Philanthropy Today: An Imperative
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I am 81 years old. I was probably invited to speak here because of my 20-year career as an Arts Advocate—ex-member of the Ohio Arts Council and chairman of the membership committee for the Ohio Citizens Committee for the Arts. I was probably not invited to speak here because of my earlier 40-year career as a Labor Advocate, President of the Upholsterers and Allied Workers Union, Local 48, AFL-CIO. Yet, to me, both are at the heart of philanthropy—a word from ancient Greek that means: "the love of humanity."

Sadly, philanthropy has been reduced to just the shrewd practice of a carefully controlled ethic of giving away of monies. Aristotle, in his Nichomachean Ethics, wrote, "To give away money is an easy matter, and in everyone's power. But to decide to whom to give it, and how large, and for what purpose is neither in everyone's power nor an easy matter." And so these carefully controlled philanthropies are deemed weighty matters. Yet, Maimonides' Eight Degrees of Benevolence places the righteous act of "anonymous, no-strings-attached giving without regard to the consequences" at a higher degree than carefully controlled philanthropies. Quite Interestingly though, Maimonides then places anonymous giving below that of giving a human being free opportunity "to achieve his own livelihood." And such livelihood is understood as the achievement of both bread and wisdom, food for the body and for the spirit.

Some years ago, as Chairman of the United Labor Agency's Cultural Arts Committee, a role that combined both arts and labor advocacy, I helped commission and produce the one-man show John L. Lewis, Disciple of Discontent. This played at the Cleveland Convention Center Theater, Washington's American Theater, the Berkshire Theater Festival, and elsewhere. The theater critics were unanimous in their praise for the playwright's powerful "warts and all" drama on union issues; but as I was later told, the playwright was most proud of the praise from a factory worker who had attended his first live-theater performance. With tears in his eyes, that worker muttered, "That's the best movie I've ever seen . . ." That work of art had uplifted his spirits.

Long ago, in the Great Depression, when I was about 15 years old, the son of an immigrant working class Russian Jew, I did not have the eight cents trolley-fare for the three miles from Luzerne to Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. So I walked to the Osterhot free library. There, gaining access to the closed stacks where they kept the unexpurgated versions of Balzac, Boccaccio, and Pierre Louys, my adolescent passions were aroused by lewd limericks and lurid poetry:

"When in the still soft night all are asleep,
Into thy chamber of delight I creep,
Finding thee in innocent repose,
Lips half apart like petals of the rose . . ."

The Ladies Garden Club would have been shocked; but, you see, in those restrictive days of blue-laws and the rhythm-method, it was cheap rhyme that first awakened my love for the more classic beauties of language. It was not long before I was also memorizing:

"Methought I heard a voice cry, 'Sleep no more,
Macbeth doth murder sleep . . .''"

In my early twenties, in another free library with a modern system, a brave librarian who identified with the struggles of the working class risked his job by playing recordings of labor songs and Revolutionary Irish tunes:

"Early on a Sunday morning
High upon a gallows's tree,
Kevin Barry gave his young life
For the cause of liberty . . ."

Soon I was also listening to Beethoven's ode to the freedom of the human spirit, the Ninth Symphony's stirring, "Freuda . . . Freuda schoner Gotterfunken—Joy, o wondrous spark divine!" Whole new worlds opened up to me. I woke up to the broader meanings of civilization and culture, history and progress. Yet not long before I was born, there was not much liberty. Few free libraries. And music, books, art, and theater were only for the idle entertainment of an aristocratic elite.

In the late nineteenth century, in Czarist Russia, Count Leo Tolstoy, at the height of his fame as the author of War and Peace, attended the Imperial Opera one winter night; then, he went outside into below
zero weather and saw all the coachmen half-frozen, waiting to take the aristocrats home in order to earn a measly kopek to feed starving families. Suddenly, Tolstoy was shattered by his own lack of "love for humanity;" and in his iconoclastic essay What Is Art? he attacked an elitist art-for-art's-sake. An art that only separated rich from poor, and brought no enrichment nor enlightenment to ordinary people. Yet, Czarist Russia clung to a feudal system of princes and peasants; and history records the brutal consequences.

In America, in the late nineteenth century, the steel magnate Andrew Carnegie argued that the huge gap between the rich and poor was necessary to economic progress; but embarrassed by his princely wealth, he wrote in his Gospel of Wealth that there are, "few millionaires, very few indeed, who are clear of the sin of having made beggars." He loathed handouts to beggars; but in a democracy, he argued, the rich had a responsibility to undertake shrewd, carefully controlled philanthropies. Carnegie funds built many free libraries; nevertheless, the well-publicized charity by guilt-ridden robber-barons was satirized by that barroom comic Mr. Dooley as being as awkward and noisy, "as a waiter falling downstairs with a tray of dishes ..." But the huge gap between rich and poor endangered the social order and aroused old questions of, "Am I my Brother's Keeper ...?" And so, over ensuing decades of cyclical booms and busts of a free-market economy, anarchists and communist revolutionaries were kept in check by organized corporate charities, new government programs, and most significantly, from my point of view, by a socially progressive Labor Movement that championed ordinary people. A Labor Movement that championed living wages and benefits.

And so I became a Labor Advocate.

Early in my union career, in 1943, my own Upholsterer's Union was the first ... the first in America to establish a comprehensive Health and Welfare fund for workers unemployed due to illness or accident outside the workplace. This provided hospitalization, surgical benefits, and 60 percent of earnings for up to 52 weeks. And also, when a worker died, the Upholsterer's Union provided a Life Insurance benefit of $1,000. Later, I found out that Funeral Homes then charged widows $999—leaving nothing for the bereft family, so I raised the benefit to $2,000. Funeral Homes then charged $1,999—I used my diplomatic negotiation-skills to tell those, "goddamn bastards that unless they stopped such exploitation I would ensure that they would never get a goddamn penny ...."

And then, near the end of my union career, I had the chance to broaden my support of workers. In 1975, the national Community Services Department of the AFL-CIO proposed, "that Labor should be involved in the arts ....""The American Dream is not about gadgets. It's not about the size of our gross national product. It's not about the level of our technical sophistication," Walter Reuther of the UAW wrote. "The American Dream is about man. It's about broadening the opportunities and facilitating the growth of every human being, so that each person can reach out and achieve a sense of purpose and a sense of fulfillment. No nation can make that possible in the truest sense, except as it is prepared to allocate increasing resources to allow the arts to flourish in every aspect of national life."

And so I became an Arts Advocate, Co-Chairman of the United Labor Agency Cultural Arts Committee. We produced the drama John L. Lewis. Sponsored the photo-album Strength Enough. Supported the "Worker as Artist" program to develop the talent that lies latent in the working class. And bought out workers' nights at the opera and ballet. Our efforts were ballyhooed by television's Today Show for bringing an audience of nearly 2,000 to the Nutcracker, a turn-out that the Cleveland Ballet management praised as "magnificent."

Once, a State Representative from Cleveland was amazed when I called him to urge support of the arts. He said, "My God, its mostly the mink-coated ladies from the high-priced Cleveland suburbs who call me, and it angers me because they want money for the arts but know nothing about unemployment, welfare needs, or other kinds of needs like that. When you called me it just blew my mind."

Well, there is little I or most of my members have in common with the mink-coated ladies. But, we do have one thing in common and that is at least an understanding that if our society is to grow intellectually and culturally, we must have strong support of the arts.

Now ... today, in our so-called computerized Information Age, under the ups and downs of the new global economy, this is all rapidly being undone.

The new breed of corporate princes still argue that the huge gap between the rich and poor is still necessary to economic progress; but they no longer seem embarrassed by their princely wealth. They smugly agree with the English man-of-letters, Samuel Johnson, who wrote, "You are much surer that you are do-
ing good when you pay money to those who work, as the recompense of their labor, than when you give money merely in charity.” And so, while slashing old well-paid jobs, scuttling old labor unions, and sabotaging old public welfare programs, corporate princes defend themselves with fudged and faked statistics of new “job creation;” and then, they argue that any kind of philanthropy—especially that crime of handing a street-beggar pocket-change—is dangerous to economic progress. Meanwhile, ordinary people are once again squeezed back into the iron “vice” of wage-slavery: a brutal new feudal system. And in the ensuing social chaos, these corporate princes claim the “War on Poverty” is an utter failure and blame the poor themselves for all the symptoms of poverty—low moral values, drug addiction, and violence.

I hope against hope that the more progressive capitalists will wake up, and will not let the ambitions of new Macbeths, “murther sleep...” We are a nation, “of the people, by the people, and for the people.” And I hope against hope that the more progressive capitalists will not allow the terrible social tragedies of the past to be repeated again... and again... and again.

Yet today, once again, an aristocratic elite step by the poverty-stricken unemployed and homeless to see the latest musical entertainment of The Phantom of the Opera at a costly $50 a seat. And the social progress of taxpayer support for public television, public theater, and public arts and humanities is ridiculed by political critics as “liberal” propaganda or “obscene” pornography. Ironically, while parents may fear for the moral sanity of a few children who might on a rare chance view a few scandalous photographs at some non-profit museum supported by the National Endowment for the Arts—at the same time parents routinely let millions of children watch Hollywood films, video games, and television shows that blatantly exploit sexy bodies and violent body-counts. Let us face these cultural contradictions and subtle commercial deceptions, but let us not allow the holier-than-thou moral censors to mount some high-horse of hypocrisy that blames the ghetto “rap” artist for disgusting lyrics and never thinks of the corporate executive who undoubtedly sanctioned the “rap” record’s release.

There is something wrong here.

Yet this wrong can not be so easily excused away by a one-sided view of cultural decay as outlined in recent books like Newt Gingrich’s To Renew America. Gingrich waxes nostalgic for an old-fashioned Thomas Edison and Henry Ford America to be magically restored by a new-fashioned computerized Information Age. I’ve heard this before: at the end of the Great Depression, at the 1939 World’s Fair, General Motors showcased its Futurama Exhibit—visitors sat in padded armchairs that moved automatically by endless panoramas of a future where robots did all the work and society was a chrome paradise of peace and prosperity.

Ah, what dreams!

The recent June issue of Harper’s Weekly, however, published a ten-year graph of corporate investments for computerization opposite gains in overall profitability, and so far, the results seem in question. The new technology seems to have just gotten rid of more workers and centralized more economic power. And, from my point of view, any real gains in the wealth of America have once again been squeezed from the usual old-fashioned source: the sweat, blood, and tears of ordinary people. Something is very wrong. And that wrong can not be so easily excused even on the ups and downs of a global economy.

That wrong is the utter abandonment of ordinary people.

Long, long, long ago, in ancient Greece, Plato wrote a warning tale in his Republic. He described how his fellow citizens, the ruling class of his day, were like slaves chained in dark caves entranced by the flickers of smoky fires and ignorant of the sunlight outside. And today, this so-called computerized Information Age looks like a new high-tech Plato’s Cave. Corporate princes chain themselves to flickering computer monitors in glass office-towers built like medieval fortresses, hook themselves to buzzing cellular telephones as they rush home in airright BMWs on highways that bypass the slums, and hypnotize their children with flashing Virtual Reality video games in security-controlled suburban mansions that keep out the brigands; and they are afraid to go out in sunlight without sunglasses and a number 45 sunblock. And in all this isolation, at best, the “love of humanity” is reduced to the cynical expediency of “public relations” that propagandize ordinary people.

The ordinary human being is often an awkward, stubborn, ungrateful creature—but given the opportunity, the ordinary human being is just as often delightful, wondrous, and inspiring. I say given the opportunity because despite the propaganda about extraordinary self-made men, opportunity is almost always a gift: Inborn talent. The advantages of family heritage. The encouragement and education by elders. The help of friends. And those myriad chances of life that in a moment can raise us up or throw us down. So I
pity those self-made men under the self-aggrandizing illusion that their success stands alone—that they owe no debt to ordinary people—that philanthropy is just the carefully controlled giving away of monies to avoid social chaos. Philanthropy must be practical and wise; but ultimately, there is no true philanthropy without the “love of humanity.”

I treasure the credo of another old Jew—a man who did poorly in school, who was often unemployed and penniless, but who managed to emigrate to America to escape the tyranny of fascism—the credo of Albert Einstein:

“Strange is our situation here upon earth. Each of us comes for a short visit, not knowing why, yet sometimes seeming to divine a purpose. From the standpoint of daily life, however, there is one thing we know: That Man is here for the sake of other Men ... Above all for those upon whose smile and well-being our own happiness depends, and also for the countless unknown souls with whose fate we are connected by a bond of sympathy. Many times a day I realize how much my own outer and inner life is built upon the labors of my fellow men, both living and dead, and how earnestly I must exert myself in order to give in return as much as I have received.”

And to conclude let me ... let this old Jew ... share a legendary story: In the mid-seventeenth century, two young men showed talent for art. Neither could afford the costs of pencils and paper, oils and canvas. So one went to work in the fields harvesting potatoes in support of the other, who went to the Art Academy. The Artist made an extraordinary name for himself: Rembrandt. They say that Rembrandt later immortalized his friend’s rough, callused hands in the famous “Hands at Prayer,” reprints of which still hang on many walls today.

But who ... who recalls that potato-farmer’s name? And who ... who best immortalized the ideal that, “I am my Brother’s Keeper?”