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Making Things and Making Things Better

Frances McCue

Once, when I was much younger and I lived in New Hampshire, I was in love with a folksinger. I was distantly in love with him. That is, I was in love with him from a distance. I'd see him walking into the Timberland Boot mill where he worked during the day as I cross-country skied past him, off to college. He didn't know who I was, but everyone knew him. He was the town folksinger, after all, part hippie, part rural—dipped in the artistic: black tee shirt and a hunting jacket with inside pockets for the ducks. He was beautiful.

Every now and then I think of him because of that distance between us. It reminds me of what it's like to be in love with an idea of something before you really know it well. (Sometimes it's better that way.) There's part of me that always loved the image of an artist getting by in a small town. It's as if the whole economy of it: the day job, the small apartment, the bar—is all in a snow globe. Bill the folksinger went to work at the boot mill where he poked eyelets into leather, day after day, where his thinking life was pushed inward. Then, he made up songs inspired by that work and went to sing them at the bar at night. He drank too much and rose each day for the swing shift. It all seems so tidy. I liked thinking of him there. That may be how many people think of artists, as quaint loners who live among us and manage some form of self-expression. We rely on them, eventually, to give benefit concerts and add local color to the town. But that's a nostalgia problem, and I hope we can all recover.

I live in Seattle now, and I work at Richard Hugo House, a literary house where people come to write, to present their work, and to take classes. It's a place for readers to connect with new literature and innovative spins on literature of the past. (Once, we hosted a twenty-four hour "Gertrude Stein-

a-thon.") It's a place that began like a song does—with a sense of inquiry, a little hunch and some pens and paper. Hugo House grew into a community place where people come to see quirky, interesting events, and to read and write poems, plays, stories, novels. It's a real thing now, clamped into the city the way a poem might be bound into a book, or a novel might end up nestled into the shelf of a bookstore. Three of us started Hugo House about seven years ago. It went through lots and lots of rough drafts, drafts created and edited by lots of people.

An organization, like a town, is a big poem. It is the juncture of interests, images, ideas all sealed together. It's like a folksinger who is, of course, more than a folksinger. When you make an organization, you're constantly looking for something urgent, something surprising. Then, the place takes off in response and triggers new ways of seeing and expressing things. A poem is like that. A folksinger is like that. He starts the song in one place, and later you find yourself somewhere else. Artists teach us to start with common materials and end up with something astonishing.

How *is* making things, artistic things, like the process of making a difference? How do we each attend to the unjust obstacles that prevent people from getting what they need? Really, I think, social change work is about bringing the deserving together with what they deserve. It's about closing the gap between the people and their opportunities for food, shelter, clothing, education and art.

On the other hand, art pries open gaps. It makes space for new things to exist. And, it leaves enough room in this newly-opened space for people to have a dialogue about it. There's room to circle the thing itself and the space it exists in. (The best art, I believe, makes a bigger space around the object or event than the space the thing itself occupies. That's the impact of the made object.) And I've come to believe that political work, the social and cultural work of caring for people, can learn from this. Maybe social change should be less about fixing and more about opening. Helping other people, transforming big systemic flaws, could be more about seeing the

abundance in what we each have available to us and less about seeing the scarcity.

The impulse to fix anything is antithetical to art. To fix is to render immobile. To embalm is to fix. Good work loosens the reach of those who bring food and those who need it. As Lewis Hyde notes in *The Gift*, scarcity and abundance has as much to do with the means of exchange as the amount of material wealth does. Timing, who is controlling the exchange, how goods are passed—each of these contributes to the success of the work. How does a poem start with an impulse and then reach, fully formed, into the world? How does a great poem find its impact, its readers? How can a poem, cropped and pruned of ornament, be so richly full of possibility? How can scarcity and abundance live so closely together?

Sometimes, the impulse is simple and the delivery is complicated and inventive. Think of Proust who, in his three volumes of *Remembrance of Things Past*, props his hero in bed, eating a Madeleine. Proust's language is incredibly lavish and ornamented but the book is still, ultimately, about a man reclining in bed, nibbling a cookie.

* * *

Bill the folksinger wrote ballads about the mill and the diner and his smoke-smeared voice crackled at the points where his songs dip into the deepest notes, coinciding, as it happened, with the emotional depths of the lyrics. He wrote longingly about places that leave you longing when you leave them. Places you would never live but you think you might, just for a minute. Or you'd want to live in them with Bill. You'd want to do this, say, if you were a young girl who felt all lumpy inside over folksingers. Maybe, for now, we should think of Bill the folksinger in his apartment alone. Maybe he's pining for a girl he hasn't met yet. Outside it's snowing. The snow is coming down. The mill is dumping leather eyelets from the boots, into the river.

I think of Bill because he's the lone artist and the town's creative burden fell to him. Most of the town's citizens, I like to think, were in awe of him. They might have been a bit contemptuous too. He played on the stage in the local bar. As a factory worker and a singer-songwriter, he straddled two worlds and they each fed off each other. Prompted by the other citizens' longing for songs about places they knew, jobs they held, Bill delivered the landmarks with a comforting melancholy. While the projection of artist fell to him, so did the mask of beloved, unattainable outsider. It was as if Bill were the artist who somehow held up the town's vision of itself.

For Bill, writing songs may have come from a different place, as the "Snow Man" does in Wallace Stevens' poem:

The Snow Man

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land
Full of the same wind
That is blowing in the same bare place

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

All that snow, that full expanse, and as readers, we're looking for openings. Just as Bill's "mind of winter" guided his artistic voice, so the wide expanse of creativity can be an incredible freedom. When you want to

act on an idea, when you want to initiate something new (like a literary center), you look out, across the spread of systems, departments, agencies, and it's like a big empty field of snow. But when you look closer, you can see variances, little gullies, divots—these are places to make an imprint, to dig a little, clear things out. You might see a way to make something better, more interesting, like a small town that looks like nothing, but a nothing with something in it.

When we started Hugo House, the world for writers in Seattle seemed blank and full of potential—a sort of snowfield. That's because writers didn't have a community place yet. They had the basement of Elliott Bay Book Company, where they could have tea and linger between readings, but they didn't have a civic space where writing, as an art and a process, could receive much attention. The symphony was building Benaroya Hall (Seattle's enormous state-of-the-art symphony hall); the Opera was planning a new opera house; the city was buzzing. Writers, it seemed, could use the civic status of the other arts.

And so, in this lack, was the abundance of possibility. Hugo House grew from a "nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" into a place that, like an artistic endeavor, introduces something new to the culture. Soon, the "mind of winter" grows around it and the new thing absorbs the novelty imposed upon it.

Too often, social change ventures try to "scotch-tape" artistic programs onto their machinery, instead of assimilating artistic practices in their work. Arts organizations try to glue social service programs onto their artistic enterprises. Both processes suffer from a lack of inquiry and depth. You have to ask the big questions (Why are we doing this? Who needs it?) It has to be an organic, integrated approach. You have to be ready for what the artist is going to tell you. You have to be ready for what the client is going to tell you. Giving people a locked corral in which to express themselves is simply not enough. You have to welcome them into the circle of the organization and open yourself, truly, to what they have to say.

"A poet is a wrong thing in a right world," said Richard Hugo, a poet from White Center, a small neighborhood just south of Seattle. In his book, *The Triggering Town*, Hugo helped beginning poets let go of the intentions that they held for their poems. Instead, he encouraged poets to "let the truth conform to music," to let the materials surface meaning, instead of the poet imposing meaning upon the medium. When Hugo says that the world is "right," I take it to mean that he sees the world as aligned. With the heft of enough people doing things in particular ways, the world balanced in their collecting and settling interests. It was not, for Hugo, a moral buy-in to accept the way things are.

I wish that activists, politicians and social workers could read Richard Hugo. I think work that sets out to "fix" things takes for granted that the person doing the fixing is a right thing in a wrong world instead of a wrong thing in a right world. How stubborn that is! How closed that can be! In some ways, social change, the name itself, assures the wrongness by applying the corrective measures. What if the ways on acting things were "wrong" in the sense of being unusual, quirky, informal or personal? What if we saw "rightness" around us and moved from that?

When we started Hugo House, we took a lease on old mansion on the North End of Capitol Hill in Seattle. What we didn't expect was a sudden, severe reaction from five of our neighbors on Federal Avenue, a tiny corridor called, by some people who live there, "an urban oasis." These people did not want a writing center in their neighborhood. They felt like we were "fixing" something in the wrong place. They hired a lawyer and started an intensive campaign against Hugo House. It reminded me of how a folksinger might be excluded from certain parts of town.

If Richard Hugo House is a poem, then our first draft was kicking back on us. We couldn't write the poem the way we'd seen it evolving, in that big house. We were going to have to ask more questions. So we invited as many people as we could to come and offer advice. We invited angry neighbors who protested our idea to come and have coffee and dessert with

us. We listened. We asked questions; we suffered through criticism. A few wise teachers, writers and activists advised us that asking questions is better than problem solving. In the end, we had to ask ourselves what Richard Hugo House was really about. "Why do you want to do this to our neighborhood?" one of our neighbors asked me. "Because it would be a wrong thing in a right world," I thought. Instead, we asked, "What does your neighborhood fear?"

Then something happened. The story showed up in a few papers and people started writing and calling us. Lots of people. They told us they wanted a writing center in Seattle. So, we kept on. We moved into our current place, a former funeral home, in the city's liveliest arts neighborhood. We added things we'd never dreamed of in our early draft: a theater and two libraries, a gallery space, café and meeting rooms. The place thrived with programs that are bigger, more accessible to more people, and riskier than we might have had in the mansion. In the end, the wrong thing needed the right place, and through the early dissonance of the draft, it found one.

In writing poems, Hugo would call this "letting the truth conform to music." You listen to the ebb and flow of language, or in the case of the writing center—you listen to other people and their voices become part of the poem.

When I think of Bill at work in the boot factory, I imagine him dreaming of that girl he hasn't met. He's punching eyelets for the bootlaces. There he is, using those guitar hands bruised with sweet calluses, passing the leather under the auger, clamping it while he looks out over the river to the houses on the hillside.

Like Richard Hugo, Bill the folksinger re-imagined a town and delivered it in song. He put in places like the mill and the bar and he stretched the truth a little. When Richard Hugo taught people to write poems, he told them to imagine a town resembling their own version of a hometown. Then, he said to the writer, populate the town with familiar things and some

oddities too: a mayor who never needs re-election for example, a hardware store that sells only hammers, a jail where the sole prisoner is always in. Then you write these details into the town. At first your poem is about the town itself, but as you march on through your draft, the oddities and familiarities take on a life of their own, and the poem roars off, in search of other adventures. The town, really, is just a trigger to get started. It's a way to ignite or generate stacks of images. Think of it as a mill rolling out textiles that a writer imprints with images. Later, you forget the mill, even the town, and you work from those images.

Organizations and programs that meet cultural and social needs begin the same way, with a triggering idea. But the idea has to hold some expanse, some room for the quirky and odd. In organizational life, you never know where the next great idea will come from, so you make room for as many people as you can. I think of this like the beginning stage of writing, that generative free-for-all when you put pen to paper and welcome whatever happens. Social enterprises, including businesses, have an obligation to enter a socially creative encounter when they establish themselves. They have a duty to the town in which they are situated. And, making the fit isn't always easy.

The town where Bill and I lived (I love the sound of that—the town where Bill and I lived)—not together but in the town, small as it was, the same town that town we lived in as citizens, perhaps, together. That town is a lyric of its own, and he wrote lyrics about it that felt nostalgic and sort of wrong for the town, but too right to exude wrongness. His words weren't scruffy enough for the buildings, and I want to write that town into a long-lined, loose-limbed thing that would keep people away from thinking it was a quaint place. It is quaint thinking of Bill and me, sitting in a barn, bent over our whiskeys, while he plucked chords. But we were never together, not really, not in that town.

Of course, in a triggering town, a poet is a kind of dictator rather than a benevolent mayor. She's a tyrant really. In the poem I'd write, Bill is

playing the guitar and stopping between verses to ask my opinion about his lyrics. I'm earnest, responsive. We breathe in the hay-laden air of the barn.

What the triggering town offers is a stack of front ends for vehicles that will later become metaphors and roar out of town. As Richard Hugo wrote in his poem "Degrees of Gray in Phillipsburg," "the car that brought you here still runs." A metaphor is a comparison. It connects and holds volatile the unlikely. Here's one: the mill was a boot in the river. Here's another one: nostalgia is a town folksinger playing the same jingly song over and over. In the collision of two unlikely things coming together, a metaphor should surprise you. (I don't think it's surprising that a folksinger would fill you with nostalgia. That one doesn't work as well as the boot in the river.)

If social change is motored on a desire to repair things, maybe art thrives on the collisions that toss themselves into the road. Metaphor is the way to make collisions happen. When you bring unlikely things together, you get interesting results. Listen to Lydia Davis' little story called "Love." (This is the whole story, not an excerpt.) It's an extended metaphor, though not as extended as the one I'm imposing on Bill:

Love

> A woman fell in love with a man who had been dead a number of years. It was not enough for her to brush his coats, wipe his inkwell, finger his ivory comb: she had to build her house over his grave and sit with him night after night in the damp cellar.

The narrator compares love itself to a woman living in a basement atop the grave of a man she fell in love with after he was dead. I don't know about you, but it makes me think of loss and how strangely and deeply intertwined love and loss become. As with me, with Bill the folksinger, for example. Once I loved him, now he's gone—that kind of thing.

While metaphor is the power tool to instigate collisions in art and verse, in the life of organizations, collisions happen in three dimensions. (I keep trying, here, to put Bill back into three dimensions.) At Hugo House one day, a retired doctor who has been working on a memoir was walking past my office one afternoon. In the hall, he ran into a young writer named Stalker. "Hello," Stalker said. "Got any change? I want to get a soda." Stalker is pierced all over and wore ripped jeans and a leather coat.

"Yes I do," Bob said. "Where do you find a soda around here?" Bob was wearing a golf shirt and khakis.

I sat at my desk and watched the two of them as they talked in the hall. "Are you a writer?" Stalker asked Bob.

"Yes, I'm writing a book about doctors and patients who are dying," Bob said.

"Wow, dude. I'm into death too! Do you know what *gothic* is?" Stalker asked.

The two of them headed downstairs together. Later, I saw them in the café, drinking sodas together.

I remembered this exchange for a long time. I told the story of Bob and Stalker quite often. Where else would a retired doctor who played lots of golf meet a street youth who was into gothic writing? At Hugo House, they actually spoke to each other and were interested in each other as writers. That's a collision with lots of possibilities. Now, we sort of take that kind of encounter for granted.

When I write poems, I'm loaded with questions. I move words around. I lose any agenda about what I what I think I should say. I'm not battling or forcing the words, I'm just listening to them, shifting and pushing them until they surprise me with something, kind of like the way Bob and Stalker surprised each other, and me.

On the best days, Hugo House feels lively, full of relationships and commerce. It feels like a painting or a book that is constantly scribbled upon and touched and handled by lots of people until it gets better and

better. It's what, in social service arenas, folks might quaintly call "grassroots." Real grassroots goes without labels. You'd never have heard Bill say that his music was grassroots. Bill would say, "Here's a little tune about the time my truck broke down in Barstow."

Inquiry shifts our private interiors into an external expression without oppressing other people. It moves important questions into a civic or human arena. Say a writer creates a poem and reads it to an audience, for example. Or to write the poem, the writer looks up from his or her page and peers into books written by other people, or she looks outside for what's going on in the world. The poem emerges from that combination of mulling about in the materials and looking up from the page or the experience. That's what inspiration is: a workhorse who plays long hours. Day after day, you tug at the knot of an idea or an image until something interesting unravels.

Some innovative foundations and nonprofit programs are looking at communities with an attitude of appreciative inquiry rather than an expertise based on a "we've-identified-the-problem" approach. They look for assets that already exist in a community, and work from there. For example, in her book *The Life and Death of American Cities*, Jane Jacobs describes the little old ladies who used to sit in lawn chairs outside their row houses in Boston's North End. On the surface, they seem like ladies sitting outside and conversing, but, because there is a group of them, they prevent robberies on their blocks. Their watchfulness is an asset.

Identifying assets is much more fun than pointing out pathologies. That practice of identifying our abundance kept us going through the startup of a reading and writing center. With skills (a form of expertise), a poet might know how to use line breaks or slant rhymes effectively. She is using equipment to enhance an inquiry. As with other experts, her tools eventually surface more questions. As an artist or social entrepreneur, you try to keep pace. You build on that. For a poet, an image is an asset because it shows you things you don't yet understand. In writing a poem,

or in an organization, you opt for inquiry over expertise. Your skills don't keep you immersed in the work. The questions that surface along the way keep you hooked in. You could be an expert on setting up security systems and neighborhood block watches but who would need it with those old ladies there? That's a novelty assimilated into the culture of that neighborhood.

Maybe doing good social work is about welcoming the stranger instead of identifying the stranger's problems before you meet her. What assets does the stranger have? What can she show us about our town? It's not asking, "What do we do to fix teenage mothers?"

* * *

Herbert Kohl, a great teacher and thinker, writes: "Sometimes we need to listen to people at the edge of language." He's talking about poets but he could be talking about government officials, case-workers, or outreach coordinators. On the edges—and the edges are creeping further and further away from us—live people who need our help in feeding, clothing, sheltering, and educating other people who need these things. For an artist, working on the edge is crucial. It keeps the boundaries wide. Maybe this is the way for a community to evolve instead of revolt. Edginess, for social change work, could insist on an openness to testing and welcoming new ideas with a spirit of yes. In that rundown New Hampshire town, Bill just wore his way into the fabric of things until he was taken for granted and his voice surfaced.

Bill the folksinger did not heal that boot-making town of its woes. He didn't repair anything. As an asset, his contributions were entertaining and reflecting the town back to itself through songs. As an artist, Bill wasn't a dangerous provocateur. He didn't show us anything radical. Most of his songs were about things we'd already thought of—falling in love, working the factory, running out of gas—but he tossed them back to us in isolated snippets and they went tangy in our ears.

Some art is dangerous, and thinking of an artist's work as a prescription to fix cultural ailments is a bad idea. Considering artistic processes as investigations into the overlap between personal and civic expression, I think, helps bring the edges of a community into our lives. It enriches everyone. Not the clutter of misaligned ornaments, but the authentic engagement with materials, that's what guides a community's assets into the artistic. And artistic engagement does help people heal—the new research on arthritis shows us the obvious: writing in a journal alleviates physical symptoms. And some artists who are ill create extraordinary work in the process of healing. There are psychiatric patients who have created beautiful, coherent paintings.

But relying on art to heal is a troubling gamble. Oftentimes, art delivers the unspeakable. French theorist Jean Baudrilliard describes the planes bringing down the World Trade Center towers as a profoundly aesthetic moment. What does one make of such a hybrid of tragedy and beauty?

But we should welcome the inquiries that artists take on. When an artist is connected to the community, the community becomes familiar with the difficult edge of play in the margins, and people learn new ways to think about their surroundings. What intelligences do we use in public life? Verbal and statistical? What about musical, visual, spatial ways of seeing? Artists help us plumb these talents in ourselves.

Before coming to the New Hampshire town where Bill the folksinger plied his trade, I once lived in a seaside town. It was a town that could have popped out of a New England recipe: a newsstand, some boutiques, a general store, pizza parlor, the tipsy cop—but our town had a painter instead of a folksinger. An older, fey man with a smudged golf cap, he set up his easel on the sidewalk and whisked off acrylic scenes of flowers, shorelines, boat-filled harbors, romantic dinghy shacks. I remember wondering if he painted with plastic. His colors reminded me of my hula-hoop. Mr. Driscoll painted what the people in that town wanted to see—a

place lit by the nostalgic lamps of beach roses and sailboats in the evening sun.

That's what Bill the singer is now: an aging artist on the side of the road who convinces us to think that his town, a mill town, holds some lost way in the midst of contemporary life. Really, though, a mill town was about having a job. In the seaside town where I grew up, the painter convinced us that our town was blessed with views of the sea. Now, the town is filled with enormous houses that offer a passerby only a glimpse of the ocean, the way you might see a landscape through the spaces between rattling boxcars. The houses are like houses from a Lionel train set, installed in an HO-scale town.

Things change. New places emerge out of the old ones. Artists help us mark our places. William Stafford writes about this dilemma in:

Figuring Out How it Is

How it tilts while you are thinking,
and then you know. How it makes no difference
for a long time—then it does.

How you walk along and you can't explain it
but suddenly a field from years ago
is present again, this time with its meaning.

How snow—without any power, and in its blindness
only repeating the same thing again and
again—captures mountains, whole countries.

How when a scene comes you look
over your shoulder and it's what you thought
it was but you are somebody else.

How the trees keep on, and through every summer
climb up where they are, a world better
than ours, more serene, going on forever.

How your town climbs through the clouds for years
till it can last, and you hold it there,
yours, in the sun that was always there.

How who you are made a difference once
but the wind blew, changing everything
gradually to here, and it is today.

Like Stevens' "nothing," the "it" in Stafford's poem is the space opening, an idea taking hold. Stafford's poem is what happens later on, in Stevens' snowfield. Even Stafford's structure imitates the unfinished nature of making anything. Each line is an incomplete sentence beginning with "How." Since thinking and meaning tilt within particular forms, and always showcase an inquiry, Stafford imitates that in his form. The finished poem lifts out of splinters. That's what Hugo House does too. It's a place that lifts with the reading, writing, conversation of the people who pass through. It's an organization built on the formal and informal commerce of relationships.

Thinking of Bill, of art as an innate social good, and making Hugo House, I have a poem coming into being. Here's what I have so far:

The Towns We Pass Through

This is a town that a folksinger would croon
over, just longing for those days, he'd sing,

when people had good factory jobs. Now,
the mill is a boot in the river, laced up.

The snow is coming down. That singer's voice
went so deep, you could drop things into it.

Men with dogs and rods nailed the storefronts
shut for good; the theater let out years back

and a pentacostal church moved in and it failed too.
The town looks like someone remembered it wrong.

There are no barns with hay-laden air.
The folksinger moved to a seaside place

where the lamps of beach roses and sailboats
take his voice up an octave. Towns are gifts.

I left this one behind and took the bridge.
The river rolled lanky to the slough,

and I looked back, only once. I'm a stranger
who craved the little ruts I'd known there:

a long line down the bar, all of us hunched over and tethered
like a line out to the stream, like a row of young girls pulled

into a ballad. Or, like writers, we see ourselves pulling
against the current. Far off, and later, we make it up.