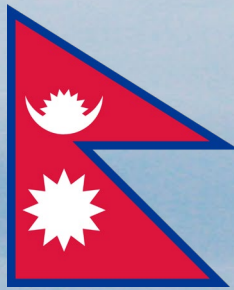


Rituals in the Field:

Nepal



Action Research in Cultural Transformation #1

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Action Research in Cultural Transformation

An invitation to network and share information that inspires creative civic engagement

Rituals in the Field: Nepal is an experiment in intentional story telling—stories of possibility and promise that support the rapid cultural transformation needed to ensure a sustainable future for our planet.

In the pages that follow, we describe aspects of Jan Sanders' work with the Institute of Cultural Affairs Nepal as a practitioner of socio-spirit artistry. In collaboration with ICA Nepal, Jan worked with a new generation of Nepali leaders who helped halt the spread of HIV/AIDS in the early 2000s. This work catalyzed a self-sustaining grassroots movement for health and wellbeing across Nepal and demonstrated the possibility and promise of cultural transformation

We prepared this report as an interactive, online *zine*—a *born-digital* document that can include text, graphics, photos, videos and links to relevant resources. Because this evolving document “lives” online, it can be easily updated and shared electronically; the latest version will always be available for download. Click [here](#).

We invite you to use this document as a template for presenting your own action learning experiences. The template suggests:

- A title page with a photo background and an outline of the document
- An introduction to the document's subject
- An overview of the author's field work
- A brief introduction to the principal methodology
- A story about a signal transformative event
- Reflections on the elements of the event
- Background material related to the methodology
- An invitation to share your experience and learnings
- Publications, Resources, Connections

We invite readers to give us feedback on our first draft of *Rituals in the Field: Nepal*. We hope that you've been encouraged to share stories and resources related to your own work and learnings.

Note. Except where specifically attributed to others, Jan Sanders is the author of this publication.

David Dunn and Janet Sanders
27 April 2021

Culture Lab and other reviewers

Thanks to everyone taking time to review *Rituals in the Field: Nepal*. Here are the questions we'd like you to have on your mind.

- What questions do you have?
- What would be good to add?
- What could be removed or shortened?
- Who would be interested in reading this?

Please give us feedback.

Jan and David

Overview of Jan Sanders' Work with ICA Nepal

I first arrived in Nepal in 2002, just as local governments were being dissolved. My work then was under the auspices of Robertson Work, UNDP Principal Policy Adviser on Decentralized Governance and Development, and Monica Sharma, Global Director of the HIV/AIDS programme of UNDP. They were initiating a joint project focused on decentralized governance and eradicating HIV and AIDS. I was the international consultant on the project and Dr. Tatwa Timsina and ICA Nepal were the national consultants. Our assignment was to convene 20 people for an initial Facilitation Training Program. These new facilitators would then be the team that facilitated another seminar of one hundred participants.

We led three of these two-week intensives, each one building upon the previous one. During these seminars we wove together the work of ICA, Ken Wilber's work on Integral Theory and Systems Thinking and Dr. Jean Houston's practices on creativity and commitment, which later became known as Social Artistry. In the morning, we worked on the inner dimensions of leadership. In the afternoon, we worked on the outer dimensions of leadership including ICA's Technology of Participation® and Imaginal Education® methods. These were critical seminars to begin to shape a new curriculum for Innovative Leaders. The book *Changing Lives Changing Societies* contains a chapter on our project.*

Following these initial seminars, we formally introduced Dr. Houston's work to Nepal through a five-day workshop we called "Introduction to Social Artistry." Dr. Timsina also participated in seminars in the US to deepen his skills in the



Nepal is located between India to the E, S, & W, and the Tibet Autonomous Region of China to the north

curriculum. We developed two *Social Artist's Field Books* to introduce participants to the inner and outer dimensions of personal capacities and innovative leadership. See Resources on pg. 12.

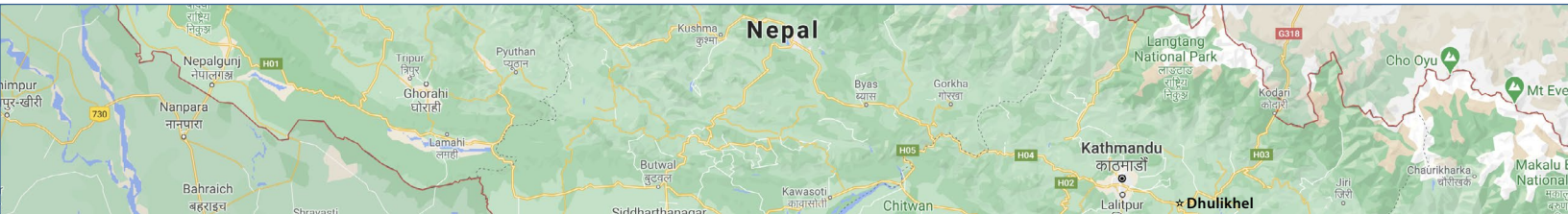
In 2008, the Jean Houston Foundation and ICA Nepal sponsored a train-the-trainer program for people who had been introduced to Social Artistry and the Technology of Participation. Most were already strong facilitators or adult educators. We had participants from eight countries and four languages. (See "Pulling Back



Developing Leaders for a New World, July 16–24, 2008, Dhulikhel, Kavre, Nepal

the Curtain" on page 8) We wanted people to take new practices from the train-the-trainer program back to their own professions and training programs. Even 13 years on, many

* Sanders, Jan. (2012). Decentralised Transformative Approaches to HIV and AIDS. In Dr. Tatwa P. Timsina and Dasareth Neupane (Eds.), *Changing Lives Changing Societies*, ICA's Experience in Nepal and in the World (pp. xx–xx). Kathmandu, Nepal.



remain part of an active *teaching-learning community* (TLC). They continue to stand in what we called the “circle of possibility” and have kept up many of their diverse personal and professional linkages.

Following the 2008 seminars, Jan, and Evelyn Philbrook returned annually to support the Nepali team through 2013. Jan, with a core of Nepali trainers, including Tatwa Timsina, Atma Timsina, Amba Datta Bhatta and Pramila KC continue to offer the two-day

program. This team was foundational to the continual development of the skills of Social Artistry. Additional work focused on facilitating a Culture Lab to deepen participants’ understanding of the culture they are working in, a small grants program for Social Artistry and two-day Introductions to Social Artistry that have reached as many as 5,000 Nepalis in their communities, organizations and businesses. In 2012, Nepali Social Artists contributed to the ICA International Conference on Human Development hosted by ICA Nepal in Kathmandu.*

Social Artistry Faculty

Nepal

Tatwa Timsina
Sabita Koirala Paudyal
Atma Ram Timsina,
Madan Bista
Amba Datta Bhatta

International

Evelyn Philbrook, ICA Taiwan
Martin Louis Cahnbly,
South Africa
Dr. Lisa Nelson, USA
Chief Lorraine McRae,
Rama First Nation, Canada

A Introduction to Social Artistry

Karen E. Johnson

Social Artistry is an eclectic approach to social transformation/social change that is rooted in developmental and dynamic understandings of human and social capacities. The deepening of our individual consciousness enables us

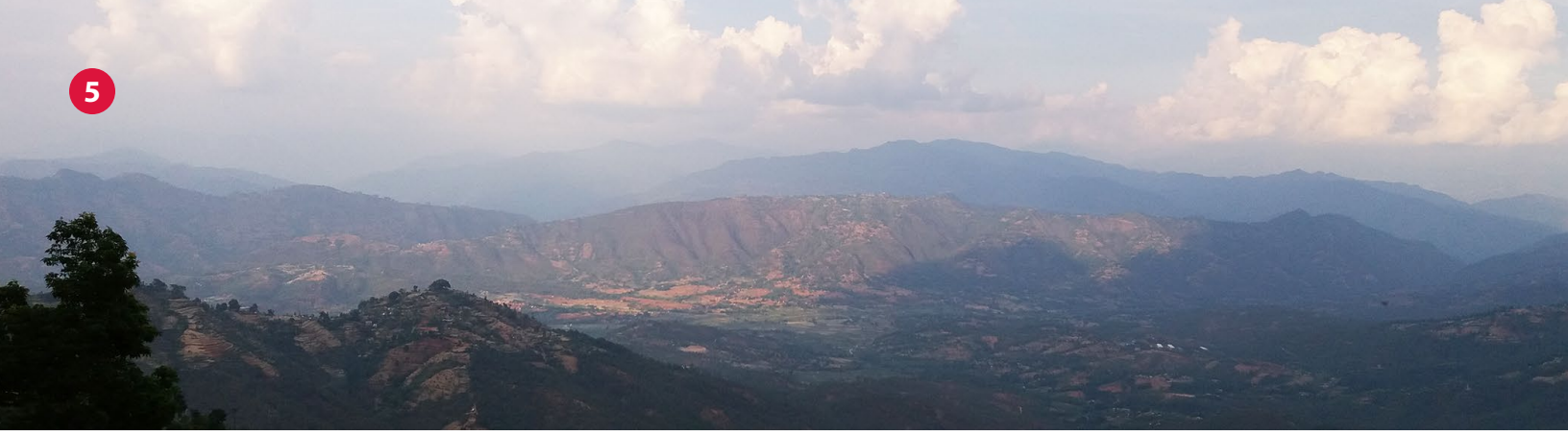
to create caring, productive and empathetic societies that can meet the physical and spiritual needs of all members of the human community and can balance our needs with those of the planet and all living creatures.

Social Artistry has drawn on the wisdom and experience of numerous organizations and individuals in articulating our model of social transformation. Dr. Jean Houston's work with human capacities and global cultural awareness as articulated in her numerous writings and teachings is the bedrock of Social Artistry. Peggy Rubin has taught us to be active players on the sacred stage of life, introducing and nurturing personal and interpersonal qualities and skills. Honed over many years in many cultures, the Institute of Cultural Affairs’ (ICA) concept of the Social Pioneer as one who works at the point of history between “that which is no longer” and “that which is not yet” to help create a caring future, has contributed to and been integrated into Social Artistry by Robertson Work and Janet Sanders, providing us with its symbolic power and teaching us many practical skills. One of the key concepts of Social Artistry is the commitment to life-long learning and openness to the wisdom of others. We are open to the experience and knowledge of those who share our goal of a world that works for all.

Social Artists are committed to social justice, social equity, peace, the elimination of poverty, respect for cultural diversity within the context of universal human dignity, participation in governance and decision-making and ongoing evaluation, learning and growth.

Note. Karen is an artist-teacher. She was a co-creator and trainer of “Reimaging Education: The Teacher as Social Artist,” held at Horace Mann School, New York City, in 2012.

* In 2017, Robertson Work published *A Compassionate Civilization*, with his reflections and recommendations on the approaches we were experimenting with in Nepal.



A Transformative Ritual in Nepal

This training was my first solo assignment to train trainers in the practices of Social Artistry. I worked for several weeks with help from Richard Sims, my husband, to hammer out an enhanced training structure for Nepal’s situation. Dr. Tatwa Timsina, Director of ICA Nepal, had personally recruited people—mostly from training backgrounds—who had experienced a basic Social Artistry workshop or ICA’s Technology of Participation training. We were experimenting with gathering people of multiple nationalities with training skills and familiarity with adult education strategies. The program was designed to refresh the basic understandings of the four levels of awareness* at a personal experiential level and then train them in processes and practices they could use to introduce new participants to these levels of awareness.

International Event

Participants
 Bangladesh
 India
 Nepal
 Tibet

Faculty
 Canada
 New Zealand
 Taiwan
 USA

* From Dr. Jean Houston: Sensory/physical, psychological/historical, mythic/symbolic and unitive/integral.

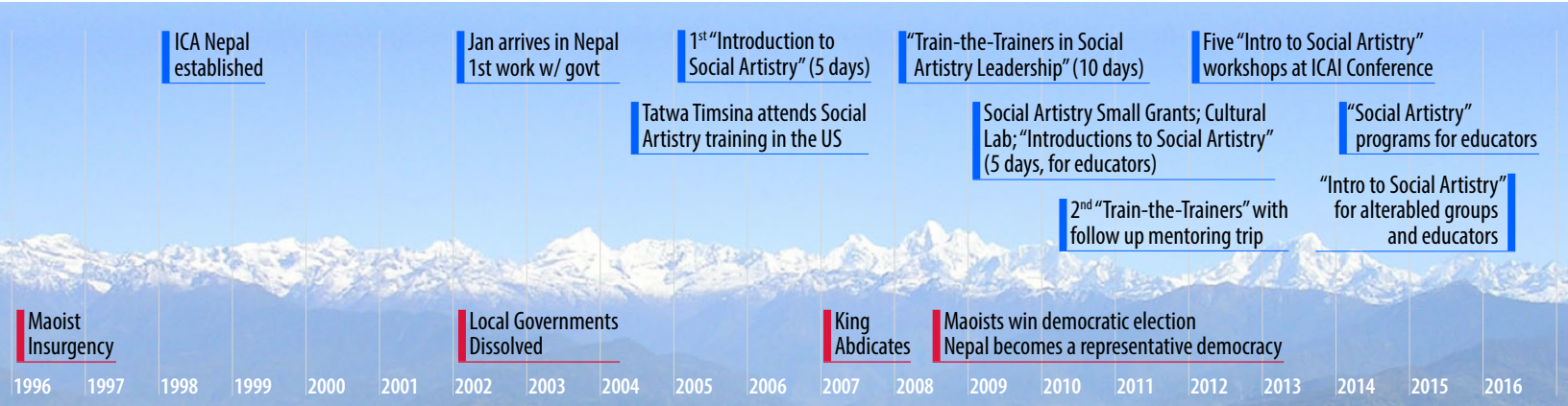
In the years leading up to the training program, Nepal had gone through an incredibly painful civil war between the local Maoists and the Kingdom of Nepal. Our Social Artistry workshop was scheduled for the end of this period, when Nepalis had begun organizing a governing group to draft a new constitution.

The training was held outside Kathmandu in Dhulikhel, in a valley with a view of the Himalayas. When it was clear or when the clouds parted we saw the majestic outline of the mountains and were enveloped in awe.

An Opening

As the workshop began, Nepal was caught up in naming its first prime minister and the key representatives who would take the country forward. People were equally fascinated with our program and the historic time they were living through. Our participants were aware that a vast amount of healing was needed and that people like themselves could become leaders in their newly forming country.

Richard was particularly sensitive to this historic period and wanted to incorporate that context into the daily schedule. He had set up



a role play with participants playing the various national roles and rehearsing events from the news or personal phone calls. Each day brought a new drama and the mood was electric. Near the end of the program, when Nepal’s leaders had finally picked a new prime minister, Richard and I wondered how we could possibly mark such a momentous event.

The events we heard about daily during the training signaled the establishment of the first representative government in Nepal since the Kingdom was established around 237 years ago.

Where could we go to honor this long past even as our trainees were beginning to see a dramatically new future? Could we mark this powerful transformation somewhere with historic significance in its own right? I asked participants if they knew of historic sites near the retreat center. It turned out that we were near a site of unparalleled historic significance: the mountain, where, 237 years before, the king had proclaimed the founding of the Kingdom of Nepal. We were stunned by the opportunity. “Whoa! Okay! Well, we had *better* go there.”

The trek up the mountain

“Whoa! Okay! Well, we had better go there.”

“The 1,000 Steps” would take about 45 minutes. We envisioned a version of a

sense walk and asked everyone to walk in silence with all their senses open to this moment. The participants had been working with the four levels of awareness in Social Artistry and were well prepared. We walked through Dhulikhel and made our way up the mountainside. There were statues at the side of the walk where you could stop to pay homage to the pantheon of gods and goddesses.

At the top, we gathered silently in a circle. One-by-one, the participants proclaimed their hopes and dreams for their new country. In over



The gateway to the summit

237 years, *The Kingdom* had been the only model. There had never been this much openness in governance, life or thought. Everyone knew that they were calling forth a new time and understood that they were going to be part of a new formation. As we went around the group, everyone listened intently, standing in total silence, savoring the historic moment.

The Return

Flags fluttered in the wind as we walked down the mountain. We arrived back at the retreat center and gathered in silence in our training room. The participants were lost in their own thoughts and aspirations, considering their fears and hopes. In this transformative time, following such a mountain-top experience, Richard and I pondered what needed to come next.

Richard asked everyone to begin a poem with the prompt, “In the silence...” and write a short poem or paragraph.* They wrote so intently we were fascinated watching them.

When there was a pause in the writing, Richard asked who was the key poet of Nepal. To a person, they all shouted out Laxmi Prasad Devkota. Richard invited one of them to stand and *become* that poet. There was a very long, worrisome pause. I was thinking “Whoa, Richard, what have you done?”



* Appreciation to Pat Webb, Director of the Silence Foundation, for this prompt and her deep work with poetry.



Suddenly, at the back of the room, a man stood up, not as his own local self, but quite palpably as Laxmi Prasad Devkota. It was as though the poet had entered the room. This young man had become Nepal's great poet and everyone in the room could feel it. He walked to the front and read his new poem to the gathered crowd. A moment of deep silence followed, after which Richard asked others to come up and read their poems. They were reluctant at first, but one by one, everyone in the room stood and came to the front to read. Just like that, the poet muse had moved through them and they simply had to read their poems for the future.

This single, long moment of reading their poems into the silence was done with the deepest reverence for Possibility. They spun out new images, they explored new healing and they imagined new roles. What had happened to them as they walked up the path to the historic mountaintop? It seemed that their deepest hopes and dreams had been rekindled and in those few minutes we had transcended time and space.

The Wonder

Then—as every afternoon—a hotel attendant came in to announce tea. Everyone filed quietly out onto the balcony and stood around, absorbed in their own thoughts. Just then, quite

unexpectedly, the clouds disappeared and everyone could see the Himalayas in the distance. At the sight, utter joy broke out. Everyone was joking and laughing. Here, in an instant—as if to put an exclamation point on the day—everyone had been touched again by Possibility. They had experienced not only their own desires for something new, but also the hopes of their parents, grandparents and great grandparents over many generations.

It had been a magical time. In the midst of uncertainty, we all stood together, buoyed up by the Possibility of being our freedom.



Pulling Back the Curtain

Reflections on the Elements of Ritual

I'm thinking about the elements of this experience. This was a community ritual, framed by standing at attention before the past 237 years, the future, and an existential moment in the present. These two elements—a communal ritual and mindfulness of the arc of history centered on the here and now—brought a huge existential question into focus.

These trainees had spent the last seven years in the midst of a civil war, unable to even go to parts of Nepal. They had experienced the fear and agony of an unknown future. They knew that they were standing at a turning point when the Nepali people had to turn from their past in order to create a new and different future for Nepal. Each of them faced the life and death question: Will I take on this historic task?

One of Richard Sim's real gifts in the training was sensing the presence of just such a moment. He had an intuitive knack for reaching into peoples' hearts and souls to see just what was needed. He didn't always follow procedure, but in this historical context, when he added the archetype of the *poet* to the ritual, his invitation to write and recite poems enabled everyone to deepen their reflective process.

Inviting the trainees to become poets together expanded their context. Reciting their poems revealed the wonder of the new images that emerged in poem after poem. Their poetry opened them to the dread and fascination of a time of transition. The participants loved their culture and they all knew that something new had to happen within their culture to be able to appreciate the many gifts of each other's cultures. They had to learn to step out of their own culture to work cross-culturally.

A Context for Considering Ritual Theory

The late Dr. Nancy Grow, long time ICA colleague and student of ritual practices, asserts that we are now in a time when we have to create new rituals that act out and dramatize the new reality that we are stepping into. She explores the ritual process and describes the three basic elements included in rituals: the *Past*, the *Future* and the present *Existential Moment*. The diagram on the next page illustrates these three dynamics. (Note the italicised words in Dr. Grow's article below.) We have highlighted the Nepal experience as one of the new rituals being created in our training programs.

The Ritual Process

Dr. Nancy Grow

Ritual comes out of a depth life experience in which we stand before the awe and the mystery of life.

We take all of this—the pictures, the sound, the feeling, the articulation—and we put them together in an acting out, a drama... that [creates] the possibility of the wonder and the power. The drama allows us to bring the “happening” into this very moment. This is the ritual, the enactment that involves all of our powers, all of our senses and all of time and space. [The ICA community] has done a superb job in this arena, but we must not forget the scope of the ritual process lest we become traitors to life itself. We must not cling to what we have done in the past, but we must cling to the wisdom of the past. We dare not slip into any notion that just reciting a few words is doing the ritual.

The first element of ritual is *anamnesis*, which simply means *against amnesia*, against forgetting. It has to do with the intentional

recollecting of those things and those events which life has taught us are crucial. In every ritual we have to self-consciously ask what is it that we have to remember. What is it that we dare not forget? What are the mysterious intrusions of power and wonder into our lives that are necessary for our lives—those without which we would be destroyed or taken out of existence?

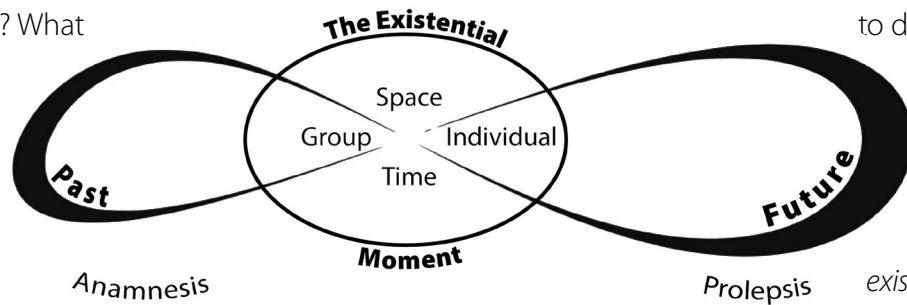
When we welcome a newborn baby, we remember the pain and the joy of birth. When we celebrate a wedding, we require a marriage vow to embrace both darkness and light. When we acknowledge a death, we remember the loss and the gift of a life. Rituals help us remember the way life is—broken and yet whole, spilled out and yet full. All of life is this way. That is what we are saying we have to remember.

The second element of ritual is *prolepsis*—that which allows us to make the leap into the future. For any ritual that only holds onto the past, which only remembers the past, is unhealthily attached to the obsolete. What good does it do to remember the Holocaust except for the sake of seeing that it never happens again? What good does it do to remember the mistreatment and the pain that minorities and women have suffered unless it is linked with a will to transcend the past, to break through into a new relatedness that uses those agonies to produce sensitive concern for all human life and all cultural manifestations. What good does it do to remember all of the gifts we have received in the past as a nation if it is not for the sake of the future and for envisioning what it could mean for

all people to live free and to live with the goods that they need in this world as human beings.

Anamnesis and prolepsis are the two bookends of ritual. Both are easy, in one sense, to deal with intellectually. The third element of ritual—the present *existential moment*, between the past and the future—is the crucial *here and now* when we define who we are and what we are doing. Our feelings and intuitions, our particular experiences of the heat and the cold, the task before us, and the pain and the struggle of that task are all dimensions of that moment.

Note: This excerpt from Dr. Grow's paper "The Ritual Process," has been lightly edited for appropriateness in an interspiritual context. Click [here](#) to read the full original text in the *Inner Life Collection* on the icaglobalarchives.org website.



Planning Your Own Ritual (An idea still "under consideration")

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Dr. Jean Houston & Social Artistry

Dr. Jean Houston—scholar, philosopher, teacher and researcher in Human Capacities—has long been regarded as one of the principal founders of the Human Potential Movement. Jean is a longtime friend of the Institute of Cultural Affairs, noted for her ability to combine a deep knowledge of history, culture, new science, spirituality and human development into her teaching. She is known for her interdisciplinary perspective delivered in inspirational and humorous keynote addresses. Together with other international agencies and companies, over the last 45 years, Dr. Houston has worked in over 100 countries.

Jean and her co-teacher, Peggy Rubin, began working with Robertson Work, Jan Sanders and the United Nations Development Program in 2001 to localize the Millennium Development Goals. The work involved training leaders in human and cultural development using a Social Artistry approach, a community-leadership training program that we developed. The Social Artist enables people to become aware of and involved in social change on four levels:

Sensory/Physical—Awakening the senses and developing body awareness

Psychological/Historical—Exploring memories, feelings, and associations

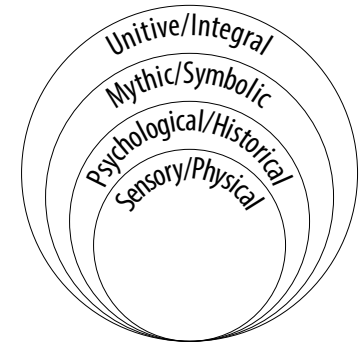
Mythic/Symbolic—Tapping the stories and symbols that give meaning to peoples' lives; creating new stories of possibility

Unitive/Integral—Connecting with the deepest level of our awareness: Exploring creative energy as co-trustee of the emerging evolutionary process.

Social Artistry Overview: The Four Levels of Awareness

Dr. Jean Houston

As we explore our work in Social Artistry, we'll be taking a learning journey through four levels of awareness and experience. Our goal is to expand our human capacities in each of these areas. These four levels are not unique to our work in Social Artistry. Once you start paying attention, you'll find them embedded everywhere in your life.



The Sensory/Physical Level consists of everything we can perceive through our senses. This is a vital place to begin our quest of the Possible Human and Possible Society. It is through our bodies that we come to know the world. As we explore the physical and sensory level of awareness, we'll focus on developing our capacities for bodily awareness and tapping into the wisdom of the body, then applying that wisdom directly to our work as Social Artists. The social artist then, is one who develops the art of heightened sensitivity and physical awareness, for with these come compassion, wisdom and the courage to help make a difference.

The Psychological/Historical Level considers our own history and psyche and our connection to the historical and collective memory of our communities. The Possible Human needs to learn to consciously orchestrate her own thoughts, internal images, talents and gifts. In this level we can explore the many different ways of knowing and tap into more of our brain's capacity to vision and problem solve in new ways. We can access our memories and sense the interconnections between the events in our lives. Attention to the inner workings of our psyche can help us make creativity central to our lives.

The Mythic/Symbolic Level takes us into the realm of great archetypes and story. Here we develop the skills and awareness to find the patterns woven by humanity that have brought our culture and us as individuals to our present situation. We also learn to create the patterns we'll need to weave a new story for our Possible Society. At the Mythic/Symbolic level we consider our mythic structures, symbols, and archetypes. Seeing our life as a great story can fill us with passion for the possible. The process of rethinking our stories gives us access to a whole new range of possibilities. As social artists, learning to work with stories in a positive and energizing manner can have a powerful effect on the people and cultures with whom we work.

The Unitive/Integral Level [also known as the spiritual or wisdom level] is the deepest level of our awareness. We engage our own deepest knowing, a clearer understanding of the great mystery from which we all emerge. The recommended practices to grow this awareness vary from culture to culture and from person to person. Such practices include poetry, meditation, contemplative prayer, mindfulness, dancing and being in nature, among many others. Growth in this level brings recognition that all human beings have within [themselves] capacities for knowing and participating in a deep, expansive sense of reality and life that can manifest in acts of compassion and service.

Stories to Tell and Learnings to Share

An invitation to collaborative, creative story telling

David Dunn

Chances are good that if you've gotten this far, you have experience to share and stories to tell related to transforming culture. This little multimedia piece is an invitation to do both.

Jan Sanders and I began our collaboration in late 2020, intent on creatively sharing Jan's experience as a Social Artist with a young member of her extended family. Jan's life and work have been a deep dive into the lives of people who care about the world and the practices of personal transformation and social engagement that shape and humanize cultures. My life and work have followed the prompts of history and personal interests from seminary and church, to community facilitation and organizational development, to desktop publishing and creative companionship.

Our complementary experiences and roles support a common mission: sharing an energizing look into practices and projects that help people and cultures heal and evolve.

Collaborating on this online publication—a *zine*—has been both energizing and great fun. We hope you'll find a partner who gives you courage to invent something new and with whom you can have as much fun as we have.

We started with "What do we want most to tell our family and friends," but our concept and vision evolved from there. We'd like to spark a vast network of engaging stories that live online, offer practical wisdom about culture change and provide links to other practitioners and story tellers with something to say and share.

The people, projects and organizations to the right are among those who figure prominently in our story and have their own to tell as well.

Publications

The Social Artist's Fieldbook One: Developing your Inner Capacities. Jean Houston, Ph.D. assisted by Janet Sanders, M.Ed. Prepared for the United Nations Development Programme

The Social Artist's Fieldbook Two: Decentralising the MDGs through Innovative Leadership (DMIL) June 2008 Edited by Robertson Work and Jan Sanders with the assistance of Tricia Webster.

Resources

Connections

Click [here](#) for the latest version of this document.

(A work in progress)