

## CULTURAL TRAINING INSTITUTIONS: THE LAST SANCTUARY FOR VALUES BASED TRAINING?

*RUSSELL WILLIS TAYLOR*

Good afternoon, and thank you to the organizers of this conference for inviting me to speak. It is an honor to be here amongst such amazing thinkers and leaders, and I can only hope that my thoughts on values in our educational institutions will be of some use to you in the challenges of your daily work.

What do we mean by values? Well, this is one thing I do not mean.



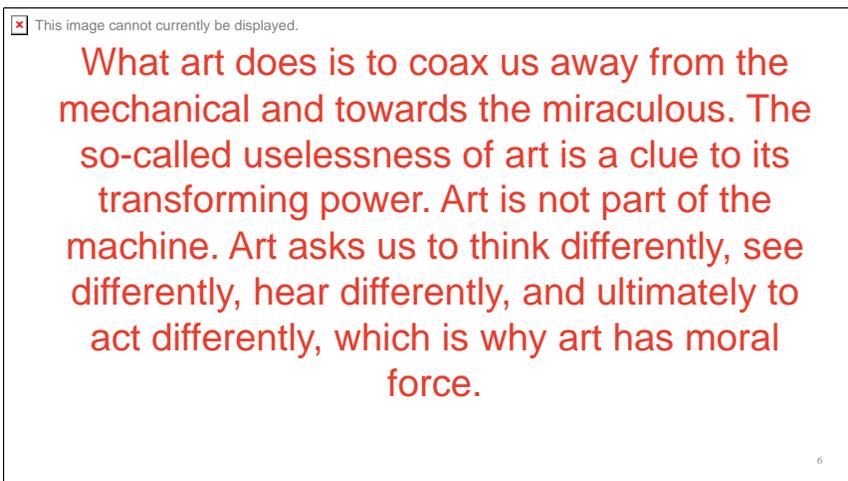
Those of you familiar with the evolution of marketing thinking and practice will know that brand values are the holy grail for most commercial products. But brands, to reference Naomi Klein, do not have values of their own, they only have those we project onto them. Institutional or personal values are something else – they are those higher

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level tenets of our belief about why we are doing what we are doing, and how we are going to do it, that differentiate our institutions from one another. They are our beliefs in action.

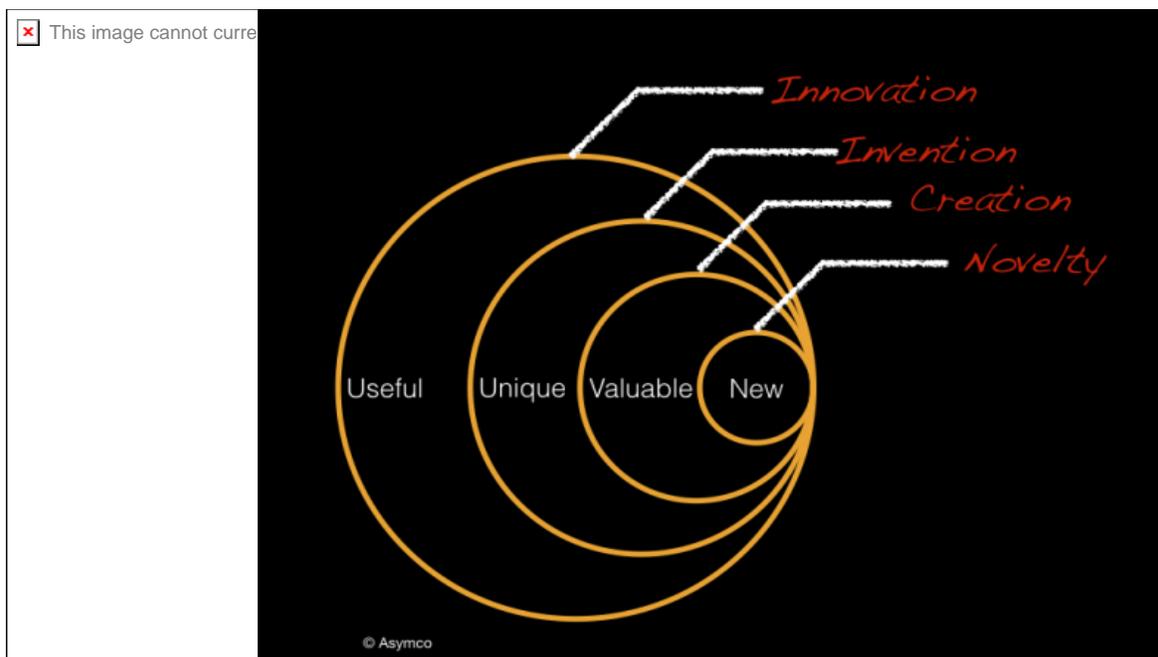
You will see that I have put my own values right in the shop window – I believe that arts schools, conservatoires, and artistic training activities are one of the last places in our late-stage capitalism world where the pursuit of excellence is paramount, and the desire for that excellence to have commercial gain comes next. I believe that this reflects a set of values that benefit us all: the primacy of meaning over money.

In a recent course taught at Banff Centre, faculty member Diane Ragsdale reminded us all that the writer Jeannette Winterson has written very powerfully on the value that art brings to all of us. Winterson believes that art itself is a different value system and I agree with her thinking on this:



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Moving us away from the mechanical and toward the miraculous is surely an important thing to do -- and this is the context in which we, and our faculty and students, operate. We are interested first and foremost in beauty and expression, and economic utility is important but not the reason that we do what we do. Our context is different, and for those who have to answer the economic utility question before they can do anything else, let me offer the following:



I have adapted this graphic from Asymco, and I have also interpreted it differently. In commercial circles this is an interesting and attractive way of saying where market value resides – the larger the circle the more monetary value is potentially there. But discussion with colleagues at Banff

leads me to think this illustrates something even more important, and that is the sequential requirements for successful innovation. Innovation is what all commercial leaders and economists talk about, often as a proxy for a large number of other terms like change, invention, windfall after low investment, etc. But innovation is really just about executing a new idea and bringing it to market or to fruition. And while innovation is often the most desired and discussed end game, this drawing shows you that it has to come after several other steps.

**Novelties** (new) are usually not protectable but their value lies in the fact that they are new – a departure from the past (often art in some form or another)

**Creations** are protected by copyright or trademark but are not patentable since they lack utility. (fall collection of a designer)

**Inventions** can be protected for a limited time through patents which allows someone to profit from them. (the formula for coca cola)

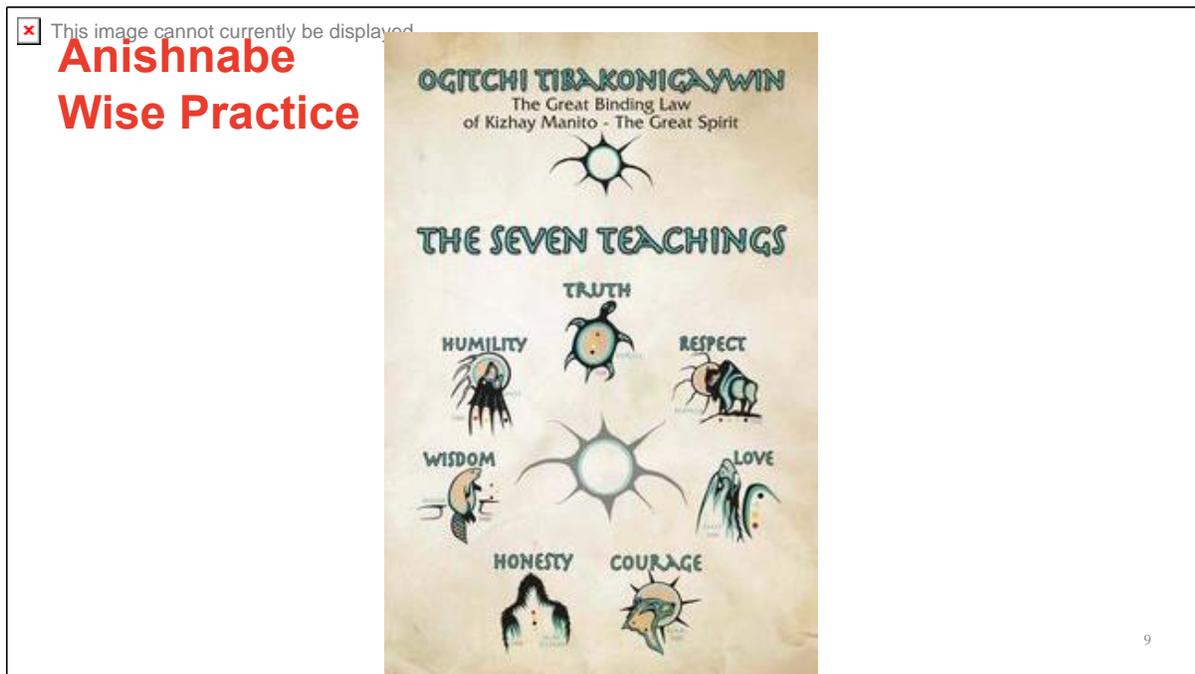
**Innovations** can be protected through market competition but are not always defensible through legal means – but they are the manifestation of the end of the process. Taking something new to market in a sustainable way requires a lot of things that never get to market, but that are beneficial to us in many other ways.

So it all begins with an environment where the new is lauded and supported. This can only happen when experimentation is required, where diverse points of view are welcomed. And in many cases, this is where our institutional values themselves are of most value – and this openness to the new rather than fear of the unknown is one of our most important contributions to society as a whole.

We have, as a global society, a shared group of values that may vary from place to place, that are being tested in many ways, but which are often – at their highest level -- more universal than not. I refer you to the Common Cause mapping of the Basic Human Values by Schwartz.  
<https://valuesandframes.org/handbook/2-how-values-work/>

Any institution that makes progress over time has some idea, clearly articulated, of what their values are. I believe that whatever the values are, they must be reflected in the work, the teaching and the practice of what we do. This does not mean that all of our faculty must think alike, teach alike, look alike. Far from it. It does mean that if we say we believe in diversity as part of the artistic creation process, our campuses should reflect that.

At Banff Centre, one of the things that we include in any teaching design is an awareness of – and drawing attention to – the seven grandfather (and mother) teachings that are part of wise practice.



This forms part of our discussions with participants around our code of conduct, and we do this not because we expect everyone to suddenly become “indigenized,” but because our campus is built on Sacred Land which was “acquired” to make a national park. But long before it was a school, thousands of years before it was any place that white people knew about, it was a place where Indigenous peoples came and lay down their weapons and talked through conflict while in the hot springs. We honor this because it makes our campus more – it makes the learning more – and because honoring it is one of our most important values. It is a very special value to honor land on which blood has never been shed.

Thinking further about how we make our institutional values mean something in everyday practice at our

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institutions, we have to look at our constituencies. How do we balance our institutional values with our student and faculty values? Teaching today is a very different proposition in some ways than it was 50 years ago. Today, we have empowered activists in our classrooms and studios – including both faculty and students. Holding values while honoring others view of the world creates a kind of Socratic tension that as arts organizations we are better prepared to deal with than most. I believe that those institutions that openly discuss how what we are teaching affects those we are teaching are more likely to be resilient, to be more confident places to work and learn, and to weather conflict when it comes. And it does come – I believe that Vasil will be talking about how conflict is its own classroom – because we are living in a world of uncertainty, and ambiguity, and very differing views of identity.

As leaders, we have to openly acknowledge these things without losing sight of the truth that we do, in fact, have things of value to teach. So I think that we have to recognize that values are not an empty promise but that they take courage to uphold. And it is the leader's job not to lose courage.

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## Values Take Courage

**What it lies in our power to  
do, it lies in our power not to  
do.**

**Aristotle**

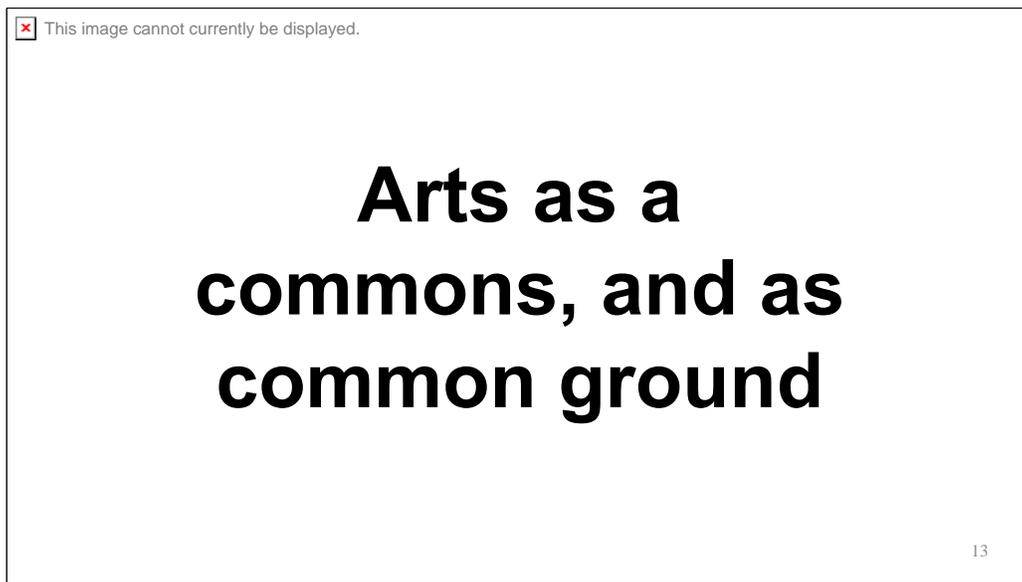
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**Money and Meaning:** What do budgets have to do with values? Well, we can identify what as an institution we really care about by looking at how we spend our money. This conclusion from one of our longer courses at Banff, Alt/Now, demonstrates what I mean. *When considering scarcity and power, if you want to change the dynamic you have to change the resource flow.* I have found as a leader and as an advisor that if I really want to see what an institution cares about, the budget will tell me all I need to know. Proclamations without money behind them mean very little.

If we really care about our artistic faculty, is this the first place to save money? If we really care about our students, are we freeing up every penny that we can to give them financial support when they need it? Buildings are not values – we have to provide teaching facilities that align with what we are teaching, but bigger is not always better and newer is not always best.

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**Values in our content:** The nature of what we teach is often collaborative – and that introduces to and reinforces for our students the idea that the arts as a whole are a commons and that they have a value of common ground.



The most extraordinary art can result in the most radically altered view of the world, and if our campuses manifest that we are interested in – and training others to be interested in – relationships not transactions -- then we are living our values institutionally. By not commodifying our students, by seeing each one as unique, we can teach people skills and curiosity that goes beyond technique and expertise, and reaches into how we see one another every day.

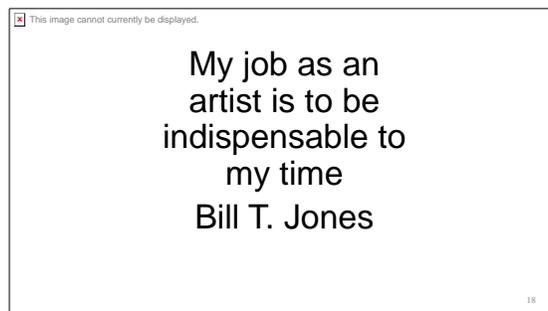
What supports our values? Well, we have to think about how we are resourced. **There is no such thing as a**

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**neutral funding source, and we have to examine every funding relationship for what it costs us as well as what it pays us.** It is a reality that all money comes with some constraints and balancing those constraints with our values is the role of the leader. Saying no to commercial or private money in the United States is becoming rarer and rarer and it is all too often damaging and diverting our higher educational institutions. Yes, this philanthropy makes a lot of great things happen, but it also allows ideology to seep into learning in ways that we may not see so clearly at first.

Institutional confidence is hard to have, and too expensive to lose. Saying no to money that changes our values may be the smart, if difficult, thing to do.

**Student values:** How do we ensure that our students feel that they are manifesting their own values? Much of this is outside of our control, but the general ethos that Bill T. Jones advocates feels right to me – to give our students not just skills but a sense of agency in the world will give their work more power, and their lives more meaning.



As institutions with values, I believe that we really do need to be for someone, and not just about something, as Stephen Weil said about museums over 30 years ago. Our students will take their place as artistic professionals in a world that needs uniting, not the addition of more layers of separation. And the future artists we are all training will need to be able to address this question – how to engage people in their work and the work of others if artists are to be seen as having, and creating, public value. We are training people to be fundamental to a civil society, not ornamental citizens.

I believe that we need to see our institutions as part of a larger system – that we are indeed sanctuaries for the kind of training that all of society needs, and that we need to look at the system we are functioning in and not look only at the problematic symptoms but really take a close look at the system itself.

For example, if your institution is the only one within 200 miles that is a nurturing place for creativity, then what are you doing for the local community? This is the environment that we will be releasing our students into – and to keep them too rarified and sequestered may not do them as much good as helping them take their part in that system. We have an obligation to give them every intellectual advantage but I believe we also have an obligation to help them confront their own values, and to become accustomed to taking their place in the wider world. The stories they tell about their work – the

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meaning that they find in their work – are powerful and we and our values help them shape those narratives.

Values – they are not always safe to have, they are not easy to live, and they are not for sale. Without them, our institutions are not enduring – and with them, we are powerful contributors not only to the students who come to us, but also to the world they build after they leave us.



**BANFF**  
CENTRE FOR ARTS AND CREATIVITY

**A ship in harbour  
is safe, but that is  
not what ships are  
built for.**

**John Augustus  
Shedd**

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Thank you for your kind attention.