



'Mondrian behind bars' by Andrew Clarkson

Moving beyond violence

*Extract of speech by Peter Biggs,
Chair of Creative New Zealand*

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Just as art comprises those three things – wholeness, harmony and radiance – so the arts can bring wholeness, harmony and radiance to an individual, to a community and to a society.

I am not talking from theory here. I have seen with my own eyes the wonderful Arts in Prisons Programme run by Arts Access Aotearoa. I visited Paremoremo Prison just last year. Prisons are not nice places. They are institutional, inhuman and intimidating. We walked through long corridors sealed off with bars and metal doors.

And then we entered an amazing space. One lone, brave and wonderful woman and about 20 inmates. And in this cold, institutional place, they were creating art – painting, sculpture and carving. It was an extraordinary experience. I saw, and talked to, men whose lives had been full of destruction now focused on creation. Men whose lives had been filled with ugliness now creating beauty. Men who, in James K Baxter's words, are "the children who have never grown" now talking with passion and confidence about their work and how it came to be. And men who felt that they had achieved nothing in their lives now standing proudly beside a completed art piece or object.. In that room the arts were bringing forth in the wounded lives of these men wholeness, harmony and radiance.

I have stayed in touch with that prison and that programme. And I have experienced first-hand how the arts, by appealing to the better angels of our nature, can make gentle the life of the world.

This experience has convinced me that – not just in Paremoremo but in Manukau, Turangi, Wellington and Christchurch – the arts are a tool in bringing about a non-violent society in Aotearoa New Zealand.

And it is not just in New Zealand that this is going on. Between September '95 and March '97, Comedia, a leading independent research centre, undertook a study into the social impact of arts programmes....

A specific case of the arts helping a community move beyond violence is the Batley Carr Estate in England – known for its very poor housing conditions, increasing vandalism, open drug-dealing and reports of violence. An artist in residence programme and arts projects were introduced with dramatic results....

More and more around the world the arts are being used as a tool to move communities and individuals beyond violence – in the prisons in the United Kingdom; in the prisons and institutions in California; in the prisons and outside the prisons in Australia....

To me, violence springs from anger, alienation, fear and frustration. And these have their dwelling place in the spirit of humankind. And it is to the spirit that the arts speak. It is the spirit and the heart that the arts move. It is the human spirit that the arts nourish. For the arts reveal to the human soul its own unique rhythm of beauty.

I truly believe that the call of every man and every woman is to be a creative hero. I believe too that this nation is called to be the most creative, civilised and noble country on this planet. Sadly, this call is not heeded by so many – through choice, through fear and through circumstances....I believe this call is issued to a country as well as the individual. We must answer the call to be a creative country, moving beyond the tired, traditional and out-worn slogans and solutions of more process, more laws, more policy and more institutions.

The key to solving the problem of violence in our society lies in the spiritual transformation of human beings. Only in this way can we transform their lives from a wasteland of low self-esteem, despair and violence to a life of wholeness, harmony and radiance. And it is through the arts – because they speak to the human spirit and because of their transforming power – that we can achieve the dream of a country where people walk without fear, act with integrity and compassion and live creatively and without the threat of violence. I know this because I have seen it with my own eyes.

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