

## **President's Report – 2011 Annual Business Meeting**

From time to time I revisit an article that Kristina Valaitis circulated in 2009 when we were still coming to terms with the effects of the economic downturn. The article is entitled “A weakened economy needs strengthened humanities” by Australian John Armstrong. In it Armstrong argues that the success of a capitalist society is totally dependent on the maturity of its citizens. To flourish, we need the economic liberty that capitalism provides. But this economic liberty is good “only when accompanied by maturity and wisdom,” which have their source in the humanities.

For Armstrong maturity consists of a group of abilities—the ability to anticipate danger and cope with difficulties, the ability to recognize one’s weaknesses and tailor behavior accordingly, the ability to learn from one’s mistakes as well as those of others, the ability to be able to take the long view and to plan, the ability to be able to analyze one’s own convictions. “Above all,” he says, “maturity involves directing one’s energies and efforts towards genuinely worthwhile ends...” He finds too many sectors of our society lacking in these qualities. And as a result, he says, our capitalist society has come to require “more maturity than we collectively possess.”

He sees remedy in the humanities, an accessible wellspring of wisdom drawn from the collective human experience. But we are not reaping sufficient benefits. Why not? If a weakened economy requires strengthened humanities, why are we not keeping pace? Armstrong attributes this in part to a failure of the academic humanities to attach themselves to the world. “Maturity doesn’t lie just in thinking,” he says. “It depends on the relationship between experience, action, and reflection...So, to be the agents of the maturing process, the humanities need to pay much closer attention to the relationship between ideas and the rest of life.”

More recently, Ralph Lewin shared with us a blog that makes a similar point. It was written by Ian Bogost, in response to an article by David Palumbo-Liu that argued for the importance of the humanities. The blog offers a nuanced exploration of Kant’s “lower faculties,” which are oriented toward theoretical reason, and “higher faculties,” which are oriented toward practical reason. Bogost argues that the humanities find themselves in an uncomfortable space between the two, wishing to cling to their claim that “their work cannot be probed for predictable value,” while also asserting the utility of such values as critical thinking and lifelong learning. But Bogost suggests that the humanities are not meant to be the untouchable domain of elite intellectuals. “Instead,” he says,

“they are meant to represent and nurture a populace in the face of the governmental and organizational interests served by the high faculties. The humanities are meant to be *populist* rather than statist. They shouldn’t stand ‘against usefulness,’ but rather ‘toward the world.’” When Ralph alerted us to this piece he noted that he especially appreciated a line from Bogost’s final paragraph: “The humanities needs more courage and more contact with the world.”

I like that line too, primarily because I have the great good fortune, as a member of the state humanities council community, to work with people and organizations who exercise that courage and that contact every day, and who do so with maturity of exactly the sort called for by John Armstrong.

Some years ago, a very young colleague of mine at *Science 86*, the magazine where I was then working, said that she was tired of being 20-something and couldn’t wait to turn 30. Until you’re 30, she said, no one is willing to take you seriously. At the start of this gathering, David Colburn welcomed you to the 34<sup>th</sup> annual business meeting of the Federation of State Humanities Councils. That means the Federation is well past the 30-year mark, and the councils that are not yet 40 are closing in on it. If my young colleague was right, we have moved solidly into the age of seriousness, and I believe the state humanities councils are taken very seriously indeed. You deserve to be. It is through hard, patient work that you have earned the respect you increasingly enjoy in congressional offices, at the National Endowment for the Humanities, among a host of national organizations and institutions, and certainly in the cultural, educational, and civic circles in your own states.

State humanities councils are no longer the well-kept secret they once were. You are recognized as innovators, skilled programmers and convenors, and creative and reliable partners. You are widely viewed as organizations that understand and have access to a wide and diverse range of communities, that are well schooled in the cultural and educational issues in your states, that are nimble enough to respond to sudden pressing issues as well as new opportunities. The signs of maturity are everywhere—in your programs that engage steadily more diverse audiences through innovative formats, your sophisticated messages about the value of your work, the ever-expanding and increasingly varied list of your partners.

The program descriptions you sent us early this year bear witness to this vitality, citing programs that reach into communities in all corners of the state and create partnerships with a host of organizations representing not just the cultural and

educational worlds but also social services, business, and medicine. In so doing, you are tending to that critical relationship between ideas and, in Armstrong's words, the rest of life.

Recent reports from councils just in the past few weeks continue to offer impressive evidence of the maturity and sophistication of councils. We were all inspired by the New Hampshire Humanities Council's beautifully executed video production describing the humanities and the council's programs in such clear, evocative, and accessible language and images. The Virginia Foundation for the Humanities once again broke astonishing new ground for all of us with its \$2.5 million grant from the National Archives for a project to provide access to unpublished works of the Founding Fathers. The Alaska Humanities Forum offered a remarkable programming and outreach model, as well as impressive access to federal funding, with its \$1.9 million grant from the Department of Education for the Educator Cross-Cultural Immersion program. You each take your turn in showing the rest of us new paths, new connections, new funding sources, new levels of maturity.

So how can the Federation be of most help in supporting your efforts? The past year has shown that first and foremost, we must be as flexible as possible in responding to the changing national landscape in which you work. You were tremendously helpful to us over these months, participating early in the year in a series of conference calls about the messages that you were using with your members of Congress, providing descriptions of your programs and data about partners, communities, and leveraging of federal dollars. The materials and information you provided allowed us to move swiftly in developing messages and documents for the new Congress and strengthening our communication with the subcommittee leadership and members. It helped us identify those qualities that resonate with members of Congress—the depth of your knowledge of your states and the reach of your programs into all the communities they care about. You also helped us define the genuine needs these programs address, from professional development for teachers, especially in low-income areas, to support for struggling organizations, to programs that allow citizens to take time to reflect, to talk to each other, and to seek common ground on divisive issues.

The Federation's five-year plan continues to provide our roadmap for supporting your work. In 2012 we will step up efforts in several areas.

You have already given us significant fuel for pursuing the first section of our plan, "Our National Message." In response to comments we have received from you,

we are now working on a full schedule of dates and deadlines for various surveys, as well as dates for other activities in which we will ask for your participation throughout the Federation year. We will distribute that annual timeline early in 2012 to help you better anticipate our requests.

We will continue to search for ways to make council work more visible. In the past month, thanks to Susan and Shannon, we have launched a Federation Facebook page, which we hope to populate over the coming year with abundant information about council events. We are in the early stages of preparing for a website redesign, where we hope to create a narrative about the councils to help the public better understand your work. We will enlist your help with that endeavor. And we will continue to draw on your own descriptions and language to strengthen our messages to Congress.

Our work with Congress will only accelerate in the coming year, but we have learned from the past months that we must remain alert to the best strategies for addressing the existing circumstances. A year ago we assumed we would be undertaking several online grassroots campaigns of the sort that were so successful in 2009. Then the climate shifted, and much more targeted communication became the best approach. We are so grateful to all of you for jumping into action to help us compile the 1,125 names and affiliations of volunteer board members for the letter we presented to Rep. Mike Simpson and the other members of the House Interior Appropriations Subcommittee. Our relations with subcommittee members have once again brought home for us how important it is for every single state council to keep their members well educated about the value of council programs. Without the strong relationships the Idaho and Rhode Island councils had maintained with Congressman Simpson and Senator Reed, we would not have been able to make the gains that we did. It hardly needs repeating, but I will repeat it anyway: We need every state council to work with every member of their delegation as though that member is poised to be the next chair of the House or Senate subcommittee.

Nothing better exemplifies the maturity of the councils than the evolving relationship between the councils and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Each year I believe we all come to a clearer understanding of what it means to be in a partnership. There is growing recognition within the agency of the councils' matchless ability to connect with communities in their states and make the humanities a force in the lives of citizens. The state councils have become the first stop in discussions of how to achieve the greatest impact with programs that have potential for national distribution. Senior staff in the Research and Public

Program divisions at NEH have turned to the councils as collaborative partners when they plan outreach workshops in the states.

But there is still room for deeper understanding of this partnership, and in the coming months we will continue to make the case for an expanded role for councils in discussions of the future shape of NEH. Conversations are underway, and will continue, on the ways councils can help define and advance the aims of the Bridging Cultures initiative. Over the coming months the Federation board and staff will pursue conversations with the Chairman and his staff about the structure of the relationship between the councils and the agency. And we will continue discussions with Edie and her staff in the Federal/State Partnership about shifting responsibility for the collection of compliance data to the Federation.

Although I'm sure it seems to all of you, as it sometimes does to us, that our data collection efforts move agonizingly slowly, I can assure you the progress is steady. Over these months, and particularly through extensive research on Jeff's part, we have significantly deepened our understanding of the kinds of information we can feasibly gather and the means of doing so. We are about to prepare a long-term plan to present to the Federal/State Partnership. Our aim with this plan will be to describe the more robust body of information and the greater possibilities for access that will be the Federation's goal in assuming responsibility for gathering compliance information.

Finally, we are poised to further increase opportunities for council exchange through webinars on targeted subjects. Robert Straughter has already agreed to participate in a webinar for finance officers and grants officers who were unable to attend the conference, and we are considering additional webinars related to advocacy.

We are all indebted to several groups who contributed significant time and energy to Federation work over this past year. The Dues Restructuring Task Force took on a daunting challenge and carried it out with a level of reason and civility that would have made Jim Leach proud. Very special thanks go to Rod Risley, former chair of the Mississippi Humanities Council, who agreed to chair this task force. We are also extremely grateful to the task force members who exercised such good judgment and good will throughout the process, including Randy Akers from South Carolina, Virginia Carter from Kentucky, Janine Farver from Florida, Brenna Gerhardt from North Dakota, Joe Krier from Texas, Ralph Lewin from California, and Ken Sullivan from West Virginia. John Roth, a member of the board of Humanities Washington, served as the Federation liaison on the task

force. Thanks so much to all of you.

You have heard throughout this conference how grateful we are to the members of the 2011 conference committee and to the outstanding Florida staff and board, but it cannot be said enough. They have made this a conference we will all remember for a long time.

We are very grateful to the 2011 Nominating Committee, led by Mike Frisch of the New York council board. He was joined in his work to produce the stellar slate of candidates by Mary-Kim Arnold of Rhode Island, Marcia Britton of Wyoming, Shelley Crisp of North Carolina, Mike Gillette of Texas, and Neal Lester of Arizona, along with Sharon Gagnon of the Federation board.

This year the Federation board will very reluctantly abide by the guidelines set forth in our bylaws and allow six incredible people to conclude their terms on our board. Sharon Gagnon certainly takes the prize for the longest commute to our meetings—and sometimes also gets the prize for joining us from the most interesting places. But Sharon, who is a wise and seasoned veteran of a wide variety of boards, warrants a far bigger prize for all the ways she has brought that experience to bear in her significant contributions to the deliberations of the Federation board and the many committees and task forces she has cheerfully agreed to serve on in addition to her regular board functions.

Willis Lott, our unflappable, no-nonsense country boy does not like to call attention to the sophisticated political savvy that he has brought to the work of the Federation, but it is undeniable, and greatly appreciated, as is his deep commitment to the work of the councils for whom he has been such a loyal advocate.

Sara Ogger came to us as a prodigy, the first-ever non-ED staff person to serve on the Federation board. During her service on the board she became a director, a mother, and a true leader among her colleagues—and through all these transitions she never missed a beat in her contributions to the board.

Max Sherman's experience as a legislator, and his incredibly rich network of contacts—most of whom are friends, because you can't know Max without wanting to be his friend—have made him an invaluable resource. In addition, he is a warm, wise, and supportive colleague.

Debbie Watrous, known to all of you as an entrepreneurial and creative council director—the person who, among other things, manages year after year to get the

most incredible people to speak at her big annual dinner—has been every bit as lively and imaginative on the Federation board, encouraging us to think bigger, to push the boundaries. She combines this with the kind of down-to-earth practicality that every board wants in a treasurer.

Jamil Zainaldin has been our guru and our incredible team leader—reminding us of our history and our possibilities, calling us to arms, cheering us on, leading the charge, giving all of us the courage to raise our voices, confident in our message. So many of our advocacy successes during Jamil’s time on the board were made possible because of his dedicated efforts. I will personally always be grateful to Jamil for bringing me into this community, supporting me with such unflinching generosity, and teaching me everything I know about this work.

The Federation is remarkable for the consistently high quality of its board leadership, and David Colburn had carried that tradition forward in grand fashion. His sure-footed style and clarity of purpose have inspired confidence just when we needed it and have given us smooth passage through turbulent waters over these past two years. Equally important, through it all he has never lost his ability to take the long view—or his sense of humor. I have never enjoyed working with anyone more.

I know you all join me in saying thank you to four other remarkable people. Jeff, Liz, Shannon, and Susan bring so much talent, humor, seriousness, wit, intelligence, and dedication to their work with this organization that I can hardly believe my good fortune in getting to spend every day with them. They are totally committed to the work you do and are constantly seeking all the ways they can to help you do it even more effectively.

And I want to thank all of you for the remarkable work you do. A weakened economy needs strengthened humanities. We have that strength in this room and in the programs that take place across the nation. We have what is needed to inform our capitalist society with the maturity it needs to direct its energies to worthwhile ends. I know the work before us is demanding, but we have the strength to make a difference, and I thank you for the difference you make every day.