

THE ART OF INCLUSION (Disability and Diversity in Art and Culture)

CORK, IRELAND 14/15 OCTOBER 2020

15 October: How can the arts empower people and services?

THE NEED FOR ART by Daphne Economou



My name is Daphne Economou and I thank you for inviting me to speak at this wonderful conference, on the 'Art of inclusion', a subject that is close to my heart.



I have a great affinity with Ireland, and here is my Irish friend at the Open Door Centre.



To begin from the beginning, I am the mother of a little boy with cerebral palsy. We had our little boy, Themis, with us for 17 years, from the moment of his premature birth, to the night when his brave, loving heart stopped beating in his sleep, and he slept on. Here he is on his first birthday with his brother and sister. They were the most wondrous and meaningful years of our lives. He gave us so much, he taught us so much. We learnt from him that love with no conditions, love as a mutual need can truly exist and that what is precious and true can never be lost. He taught us that we cannot solve all the mysteries of nature, and that time must be allowed to play its role, but most of all he shared his joy for life with us, so that not one moment of his short life was wasted. Close to him we were educated, helped and healed. This was the inestimable gift of an exceptional human being. Themis was profoundly physically impaired, but he was totally and wonderfully complete as a human being. With him, and because of him, his father and I founded Cerebral Palsy Greece in 1972, and after his death and in his memory we continue our work, learning from people with disabilities, more and more every day.



Nothing gave Themis greater satisfaction than the recreational play-groups that we set up when we founded CPG. 'I am going to the kids' he would say, and his face would light up with delight.



Up till then, children with cerebral palsy were usually caught up in an endless round of therapeutic sessions, with all the stress on their physical function, and no time to play or have fun, no time to sing, to dance, to make pictures or to tell stories.



So this brings us to the theme of our conference: *The art of inclusion*. And the topic of today's session: *How can the arts empower people and services?* I think the answer is quite simple. Art is a definitive element in the life of every human being and all of us at

some time in our life have felt the need to dance and sing and to play-act. That is, to allow our imagination to carry us beyond the boundaries of everyday reality, to an imaginary world that can be shared with others. Clearly this primordial need for artistic expression is deeply imbedded in our nature and in the collective destiny of the human race, where we are all included. More than anything else it empowers us to look further.



In Australia, *Song-lines* not only carry songs and stories from place to place, but stake out imaginary, invisible boundaries.



Centuries before man learned to write, he painted the elements of nature that surrounded him, in order to worship and appease them, and the wild horses immortalized in the cave paintings of Lascaux are still roaming the flatlands in the South of France.



And what can we say of the beautiful painted swallows of Santorini that are still flying in the sky?



All nations in the world celebrate the coming of spring with carnivals, dressing-up and masking, as a fundamental need for regeneration and in ancient times these ceremonies constituted the birth of drama.

In *The Merchant of Venice* Shakespeare writes:

*The man that hath no music in himself,
Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds
Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils.
...Let no such man be trusted.*

An ancient Chinese proverb says that *'dynasties depend more on music and ceremonies for their survival, than on force of arms.'*

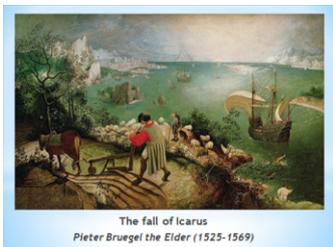
And Carl Gustav Jung wrote that *'the debt we owe to 'the game of imagination' is limitless, because every inspiration and every artistic expression has its source in our imagination.'*



Young children play imaginary games when adults do not hinder the scope of their imagination, through over-rationalization. It is their way of extending their world beyond the limits of what is possible and what is permitted.



Even today, if we leave a small child alone in an old unkempt garden, it will soon start enacting a new role, will find imaginary companions and will discover a brave, new world of its own creation.



Myths and legends are another rich source of artistic expression. They provide us with a sense of measure and they remind us not to challenge the gods, not to fly too close to the sun and never to profess to know what lies in the future. The ancient Greeks believed that Hephaestus, the wisest and most ingenious of gods, was a cripple. It makes you think. Myths record events that caused astounding changes in the way humans feel, think and act and the story of the human race has found wondrous expression in poetry, music, drama, dance and painting and remains an inspiration for artistic creativity in every generation.



We all know that play and creative activities are essential for the development of a child's personal identity, and as I have mentioned, Cerebral Palsy Greece's first initiative at the Open Door Centre was the establishment of recreational and artistic programmes for children with cerebral palsy.



The results were immediate and astounding. Our children made incredible breakthroughs and found ways to express their inner selves, as unique individuals with an indisputable right to a place in the sun,



and over the years we have watched our children and adults, our staff and volunteers change and develop, as they discover not only hidden talents in themselves and others,



but also achieve self-confidence, social graces and balanced human relationships through music, dancing, acting and art.

We have witnessed every day, how art can empower people and services and over the years we have put this belief strongly into practice,



with inclusive artistic activities for all ages at the Open Door Centre and a series of artistic workshops for people with and without disabilities from all over the world that have left their imprint and have been widely emulated.



"The adventure becomes even greater
when we share it together"
Helen Keller (1880-1968)

So it is up to us to foster and develop the creative talent that exists in children and young people with disabilities by allowing them opportunities for artistic experiences and the scope to express themselves freely through art. Nothing is more tragic than a missed opportunity. If we are to empower people and services through art we do not want artists with disabilities to be delegated to a separate category as 'special artists' or their work as 'special art'. It is essential that both the enjoyment of art and the expression of art should be inclusive, involving disabled and non-disabled people as equals and as co-artists. This is the only way that we can learn from one another and develop appropriate services.

Before closing, you will allow me one more consideration. Creative life always stands outside convention. For the exceptional person to be nothing but 'conventionally normal' signifies stagnation and immobility. So we must allow ourselves and others, to be much more than 'normal'. There must be no limit to the possibility of surpassing ourselves.

And finally all we need to remember is that along with our biological development every human being needs a world of the spirit too and that in the footsteps of our lives we should not underestimate the development of other wondrous abilities of the mind, the heart and the soul that for many of us, and particularly for people with disabilities may have priority. This is what we learned from our beloved child, Themis.

Thank you.

