

“Soul Liberty,” Civic Knowledge, and the “Custom of the Neighbors.”

Few things in life can be as satisfying as the approval and recognition of one’s professional work by those whose opinions you value the most. It is even better when family who shared in the vagaries of the work can be present, too, Beverly, Kevin, and Jennifer. For this I thank you. Much of the most satisfying work I have done over the years has been in the guise of story-telling, although I can claim few of the performance qualities of a Marc Levitt. Still even better about this recognition is its association with Tom Roberts and Linda and Ed Wood.

I first met Tom before he worked with RICH when he was producing a show for Channel 36 on the history of Rhode Island. It brought him to John Brown House from time to time to tape Eleanor Monohon, a teacher of Rhode Island history, retired from Moses Brown School. I have always thoroughly enjoyed Tom’s zany wit, but even more appreciated his commitment to critical, but civil, public dialogue. As Director of the Historical Society I sponsored several of Linda’s Oral history projects, like Rhode Island’s islands and the trilogy of student interviews, “What Did You Do in the War, Grandma,” “Hope, Fear, and Rock ‘n Roll,” “ The Whole World is Watching.”

Time after time, as the Director of an agency, sharing the responsibility with other statewide entities for the welfare, growth, and the promotion of Rhode Island history, there was a common consensus about the importance of knowledge of the past as a basis for progressive public policy. Over the years I was involved with dozens of

projects as a consultant, participant, principal scholar, and paymaster. The years I spent on the RICH Board were the most pleasurable I spent on any community agency. The two years as Chair were truly memorable.

It seemed to me that whatever the role: as petitioner, or as trustee, there was a common consensus that there was important community business to transact.

Among this important business to transact was the matter that, almost alone of all the states, Rhode Island had no state history museum, and that needed to be remedied.

* * * * *

In other states, history museums are used to enhance the state's image of itself and the self-image of its citizens. Museums are used to add value to the public education program, and they are used for the economic development purpose of leisure time tourism. In Rhode Island, for the second half of the 20th century, one could make the argument that the lack of a positive self image about the state in general and the lack of a positive self image of most of its population was a serious drag on the economic momentum of the place and a depressing personal condition for many of our people who were not motivated to develop or use all of their potential.

But why museums? Can't the problem of a lack of self-esteem be dealt with in a different way? Possibly so; probably yes, but museums have certain qualities, certain capacities for transmitting information that other media lack. First of all, there is an aura

of approval, an endorsement of significance simply by having something displayed in a museum. It's assumed that public exhibit space is a scarce commodity. Only something of merit would warrant the luxury of taking up the public's space, requiring the public's notice. More importantly, there's the added drama of being in the presence of an important artifact, something a published catalogue or video can only suggest. People like seeing the real thing. There's an excitement of being in the presence of authenticity. Lastly, there are teaching properties of three-dimensional materials that are enhanced by the theatrics of dramatic presentation. New interactive techniques of exhibition only heighten the chance of making a memorable, lasting, impression.

The public service advertisement for the Negro College Fund has admonished us for years that "a mind is a terrible thing to waste." Self esteem is not much far behind. One's sense of self-worth stems largely, I believe, from the ability for us to see ourselves in the context of family, neighbor, and community. I believe that in order to see into the future, to aspire, to hope, and to strive, depends upon how we orient ourselves to the past. Our personal gyroscope, our compass, our motivation, is greatly stimulated by what we know of that which has gone on before. The fact that other people, in other times, but in similar circumstance, were able to overcome adversity, to survive, to persevere, gives us the courage and fortitude, as well as the energy to make strides to advance our human condition. Without this sense of direction and security of knowing our past, we waste a lot of time being insecure, indecisive, and uncertain about the course ahead. History, one's personal history, can provide that confidence to confront the unknown.

By contrast, lack of access to one's past can be destabilizing. One of the cruelest things that can happen to someone is to be denied their past, to be told that they are not worthy enough to have a story, that there is no past for them, that they just don't count. Never have; never will. Those who commit such a cruelty display a meanness and an arrogance that I have devoted a life to oppose and confound.

Here in Rhode Island we have done just that for decades. Not as an overt policy of discrimination, or disrespect, not out of a conscious effort to violate one's civil rights, or as an insidious denial of an entitlement, but we have done it just the same. The emblems, icons, symbols of personal and community accomplishments which we have installed in the places of public recognition we call museums exclude 70 to 80 percent of the people who live in Rhode Island today. There is no community mirror they can go to in order to see their face, or that of their family, their neighborhood, their ethnic or nationality group. They have been denied access to their seat at the table. This exclusion has had a price, a consequence. The very people that Rhode Island now counts on for improvements in our economy, reform in our government, and general progress in our community receive no reinforcement and see no role models for them to emulate. We thus fail to encourage self esteem and self confidence at our own peril.

Roger Williams spoke of "Soul Liberty," the right of each person to exercise their own conscience in religious matters without fear of reprisal or disrespect.

Rhode Island has a long tradition of independent thinking, a long tradition of ingenuity and enterprise, a long tradition of creative solutions to difficult problems. To fail to teach those traditions to our current population, to fail to celebrate them as a personal endowment shared by all is a huge mistake.

The idea of remedying this oversight by creating a new history museum that included all backgrounds and embraced all cultures as worthy has been the aim of a major part of my career for nearly a quarter of a century. That it has not yet succeeded by no means diminishes its value or its merit. That it will succeed, and that it is needed now more than ever, must be a commitment for all who value fair play and seek to promote community progress.

Rhode Island has a history unlike almost all other original American states. Founded without any expressed permission from the English King or Parliament, it was neither a royal colony, a proprietary collection of large landholding estates, nor was it devised as a business enterprise for English investors. Unintentionally it developed as a refuge for those persecuted for their beliefs and opinions. Its initial form of self government was nothing more than the village gathering of the heads of households, from which evolved the town meetings. Eventually, the town meetings deputized representatives to attend a general assembly to conduct the affairs of the colony. So suspicious were the original inhabitants of an abuse of power by these elected officials that they held elections twice a year so that they could keep these office holders on a short leash. Originally, the laws passed by the General Assembly had no force until they were referred back to the Town Meeting for review and endorsement.

Without guidance from King and Parliament, and without a strong authority figure in the form of a Governor, much of the running of local life depended on what David Hackett Fisher has called the “custom of the neighbors,” or “the custom of neighboring men.” Pat Conley has called this tradition of local control of public affairs, “Democratic Localism.” Thomas Wilson Dorr called it “Popular Constituent Sovereignty.” It’s not all that different than the impulse to rise up and recall an unpopular public official as we have seen recently in California.

Democratic localism, Popular Constituent Sovereignty, the Custom of the Neighbors, however, only works well if everyone is motivated to be a participant, an elector. The duties of citizenship fall upon us all. In Rhode Island it is not uncommon to see nearly half of the seats in the modern General Assembly go uncontested. It is not uncommon to have local government scandals of the improper use of influence or misuse of public funds. How does that phrase go ?

“No conflict ? No interest !”

A sense of civic duty, a sense of participation, can only emerge in a situation where everyone feels like a stake holder, a player. This derives in turn from Civic Knowledge. Civic Knowledge is a combination of public education in the fields of government and political science and the larger awareness of one’s place in society informed by a background in history. Consequently, when a major part of our population sees nothing, or hears nothing, about their place in the history of making public policy, it is easy for

them to assume that they have no role in the public sphere. A state history museum provides some of that awareness and confirmation. A state history museum that incorporates educational frameworks and standards in its presentations and transforms school field trips into school residencies assists in creating an environment conducive to a widely accepted obligation of civic duty.

Civic Knowledge, however, is an even larger asset to a community. A citizenry secure their own past is a citizenry armed and energized to overcome adversity and grasp the challenges of the present. Civic knowledge can lead to community wisdom. A wise community is a just community. Justice can only exist when all members of the community are included, valued, and respected. This is true “homeland security.”