert Woods and Margaret Barnes Bliss intended when they purchased the original 1801 Federal style house on this property in the summer of 1920? The museum/research idea that grew into Dunbarton Oaks emerged from the interactions of the Blisses with more knowledgeable specialists like Royall Tyler and Beatrix Farrand. Similarly, the DO musical program emerged after the construction of the Music Room in 1929 and the Byzantine Collection in 1940. The space for and interest in pre-Columbia art came along similarly but later. The Bliss family slowly grew into their cultural philanthropy.

Mrs. Bliss later articulated her intentions in her well-known letter to Tyler in 1939: “I know that what Dunbarton Oaks has to give—the work that it can do—can never be done in a big center—it must be small and quiet and unemphatic: a place for meditation and recueillement.” She later (1966) said that “Dunbarton Oaks is conceived in a new pattern, where quality and not number shall determine the choice of its scholars; it is the home of the Humanities, not a mere aggregation of books and objects of art.” Her husband expressed himself in similarly general terms (1940): “There was a need in this country, we thought, of a quiet place where the advanced students and scholars could withdraw, the one to mellow and develop, the other to write the result of a life’s study.” These are, I think, the general sentiments of two generally cultured and modestly wealthy members of the American elite. They were quite comfortable in the emerging asymmetry of the principal collections, which do not relate to one another in any comprehensible aesthetic or historical relationship. DO is a place that presents beautiful objects and ideas and thoughtfully supports distinguished scholarship to interpret the cultures they represent.

One of the things that distinguishes the Blisses from wealthier and better known cultural philanthropists is their modesty and their lack of any need to draw attention to themselves. I imagine that they felt confident that exposing members of the public to natural and artistic beauty was an end in itself, but one that would somehow improve (would it be fair to say “civilize”?) the public. Their ultimate vehicle for ensuring the perpetuity of Dunbarton Oaks was to leave it to Harvard University in 1940, where it has since resided gracefully if somewhat awkwardly.

But compare the Blisses to their near-contemporary Andrew W. Mellon. Mellon was of course a great deal wealthier than either of the Blisses. He was a famous financial titan, but also an internationally famous collector of fine art, and had endowed a substantial philanthropic foundation to support his collecting and other philanthropic activities, when in 1937 he left both his art collection and a substantial sum of money to build and support an art gallery that Mellon insisted should be called the National Gallery of Art – he was quite clear that it should not be the “Mellon Gallery.” How American that a private millionaire should provide a public museum (not unlike the first major private gift to our federal government that produced the Smithsonian Institution)? The National Gallery, as it is indeed called, however, is a much more traditional form of cultural philanthropy in a democratic society, founded as a plutocratic gesture by a famous member of the ruling financial classes then facing a difficult income tax situation as well as political opposition. Like his more recent plutocratic counterparts, Mellon was generous, but determined to impose his own taste on the public – which for Mellon meant a prohibition on the display of modern art in “his” gallery. (David Canadine, *Mellon: An American Life*, Knopf, New York, 2006, pp. 557-567) The Mellon Gallery was a monument to its founder in a manner quite different from that of Dunbarton Oaks, which eschews the use of the Bliss name. Mellon and the Blisses provide two related but very different versions of early twentieth century cultural philanthropy.

I do not want to place too much emphasis on these two examples of two institutions nearly a century ago, but it is worth pausing for a moment to ask how the cultural philanthropy of the megaphilanthropists of the twenty-first century differs that of Bliss and Mellon. One possible answer is that the current group of the ultra-wealthy (now billionaires rather than millionaires) do not seem much inclined to create new arts and cultural institutions. There are a few notable exceptions. Eli Broad and his wife Edythe have founded an impressive modern art museum in Los Angeles, The Broad, which features art created since 1950, along with the Broad Art Foundation, which supports the museum.

Another outstanding example of cultural philanthropy is the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas, founded by Alice L. Walton, a billionaireess (if that is a word) and one of the heirs to the Walmart fortune. This is a truly major collection of our national art, with an accompanying philanthropic foundation to support it. Both of these impressive museums are examples of very traditional American arts philanthropy. The Crystal Bridges highlights a few of its founder's sentiments: "outstanding artworks are in museum vaults and private collections—let's make that art available to everyone" [but who can get to Bentonville?]; "Much of my work has been about creating access . . . access to art for everyone"; "I want to continue to create opportunities that help people and communities achieve their dreams". These seem to represent a quite traditionally public-spirited approach to philanthropic investment in the arts.

Nevertheless, in many ways these commitments to cultural institutions seem against the grain of what has become the wildly individualistic mega-philanthropic behavior, although there has always been a donor-regarding side to large cultural giving. Even so, and I may well be wrong, but it is hard for me to imagine museums named The Musk, The Bezos, or even The Zuckerberg being established in the center

of some American town or city. The ultra-wealthy of the twenty-first century have mostly been quite personal and eclectic in their philanthropic tastes, and their choices seem to be driven by their own sense of what philanthropy can do to change the world in the ways they prefer. That was always true to some extent, of course. Robert and Margaret Bliss probably did not have any well-defined social/political vision of the future (though I may be underestimating them), but Andrew W. Mellon certainly did. His gift of a museum to the American nation was, however, a quite traditional plutocratic cultural act, one intended to seem aligned with traditional cultural and philanthropic values. Current megaphilanthropists, at least those who are self-made, are more highly instrumental in their philanthropic orientation, but as a group their social visions seem to have little in common.

I am not going to try to define cultural philanthropy for the purposes of this lecture. The Dunbarton Oaks program has understood it to mean the creation of museums or similar institutions by wealthy individuals or families, open to the public, generally for the display of rare or beautiful objects. These are mostly art museums, and it is probably true to say that the creation and support of the arts has long been one of the principal objectives of cultural philanthropy. I recognize that this is a narrow definition of cultural philanthropy, especially since the traditional somewhat broader definition includes both the arts and humanities, and I am a long-time resident of the humanities world. But the question I want to raise this evening is why a contemporary philanthropist should want to invest in culture? What is the comparative advantage of arts and culture as the object of philanthropic investment, assuming that a current megadonor probably has multiple goals, only some of which are cultural?

Over the past few decades, “effectiveness” has become the dominant mode of evaluating the worth of philanthropy. The creation of the Center for Effective Philanthropy in 2001 was a sign that the concept of effectiveness had become generally accepted as the measure of successful philanthropy. The CEP

website proclaims that: “CEP provides data, feedback, programs, and insights to help individual and institutional donors improve their effectiveness. We do this work because we believe effective donors, working collaboratively and thoughtfully, can profoundly contribute to creating a better and more just world.” The concept (and CEP itself) are thus highly instrumental, both in concept and orientation. As a prominent foundation president, himself an intelligent advocate of effective philanthropy, asked to me a number of years ago when I challenged his use of effectiveness as a mantra, “would you prefer *ineffective* philanthropy?” My response was that I did not, but that “ineffectiveness” was not the only alternative.

Effectiveness is of course the ordinary language version of the philosophical tradition of utilitarianism – the notion that the measure of goodness is what produces the greatest good for the greatest number. This means that defining good is a measurement problem, and measurement necessitates objectifying our goals. The most prominent spokesperson for this point of view in philanthropy is my friend and colleague Peter Singer, and the best-known institutional expression of his position is in the flourishing Effective Altruism movement. This is not the moment to digress at length on the implications of utilitarianism for philanthropy, but I think most of you will know that Peter Singer has frequently called out cultural philanthropy for its failure to meet the rigorous tests of utilitarianism. He could not be more blunt than he is in *The Life You Can Save* (New York, 2009, p.147): “. . . philanthropy for the arts or for cultural activities is . . . morally dubious.” The arts, in Peter’s view, do not save lives, and life-saving analogy is his sole test of philanthropic effectiveness.

Partly in response to the increasing acceptance of utility as the measure of philanthropy, over the past generation or so, advocates for the philanthropic support of cultural institutions and practices have turned to utilitarianism to explain and defend their giving, especially to the arts. Giving Compass

recently argued that “The arts connects us to a range of social issues, such as promoting mental health and wellbeing, spurring youth empowerment and creative education, and addressing mass incarceration.” (17 February 2022) The slogan of the National Endowment for the Arts is “Art Works”. The current NEA chair, Maria Rosario Jackson, in announcing the most recent round of NEA grants, asserted that “the arts contribute to our individual well-being, the well-being of our communities, and to our local economies”. (NEA Monthly Newsletter, May, 2022) The largest of the national arts advocacy organizations, Americans for the Arts, promotes its Arts Action fund as essential to securing “billions of dollars in federal COVID-19 economic relief funding for the arts”, helping to increase the NEA and NEH budgets to \$180 million each, and to produce “Why the Arts Matter” factsheets for all 50 states.

But of course we all recognize that ours is the only large country without a national Ministry of Culture, and one of the few in which the preponderance of arts funding comes from individuals and the private sector. The founding legislation for NEA and NEH in 1965 proclaimed the necessity of the arts and humanities in a vibrant democratic society, but in subsequent years the emphasis in federal cultural advocacy has largely been restricted to the economic advantages to government support of culture. Americans for the Arts has from its inception been dedicated to the support of NEA, and to advocacy of increased federal funding for the arts. It is not surprising that instrumental arguments predominate in the public sphere. But what about cultural advocacy in the current private sphere? Must we argue that investment in the arts produces economic value? How should we frame the non-monetary value of philanthropic investment in culture for the Blisses and Mellons of this moment in time?

Fortunately, a book on that subject has just been published: Alberta Arthurs and Michael F. DiNiscia, ARE THE ARTS ESSENTIAL? NYU Press, 2022. Alberta Arthurs, the senior editor, notes (p.3) that “the

arts can provide amplifying ideas,” and that “The arts record realities broadly, eclectically, beyond set interests and established disciplines.” Hmm. I am not sure how far that gets us. Two established museum professionals are a bit more concrete (p.4), arguing that “established cultural institutions . . . must anchor social change and meet societal needs in their communities.” One of them expands on the idea, saying (p.34) that “we’re moving far from a conventional view of what collecting and exhibiting art are about to engaging audiences in ways that connect them more directly to their own experience, to their own desire to learn—and less about what we need them to know to be considered cultured people,” but the other warns that museums “risk about maintaining standards if we shift to a mind-set of public engagement.” Looks like the traditional tension between “standards” and spectator involvement is not going away, doesn’t it?

But in the chapter written by the current President of the Ford Foundation, Darren Walker, we begin to get a better sense of the current major tensions in cultural philanthropy. Walker laments (p.57) that “the arts are usually the first investments tossed overboard in rough economic or political seas. Our National Endowments for the Arts and the Humanities are constantly under siege.” He rues the fact that (p.58) “Even people in power who defend the arts do so—all too often—with a narrow emphasis on economic returns.” He thinks this is regrettable since, “One cannot measure the impact of art, because one cannot measure the impact of hope or empathy or love.” “Art is an essential element of the human experience.”

So for those of us who would defend the arts, we cannot merely assert that the arts are essential because they are instrumental. We have to go deeper, to consider why they are *intrinsically* essential—for ourselves, our societies and our work for justice.”

And for Walker what is “essential” about the arts is their connection to social justice.

Walker makes his point by describing the philanthropic journey of Agnes Gund, who has transitioned from being one of the most generous and best-known American arts collectors and donors to being an activist for criminal justice reform. Walker says that: “What strikes me about Aggie’s journey is the way that within it, art and justice are inseparable. It shows how art can create value, to be sure. But it also shows how art and culture create economies of empathy.” They also create “spiritual growth, and this spiritual growth allows us to communicate, collaborate, and construct. . . . our return on investment comes not only in dollars but in shared understanding and active concern for who we are as people. . .” What does this mean? Walker is clearly moved by the fact that “after decades of charitable donations to museums, she chose to direct her philanthropy toward justice.”(p.59) This leads him to quote the poet, and Andrew W. Mellon Foundation president, Elizabeth Alexander on the notion that philanthropy is philanthropy is “the animated love of humankind”. What do you suppose that means? It seems to me as obscure, and dubious, as “economies of empathy”.

I am not sure what any of these slogans mean, but they go easy on the ear. And all of us interested in foundation-based cultural philanthropy have to pay attention to Walker and Alexander, since they are the presidents of two of the largest legacy foundations in the United States. Both Ford and Mellon have recently decided to commit their missions primarily to social justice. The Ford Foundation now states its mission as: “We believe in the inherent dignity of all people. But around the world, too many people are excluded from the political, economic, and social institutions that shape their lives.” Consequently, the Foundation mission statement continues:

In addressing this reality, we are guided by a vision of social justice—a world in which all individuals, communities, and peoples work toward the protection and full expression of their human rights; are active participants in the decisions that affect them; share equitably in the knowledge, wealth, and resources of society; and are free to achieve their full potential.

<https://www.fordfoundation.org/about/about-ford/mission/>

Meanwhile, Alexander and her board are also moving in the direction of a social justice-oriented program. The press release for their new program announces that: “the Foundation’s focus will be on building just communities enriched by meaning and empowered by critical thinking where ideas and imagination can thrive” and animated by a belief that “the arts and humanities are where we express our complex humanity.” [https://mellon.org/news-blog/articles/mellon-foundation-announces-](https://mellon.org/news-blog/articles/mellon-foundation-announces-transformation-its-strategic-direction-and-new-focus-social-justice/)

[transformation-its-strategic-direction-and-new-focus-social-justice/](https://mellon.org/news-blog/articles/mellon-foundation-announces-transformation-its-strategic-direction-and-new-focus-social-justice/)

The result is that the new programs of two of the historically dominant arts funders have taken a specifically instrumental turn. They are legacy foundations transforming themselves into social justice foundations. Even though Ford has a legacy of more than a half century of vigorously socially activist funding, and Mellon has as long a history of outreach to minority groups, the current moment seems to be a genuine inflection point in the funding orientation of these two large and influential foundations, and others such as MacArthur following Ford’s lead. Most of the many traditional cultural organizations accustomed to receiving recurring funding from Ford and Mellon are understandably shaken by this development.

The important point for my analysis is that this is a specific form of instrumentalism, going far beyond “effective” philanthropy, one inflected by the specific forms of social activism of liberalism in this country. Our legacy foundations have generally been conventionally politically liberal, but the recent

turn to social justice has given that liberalism a very specific focus and a heightened sense of temporal urgency. Both foundations continue to fund cultural activities and institutions, but only where and when culture seems instrumentally “essential” – or, as Walker has put it, “intrinsically essential”.

And, indeed, there is a steady stream of new philanthropic support for arts and cultural organizations. Some of this funding is traditional institutional support for the institutions themselves and for specific programming initiatives, but the overwhelming majority of the funding is for institutions and programs that are specifically directed to and by individuals and groups who were previously ignored or underfunded by philanthropists. An article a few years ago in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* noted:

Equity in the arts is an important missing ingredient in the larger social effort to increase equity. The good news is local arts and cultural institutions have the power to help drive equity and inclusion within and across communities by incubating diverse talent; illuminating unseen social issues; and improving civic vibrancy, health, and educational outcomes. It’s time for philanthropy to get creative and correct the historical unfairness of arts funding, https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_role_of_philanthropy_in_advancing_equity_in_the_arts#

InsidePhilanthropy recently published an article entitled “Eleven Ways Funders Are Supporting Social Justice Within and Through the Arts” <https://www.insidephilanthropy.com/home/2022/2/24/eleven-ways-funders-are-supporting-social-justice-within-and-through-the-arts> that included:

4. The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation gave [\\$10 million in emergency grants to U.S. Regional Arts](#) organizations to be redistributed in the form of unrestricted funding to small to mid-sized arts organizations led by and serving BIPOC people as well as rural nonprofits.

5. The [Ford Foundation's America's Cultural Treasures](#) initiative provided \$156 million in unrestricted funding to 20 BIPOC arts organizations during the pandemic.

And also, significantly,

3. Art collector and patron Agnes Gund, along with the Ford Foundation and Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, created the [Art for Justice Fund](#) to directly support artists who are changing the narrative around mass incarceration. Grantees include advocates as well as artists across disciplines, from the MASS Design Group, which is exploring architecture and design's role in decarceration and reentry, to [literary](#) organizations like the Asian American Writers' Workshop and individual artists like Reginald Dwayne Betts.

Another example of the trend is the recent announcement by the Wallace Foundation, a major supporter of the arts, which announced a few days ago that it was launching a new funding program to support "Eighteen organizations of color across the country . . . [who] will each receive up to \$3.75 million over the next five years." <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/26/arts/wallace-foundation-arts-funding-initiative.html?searchResultPosition=1>

All knowledgeable observers of cultural philanthropy can give dozens of similar examples. While it is still true that cultural philanthropy counts for only a small fraction of total philanthropy in the United States, the proportion of cultural funding that has sustained historically mainstream and traditional cultural activity has surely declined as foundations and individual donors have shifted their interest to the new social activism. The Agnes Gunds of this country are still exceptional, but the impact of the sentiments and pressures that moved Aggie Gund to social activism are reshaping practices of cultural philanthropy.

Thirty years ago I was leading ACLS, a national cultural organization. We were in fact little supported by philanthropic foundations, but we felt ourselves, and the humanities organizations we represented threatened politically, not financially, by the attacks of political conservatives during what I would now call Culture War I. The NEA and NEH were then among the most endangered cultural institutions. Their budgets were cut, and the cultural community feared that both Endowments might actually be zeroed out of the federal budget. It made political sense in the early 1990s for conservatives to single out certain personalities and practices in the arts as symbols of national moral decline. Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano became household names, just as the secondary school History curriculum became a political football.

By this time, philanthropy had also been politicized to the extent that a small but significant number of avowedly politically conservative philanthropic foundations had come into existence, and had begun to challenge the political liberalism of the large legacy foundations. But the legacy foundations were still the institutional leaders of American philanthropy, and their support for traditional cultural organizations was consistent and strong during the first Culture War. NEA and NEH survived, of course, although Culture War I had a generally acknowledged negative impact on both Endowments – their annual appropriations fell, their mandates and programs (especially at NEA) narrowed, their function as pass-throughs to state humanities and arts organizations increased, but there were few political controversies concerning their Chairs and Council members. The Endowments were simply less in the public eye by the turn of this century.

On the one hand, this decline in visibility was positive, in that it protected the Endowments from controversy, but, on the other, their loss of visibility was also the result of the weakened culture power and funding of the Endowments. And as the Culture War nudged public institutions from their perches

of cultural power, the private sector (donors and funders) increased its role. In a wealthy country with a steadily expanding commitment to public cultural access, this was not a bad situation, especially since the public sphere has never been the dominant funder of culture in the United States.

But the bad news for many traditional institutional objects of cultural philanthropy, who had become dependent upon legacy foundations for support, was that most of those foundations lessened or abandoned their support in the 1990s. Those of us who followed the culture sector were troubled to see foundations such as Ford, Rockefeller, MacArthur, Pew and others fail to appoint arts program officers, and terminate arts and cultural funding programs. To be sure, Mellon and others maintained their levels of cultural funding, but national cultural funding programs began to disappear at Pew and other large legacy philanthropic Foundations. This is not the place to describe the dynamics of this process, so suffice it to say that in my view this was a product of the emerging dominance of “effective” or “impact” philanthropy on foundation cultural funding. It was the moment, I think, when the traditional claims of cultural organizations that they produced both economic growth and social good were implicitly rejected by the big foundations, which now had more well-defined social goals for their investments and demanded demonstrable, quantifiable proof of social impact from their grantees.

So what had become the traditional institutional philanthropic support for much of the cultural sector declined or disappeared at the end of the last century. It has been replaced by a reconceptualized foundation sector, typified by the transformations at Ford and Mellon – and by the tantalizing prospect of the potentially massive support of the new individual philanthropists – billionaires -- with their equally novel institutional mechanisms for funding (LLCs, DAFs, and others).

Meanwhile, we seem to be entering Culture War II, in which the principal target of the Right is no longer traditional cultural activity but rather abortion, vaccination and the other objects of traditional religious and libertarian American fears. At the moment, the right to possess guns tops the list of the Culture Warriors II. A former gun manufacturer (apparently the manufacturer of the weapon used in Uvalde) recently told the *Washington Post* that “About 1999, in the Columbine shooting, the NRA set its political course: *We’re in the culture war business.*” [Opinion | How the AR-15 conquered America, as revealed by an industry insider - The Washington Post](#) At the same time, there is cultural danger on the Left, with identity politics and “cancel culture” pushing themselves into cultural disputes. And in this situations there are billionaires and philanthropic institutions on both sides.

But if the question is, can we save America through cultural philanthropy?, the answer is clearly that we cannot. The harder and more important question is how socially significant is philanthropic investment in culture and cultural institutions? I am strongly inclined to the view that the arts and humanities are more essential to maintaining the vibrancy of our civil society than they are in terms of their specific disciplines, but I recognize that most colleagues in the field will disagree. I fear that the larger danger to our country is that we are losing the capacity to listen to and agree with one another. Last week Paul Krugman argued that what the United States was “really looking at here is a broad assault on the very idea of civic duty,” and admitted that “I don’t fully understand where this aversion to the basic rules of a civilized society is coming from”. (5-26-2022)

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/26/opinion/republicans-guns-ualde.html?searchResultPosition=2>

I suspect that the answer is the one Bob Putnam has given, which is that the steady decline in social capital is undermining the strength and quality of civil society. The problem can be framed of one of cultural decline, with an attendant loss of civility, but the problem is far larger than culture and much too large for philanthropy.

I know this is not what you want to hear about on a beautiful early June evening at Dunbarton Oaks, where we would prefer to enjoy Mrs. Bliss's "place for meditation and *recueillement*." But I remain adamantly optimistic that we will get through this. I was born in the Great Depression, grew up during World War II and the Korean War, lived through the assassinations, riots and war of the 1960s, and participated in Culture War I. Institutions like DO and colleagues like those gathered here encourage me to believe that the better angels of our nature will once again see us through.

So, let us share the insight of the poet:

But only when everything hurts

May everything change.

