**Expressive Life**

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The phrase *Expressive Life* (in French, *Expressif*) denotes an arena of human experience in which the collective past (Heritage) intersects the self-directed present and future (Voice), enabling both community connection and independent creativity. Like *work life* and *family life*, Expressive Life is composed of elements -- relationships, memory, aspiration, belief. When lived in balance, Expressive Life enables the achievement of meaning, purpose, and ultimately a high quality of life.

In 1976, in his influential critique of 20th-century American society, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, Daniel Bell introduced the concept of “expressive symbolism.” For Bell, expressive symbolism encompasses “those efforts, in painting, poetry, and fiction, or within the religious forms of litany, liturgy, and ritual, which seek to explore and express the meaning of human existence.”

Bell was on the right track; we need an understanding of culture that is precise -- one that focuses on ideas, knowledge, and practice that connect with the past and equip citizens for the future. But Bell’s “expressive symbolism” contained only art and religion; although helpful, this useful subset of “culture” feels too narrow. Is Bell talking only about inherited religious and artistic practice or also about present-day religion and artistry? What about practices from the past that are not religious, or forms of expression past and present that, while creative, are not “art?”

While serving as chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts in the late 1990s, I became fascinated by this challenge: how can we advance the idea of cultural vitality as a public good given the reality that the US has never really engaged culture as a component of public policy? What would a framework of human behavior that encompassed cultural activity as a key aspect of life and society actually look like – a framework that would be distinct and useful in arguing the value of engagement with heritage, artmaking, political action? In a National Press Club lecture in the fall of 2001 I put forward some tentative ideas, in part calling for the adoption of a US “Cultural Bill of Rights.”

The talk was reprised in March of 2001 at the Harvard Club in New York City, and became the basis for a 2008 book, *Arts, Inc.: How Greed and Neglect Have Destroyed Our Cultural Rights* (California: 2008). That volume argued that “culture” is itself an inherently-problematic term – one which encompasses both “the artistic/aspirational” and the “ancient/anthropological” (The cultural life of New York City v. the culture of the Inuit people). Further, in popular usage it can refer to a constellation of ideas of beliefs (“the culture of police work”) or even to popular habitual behaviors (“FaceBook culture”). It seemed clear that *culture* (and *The Arts* for that matter) – burdened with multiple meanings and hidden hierarchical assumptions – must be replaced if the expressive component of human behavior is to ever find its appropriate position among America’s public policy priorities.

So *Arts, Inc.* asserted a basic citizen claim to cultural vibrancy as a public good, but the need for fresh terminology remained. What word, phrase, and concept would enable the cultural community to “speak truth to power” in a new way, sidestepping the unhelpful assumptions that inevitably arise in discussions of *Culture* or *Art*?

The answer is to reconfigure Daniel Bell’s *expressive symbolism* into *Expressive Life* -- an arena of human behavior both expansive and distinct, as meaningful as “Family Life” or “Work Life”. What are the major components of Expressive Life? Using concepts from the field of Folklore, Expressive Life can be divided into *Heritage* and *Voice*: Heritage suggesting community, history, neighborhood, family, belonging and continuity; Voice conveying independence, unfettered expression, aspiration, autonomy and change.

Framed as a simple graph Expressive Life (or *Expressif*) looks like this:



A second book, *Handmaking America* (Counterpoint: 2012), refined the definition of Expressive Life, distinguishing the sacred and secular aspects of Heritage – *Religion* and *Tradition*, and separating the artistic components of Voice from those of civic engagement – *Personal Creative Practice* and *Political Speech*. Fleshed out in this way, it seems that Expressive Life delineates a new category of human behavior, one that is a worthy subject for both research and good public policy.

Heritage and Voice interact and influence and at time reinforce one another, but most often exhibit an oppositional tension. The past can be a burden and independence can feel untethered; in the lives of individuals and communities, it is the *balance* within expressive life that is most critical. A life dominated by heritage is constrained by belief, habit, custom, ethnicity, and often unprepared for engagement with a cosmopolitan world. But its opposite, a life that only honors individual identity, global desires, and the prerogatives of personal ambition is rootless and devoid of meaning. A balanced expressive life can provide an essential sense of continuity and belonging while also offering multiple avenues for personal growth and free expression.

Cultural policy is society’s mechanism for shaping expressive life. It is the framework of law, regulation, and customary behavior in which art, information, and knowledge are created, distributed, consumed and preserved. Thus it is cultural policy that controls access to the components of a vibrant expressive life. Specific policies can be analyzed and if necessary changed to ensure that barriers to access are as low as is possible. For example, Internet policy can be shaped to enable the greatest number of people high-speed service, providing access to knowledge, news, and to the tools of communication. Similarly, policy governing corporate ownership of media – film, sound recordings, books, etc. – can be crafted to allow citizens reasonable access to the quantity of intellectual property that is also a nation’s shared cultural heritage. Once the elements of Expressif are objectified as part of a comprehensible whole (in the same way that we understand how various components make up work life or family life), the quality of the expressive life of an individual, community, or nation can be assessed and deficiencies addressed.

Thus, Expressive Life, or Expressif, must be viewed as an important space in which to achieve a high quality of life, a policy frame that addresses tradition, religion, creative practice, and political engagement in a new way, defining a new life domain within which individuals and communities can, and should, align public policy in order to advance the human condition. Equal access to the components of a vibrant expressive constitutes an important public policy objective.