"We have to be civil with one another. We have to embody some sort of character, I think, or this all falls apart. Politics is a mirror of our culture, and public leaders have the responsibility to fortify the culture not to make it worse."[[1]](#endnote-1) (Jeb Bush)

“For if we choose only to expose ourselves to opinions and viewpoints that are in line with our own, studies suggest that we will become more polarized and set in our ways. And that will only reinforce and even deepen the political divides in this country. But if we choose to actively seek out information that challenges our assumptions and our beliefs, perhaps we can begin to understand where the people who disagree with us are coming from.”[[2]](#endnote-2) (Barack Obama)

“…I think many museums now have at least a component of them that are activist — by that; I mean wanting to participate in healthy civic culture and conversation. Moreover, given the unbelievable celebration of ignorance that we see in the contemporary political climate, thank god that museums are doing that.”[[3]](#endnote-3) (Ed Lillenthal)

## MODELING DECENCY, SIR!

ELAINE HEUMANN GURIAN

## INTRODUCTION:

For nearly fifty years, I have been writing papers about the multiple layers of human activity needed for creating inclusion, welcome, and civility for strangers in the broad range of public institutions I refer to as museums. I have done so because I believe that museums are thoughtful and trusted institutions within the civic firmament and, as slow to change as they might be, their position as presenters of our multiple memories can provide an important portion of communal wellbeing.

This paper argues that it is perhaps more critical than ever that museums systematically review and publicly demonstrate actions of empathy, respect, welcome, moral judgment, nuanced complexity, and civility to encourage, in the citizenry, the practice of public behaviors necessary for maintaining a working democracy. If the aggregate of public institutions of trust consciously illustrate the heretofore tacitly assumed and unremarked behaviors of moral decision making, inclusion, and sincere welcome, they will be providing a working model of the civic context necessary for the rehabilitation of our current democracy.

Museums have at their disposal overt tools of “resistance” to public positions they disagree with; some of these include exhibition choice and public utterances. I understand their obvious importance. But in reinforcing the background role of intentional, mindful and empathetic behavior, public institutions of trust (and museums are among the most trusted[[4]](#endnote-4)) can help collectively rebuild the foundation of shared values and practices --- frayed now --- so needed for knitting together a generous and inclusive society. In this paper, I suggest some of the tools (i.e., the director’s decision-making matrix, nuanced exhibition templates, cessation of neutrality, and expansion of audience inclusion) that need to be developed and I invite practitioners to do so. I urge museums to reexamine and refine our collective bedrock of decency and safety.

Empathy and civility --- like the very air we breathe --- is usually assumed in daily life but is most likely an essential prerequisite for democracy itself. I am more and more persuaded that the current nationalistic, racist, xenophobic drift toward enclosed political silos is not only dangerous but threatens the basis of peace, self-rule, and human liberty itself, everywhere and in every form of government.

I am an American, and in America, from the home, religious training, and pre-school forward, facts, truthfulness, and the sanctity of your “word” were considered bedrock ethics expected from all and, if dishonored, re-enforced by admonitions, shunning and retribution. Now we have Donald J. Trump as President of the United States. He does not appear to believe in these same bedrock values and attacks all agencies that do, instead supporting those elements in our society that make others feel excluded and in danger[[5]](#endnote-5).

Alarmingly, America’s political drift toward authoritarianism is currently mirrored in other societies around the globe. We have not seen this much worldwide resurgence of hateful “isms” since before the Second World War. Over the last 70 years, there have been episodes of difficulty everywhere, but resistance from many sectors has eventually prevailed, with an overall improvement in the acknowledgment and protection of human rights. I am searching for ways that museums can be useful in reversing the current regression in that trend.

A striking symptom of this grave crisis is a description of a consequential new form of post-traumatic stress disease medically described as “moral injury” found in many military drone operators. A definition in the PTSD Research Quarterly is:

“…the key precondition for moral injury is an act of transgression, which shatters moral and ethical expectations that are rooted in religious or spiritual beliefs, or culture-based, organizational, and group-based rules about fairness, the value of life, and so forth.”[[6]](#endnote-6)

Today, the very people (on the right) who in the recent past cloaked their policy positions in moral argument now (mostly) remain either Trump enthusiasts or disappointingly silent[[7]](#endnote-7). And despite his speaking and acting in ways that violate many moral and ethical norms, there seems to be little recourse for the rest of us beyond resistance and alarm. While perhaps dramatic, such actions appear neither immediately effective nor coherent.

“So, if appeals to civility, decency and conscience won't work, then perhaps an appeal to base political pragmatism will. Democrats are deluding themselves if they think they lost because of "#NeverHillary" voters who will come home when she is not on the ballot. They lost because they have become a party of coastal liberal elites who have lost touch with millions of ordinary citizens in Middle America --- working-class voters who are struggling with factories closing, jobs leaving and an opioid epidemic that is destroying their families. These voters concluded in 2016 that Democrats no longer care about their problems and that Trump does.

Spasms of anti-Trump outrage are not going to win them back. If anything, they are confirming these voters' conclusions that Democrats still don't get it --- and don't get them. The left's miasma of contempt may feel cathartic, but it is the best thing that ever happened to Trump. Indeed, it may very well get him reelected.”[[8]](#endnote-8)

What is referred to as the “guard rails”[[9]](#endnote-9) -- the formal and informal systems (both governmental and non) that have always acted as checks and balances to the overreach of government -- are now threatened.[[10]](#endnote-10) I assert that no matter what your political persuasion, we all have a stake in the guard rails holding and a return to the collective moral norms from which they derive.

In this critical moment, museums have three options and an important choice to make – to become a part of the supportive democratic “guard rail” system; to do nothing, risking becoming complicit bystanders with no responsibility; or, to actively aid those in power as they intentionally roll back critical democratic protections. Make no mistake, our only real option is the first.

I do not want to overplay the role of museums today. However, museums do belong in the overall fabric of civic institutions that together create a public expectation of trust and reliability and are, therefore, more consequential in the aggregate than they may believe individually.

There are many ways museums already play roles that might continue to help in fostering a more civil discourse and mutual regard in America. Museums already have resource centers, outreach programs, traveling and digital exhibitions that allow people to encounter an extensive collection of informative content from anywhere in the world. They have public speaker series and programming of all kinds. Museums, using these and other tools, are sophisticated and useful civic institutions, and hopefully, they will always remain beacons of public trust and respect. However, the emphasis I am now placing on museums is more specific. How will museums become part of a system for restoring a climate of civility and mutual respect in the larger society as a whole?[[11]](#endnote-11)

I suggest that museums’ most useful role at this point is one of soft diplomacy, one of bringing people with sharply differing views back into, at least, tangential contact and engagement with each other. While I understand that I do not speak for all museums, I hope that by describing some specific types of “resistance,” I am adding to a dialogue among museum professionals – so that we might foster at least the possibility of the same among our respective institutions. If museums can be informative, open, honest, social, welcoming and civil places, maybe this will also rub off on our visiting public. At this moment timing seems urgent, but the tools afforded by traditional museum practice work slowly. The question I ask myself is: can museums become newly useful in this polarized and much more dangerous world? What techniques for soft and effective intervention (new or old) are available to us in this unexpected, and alarming, political and social climate?

## ASSUMPTIONS:

I am working with the following palette of ideas within the context of museums:

* The individual moral center of leaders/directors is crucial,
* Norms of behavior that rule our institutions need to evolve further to safely include visitors, non-visitors and those we sometimes really wish wouldn’t visit,
* We need to activate, integrate, use and support often ignored leadership systems of emotional, empathetic, non-rational techniques alongside the tools of the more honored rational, objective world of scientific thought;
* We need to teach nuance and approximation as tools to turn away from simple (and thus inaccurate) explanations,
* We need to perceive our “opposition” as people of worth and invite them into our midst so long as they too play by the minimum rules of mutual respect,
* We must reintroduce compromise as an honorable system for matters of dispute,
* And after all that, we will need to change the often declarative, sometimes dogmatic, template of exhibition explanation to include uncertainty and ambiguity.

It is a big ask and still not exhaustive, and even more will be required to help with the civic healing I thought we would never need.

**THE WEAPONIZING OF ETHICS, MORALITY, AND NORMS:**

Surprisingly, in a political landscape where bad acting is repeatedly rewarded, the words “principles, morals, ethics, and public norms” are often referenced in the daily press as descriptors of a necessary antidote.

While we may think we understand what “ethics” and “morality” mean in this context, we might be less sure of the meaning of “norms.” Normative behavior is a sociological term for our traditional, often unremarked customs we all know and mostly abide by --- like standing in line at the supermarket. It is a confusing term because it is used to describe two different things:

“… ’norm’… can refer either to what is commonly done --- that is, what is normal --- or to what is commonly approved --- that is, what is socially sanctioned.” [[12]](#endnote-12)

In this paper, I will choose to use norm in its second meaning “a principle of right action binding upon the members of a group and serving to guide, control, or regulate proper and acceptable behavior.”[[13]](#endnote-13)

I have written previously about normative values because they are culturally-based, ever-evolving, conformed to only by tradition and public pressure and not codified by law. Because norms have social power, they, when “un-interrogated,” can be used as much as a strategy for exclusion as of inclusion within museums[[14]](#endnote-14) Adam Gopnik, in a New Yorker article about Trump, wrote: “Norms are social conventions; they’re normative because they’re useful, and they’re not codified because they don’t have to be.”[[15]](#endnote-15)

Such “norms” are now at issue and much referenced in the daily press. To our surprise, many of the processes which respect a separation of powers between the major branches of government have never been codified in law. So, while general norms, such as telling the truth, and addressing others politely have customarily been respected by other Presidential Administrations, many of President Trump’s behaviors and pronouncements and those of his administration violate such norms, as if they were to be disparaged as mere “political correctness” or even more perniciously as actually ineffective, useless standards for maintaining a civil world.[[16]](#endnote-16)

Since customary normative behaviors are not legally binding, why is a discussion of values, morality, and norms so prevalent in the news today? For example, the Trump-fired former head of the FBI, James Comey, writes:

“Our president must embody respect and adhere to the values that are at the core of this country,”… “The most important being truth. This president is not able to do that. He is morally unfit to be president.”[[17]](#endnote-17)

I understand that Comey believes this sentiment, and hopes that the reader will too, but to what useful end? Surprisingly, I am suggesting that the public pronouncement of norm violation may be centrally important and is indeed actionable because it provides layer upon layer of gradual public understanding --- a strategy I refer to as “silt” --- that ultimately, and under the right circumstances can unseat a regime. The antidote to norm trampling may be a consistent, persistent and general public announcement of personal and collective adherence to such norms. In the face of insult, we all should recognize the offense, reprimand the offenders and insist that the price of our attention, at the very least, is decency.

McCARTHYISM AND JOSEPH WALSH:

I take some courage in citing one historical moment when a critical moral outcry changed political fortunes. It was the invocation of shame that capped a much longer, multifaceted effort that ended (for all practical purposes) the power of Senator Joseph McCarthy.

Senator McCarthy had caused our country to divide along similar fault lines as Trump. He displayed that same lack of truthfulness, and the same exaggerated egotism, which envelops us now. The age of McCarthyism had persisted for years and did perhaps the same kind of lasting damage of fearful ostracization of individuals using scant evidence and bullying tactics. And then Joseph Walsh is credited with bringing the era down.

History tells us that on June 9, 1954, the courtly and quietly theatric lawyer, Joseph Walsh, said on the televised Army-McCarthy hearings, when he was challenged by McCarthy about the past political indiscretions of a young lawyer on his staff:

“If it were in my *power*to forgive you for your reckless cruelty, I would do so. I like to think I'm a gentle man, but your forgiveness will have to come from someone other than me…..You've done enough. Have you no sense of decency, sir, at long last? Have you left no sense of decency?”[[18]](#endnote-18)

And the McCarthy era was over! Why would a single paragraph take down a whole troubling period? I am assuming that before this perfectly-timed interchange by the perfect person in the perfect televised situation, there were years of thousands of individual and institutional actions, largely unremarked, that prepared the populace to return to an ethics-based expectation about the behavior of the powerful in America.

It seems that these thousands of small pieces of written and spoken push-back over the years constitute a slow-moving but effective tool I refer to as “weaponizing ethics.” I am suggesting that to be effective, resistors including staff in institutions must double-down on reinforcing their own ethics, expand their inclusive behavior, project trustworthiness as a constant reminder of appropriate behavior, and become part of the needed “silt.”

I am suggesting that part of the responsibility of institutions, like museums, is to model the behavior we yearn for. In doing so, we help create the necessary loam so that when the next perfect someone comes alone, she/he will catalyze all these small acts with one perfectly controlled presentation, using the correct emotional words, and will, like Walsh, take down the destructive power of this President. It is the appeal to values, public morality, civility and empathy as if they have a higher materiality than power that now interests me. Weaponizing ethics may be useful. Museums can contribute to that practice!

## LEADER’S MORAL COMPASS

If museums are to model good ethics in museum practices, it follows that the director’s conscious access to and application of his/her personal ethics is key. Directors in museums have sometimes been susceptible to moving their position closer to the elite’s view of the world or the public’s demands depending on the source of the pressure and its situational power. Making unpopular decisions based on an ethical sense and moral core brings considerable risk to a director’s tenure.

Enter a few directors, like Frank Oppenheim of the Exploratorium, Michael Spock of the Boston Children’s Museum, and Jeshajahu Weinberg of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, who are among the individual brave beacons of experimentation in each decade. What did they have in common? They seem to be, despite their various unrelated backgrounds, nuanced, diplomatic within the normative values of their environments, and solid in their moral core. Additionally, they seem practical about ways to go forward, intent on succeeding, yet willing to resign if the moral costs of compromise are too high. Moreover, if you look at their often-distinguished careers, there are sometimes moments when indeed they left or were pushed out by those in hot opposition.[[19]](#endnote-19) We all aspire to this brave profile, and I suggest that the bravery of personal ethics is more essential now than ever.

The guiding principle for the honorable director must be, simply stated, “this far and no further,” drawing the proverbial line in the sand. “This far and no further” cannot be standardized, but the sentence is perhaps the most controlling one in the world of personal conscience.

What I am talking about is an interest in self-interrogation in the face of difficult decisions. Rigidity, smugness, and self-righteousness sometimes presented as principled behaviors are the antitheses to ethical considerations. Each person’s moral core must always live under scrutiny and unease if it to stay relevant and sincere. However they locate and maintain it, ethical leaders have a moral compass and an authentic connection between their internal principles and their daily work.

## DISPASSIONATE, RATIONAL NEUTRALITY;

Since we all have an individual moral core of varying depth and clarity, in calling for stronger moral underpinning for our museum directors, the rest of the profession and the visiting public have to accept that decisions will not be uniform, will rest finally with an individual decision maker, and will always be based on approximate and complex data. Because in the end, we understand and accept that in no sense is our world, and thus life itself, intrinsically fair.

A compilation of ideas from Primal Leadership: Learning to lead with Emotional Intelligence suggests that:

“The ingredients that differentiate leadership from management include the more emotional and visionary aspects of one’s work and are aligned with those personalities who seem self-assured, introspective, self-critical, and willing to be in touch with their emotional, personal and spiritual lives without apology.”[[20]](#endnote-20)

It also follows that a greater acceptance for the role of leadership’s subjective judgment in museums will have to offset arguments for impartiality, and neutrality (long prized as the wellspring of authority). Personal judgment is clearly none of the above.

The argument for museum objectivity has always been in the so-called service of being “safe places for unsafe ideas.”[[21]](#endnote-21) It is an argument that our role is to be neutral when presenting information so that our institutions will be safe for all who hold differing opinions. Though credited with the phrase, I am arguing against this impartiality. For example, none should be neutral as regards the Holocaust.

Neutrality is probably an impossible position for our institutions to take anyway, for we have never been individually without judgment and indeed we are all filled, through personal experience, with unexpressed, and often unwitting, biases. I am not arguing for any particular political position to be controlling but instead, urging support for directors who use their hard-won internal value system to make contested decisions in favor of inclusion amidst the inevitable political and public outcry.

In the past, we have done directors no favors by recommending their institutions present the broadest continuum on contested issues under the guise of fairness. The definition of fair-mindedness (especially in journalism) has been to give competing positions “equal time” or space to appear (as Fox News cynically used to claim) “fair and balanced.” Determining what a fair balance of views is turns out not to be merely an equal allocation of words written or broadcast time, but instead must rely on an evaluative judgment informed by the interplay of personal morals and group ethics without drifting toward the dead-end of moral relativism. While it is essential to understand the process by which dark evil grows and unfolds, there is no point in allowing much time for its defense.

To support a museum director’s right to make such judgments, we, colleagues, journalists, and even members of a currently satisfied visiting audience, will need to bring more empathy to the fore, suppressing our judgmental selves when leaders make thoughtful decisions. Such decisions are always difficult, often in situations pitting partial truths from hurt communities against each other. The act of criticism, so highly prized as a sign of intellectual discrimination, may be hurtful and without empathy. There is honor in proximate solutions to largely insoluble problems, and in those leaders, who forge them.

## MUSEUMS AND RATIONALITY:

Having rejected neutrality and the beguiling notion of fairness in favor of studied judgment, I am also arguing against the museum as a site of dispassionate rationality only. Much as we in the museum world have liked to think of museums as places of authoritative objectivity, we can no longer pretend that intellectual wholeness is to be found exclusively in the non-emotional sphere. In fact, art museums arguing for the appreciation of aesthetics have always claimed that non-rational emotions in the presence of beauty is a significant reason for visiting.

On the other hand, true inclusion means respect for differences, and this, in turn, requires protective parameters against hurtful and destructive rhetoric, and clear rules for civil discourse that promote productive engagement. In historical, social, artistic, and scientific subject matters such disagreements are often ardent. I am suggesting that a museum’s philosophic framework for determining appropriateness must be tempered by a commitment to inclusion, using rules of civil engagement that are as broad as culturally possible. There is a difference between allowing for culturally and class-based etiquette (which I support) and accepting what to others appears to be an intent to demean (which I don’t). However, that difference can be difficult to discern. This new internalized rule-making that differentiates between aggression and inclusion may be our most important current task, and it is, indeed, a difficult task.

In Trump’s twitter-land, it is precisely such conventions of courtesy that are being trampled, allowing some in opposition to feel justified in replying in kind, resulting in a downward spiral of mutual contempt. Rules of engagement that do not humiliate any party will go a long way toward greater understanding on all sides and open up possibilities for compromise. Michelle Obama said it succinctly, in a speech to the Democratic Convention in 2016 when she said: “When they go low, we go high!”[[22]](#endnote-22) This doesn’t mean that we fail to call out an untruth, or bigotry, but rather when we do so, we do so with courtesy. From a practical point of view, if you wish to persuade someone, hectoring them is most often ineffective, while provoking curiosity and telling stories may be more successful at changing opinions.[[23]](#endnote-23)

Unless we wish to return to the authoritarian model of “because I say so,” the interplay of personal morality with competing group ethics must be included in the training of future museum leadership. Experience with effective discernment and a personally crafted toolkit of appropriate rhetorical responses is necessary and must be practiced.

## INVITE EVERYONE IN:

After all these years of demanding cultural and economic inclusion in our visitor base, it turns out that these visitors were easy to invite because they aligned with us politicallyThe most radical of my suggestions involve creating a new audience matrix based on welcoming both those who support and those who are resisting the current President. . What we have not realized is that museums have little experience in the rules of engagement with those with whom we profoundly disagree.

Accepting that museums are mostly run and visited by the highly educated, it would follow (but not entirely) that museums are generally in the hands of those opposing “Trumpism.” Trump supporters may equally not desire to enter museums because these visitors believe, rightly or wrongly, that the institutions serve as symbols of elitism and liberal disdain. Given the current polarization, how can museums productively welcome all? Welcoming all, is really the definition of inclusion but museum staff has generally used a different axis for selecting their target audience. This new inclusion aspiration, I would assert, has never been more important nor more difficult to contemplate because we know less about this demographic than we should.

Currently, our visceral prejudice is egged on by the polarized news sources we each read. The Trump and non-Trump supporters generally neither share the same information nor the same interpretation about almost every issue. Facts themselves are contested. Even the very usefulness of facts is debated. Likewise, the value of honesty is sometimes dismissed. If empathy is a pre-requisite for creating a peaceful society, it is a difficult period in which to attempt its practice but it’s likely that it is most needed to rescue some modicum of civilly when working together.

To bring these angry and mutually exclusive groups of pro and anti-Trump voters together, we must find some/any/all overlap that both sides share and use that to form part of a new loud and clear welcome. The information on voter overlap is not very encouraging, but there may be some places to start.[[24]](#endnote-24)

Perhaps calling all of us “citizens” might help. Frank Bruni has written in the New York Times:

“When it comes to politics, most people don’t want to be addressed as members of a demographic group looking for a payoff. They want to be addressed as Americans….who have embraced the rhetoric and the policies that connect citizenship and civic virtue….”[[25]](#endnote-25)

We must actively see the “other” as holding some elements of useful truth and as worthy people. We must, uncomfortably, look critically at our assumptions of the “other” to see where our biases (acknowledged and unacknowledged) may lie.

What do we know about Trump voters? Do we have any idea if they use museums or if museums have anything they might find engaging? The Democracy Fund Voters study describes: the largest identifiable pro-Trump group as white non-college educated men (representing 31% of Trump’s voters in 2016). Unfortunately, this group tracks as non-museum users.[[26]](#endnote-26)

However, white, non-college-educated Trump supporters, like others in all sections of our lower economic citizens, will break their normal use pattern for either their children’s education or for patriotic purposes when traveling. Unfortunately, in a study in 2009 in the Journal for Youth and Adolescence, it was found that “Caucasian parents with lower levels of education had significantly lower educational aspirations for their children than did parents of other ethnicities with similar low levels of education.” So their motivation for attending museums for the sake of their children is weaker than it is with non-white groups.[[27]](#endnote-27)

I contend that offering children and families comfortable opportunities to expand their horizons is the most natural and fruitful place to begin to invite any unfamiliar group in any museum. However, to do so, the opportunity has to coincide with values of the parents. We need to be interested in finding out directly from folks not readily available to us what they want and need. While focus groups and community consultation as techniques are practices we use, it is rarely tried with this group and now needs to be.

The next largest group of Trump’s voters (25%) are white and affluent. This demographic group as tracked by income and race alone, already uses museums. So, a specific new welcome may not be needed. However, what may be useful is an understanding and incorporation of their different intellectual agendas. Learning to know this sector better and acknowledging where their content interests might overlap with non-Trump voters would be thought-provoking and potentially useful.

It must be recognized that some Trump supporter concerns are antithetical to the idea of inclusion and its pre-requisite, empathy. For example, Lee Drutman writes:

“…we can see that Trump’s biggest enthusiasts within the party are Republicans who hold the most anti-immigration and anti-Muslim views, demonstrate the most racial resentment, and are most likely to view Social Security and Medicare as important.”[[28]](#endnote-28)

Nonetheless, as in all other instances of profiling, we must remain mindful that it is only the extreme outliers of any group that museums might find unwelcome. More importantly, it is only action of their part that would identify them as unwanted, not their group affiliation, clothing, or styles of address. In fact, it is action solely that determines the actions of anyone that would get the visitor uninvited. Inclusion policy needs to be blind to outer physical manifestations and ousting folks must rely on action alone.

Ed Linenthal, a museum historian, has written:

“… I do think museums often are kind of demilitarized zones in the culture. People still behave civilly most of the time in these places, and maybe are willing to reflect and engage thoughtfully in ways that they’re not when they’re thinking about politics or candidates or the other side that really pisses them off. So I think museums have a real role to play in that way…And even if they’re not talking to one another, they’re part of a public culture that is engaging in what the museum has to offer.[[29]](#endnote-29)

Thus, it seems in the world of creating meaningful “silt,” museums provide vital peacebuilding behavoural ingredients for strangers to peacefully observe each other.[[30]](#endnote-30)

## MUSEUM EXHIBITIONS AS RAW MATERIAL:

The presentation templates of exhibitions in museums—i.e., the design and messaging--- and for some the ostensible reason for visiting, have long been the subject of debate. Those exhibition creators in search of inclusive techniques have been charged endlessly with “dumbing down” the core content by those arcane specialists whose exhibitions, in turn, have been charged with elitism and mystification. And maybe both teams have been partially right. We may have replaced the argument that “objects spoke for themselves,” with the simplicity of the sound bite and added to our audience’s reliance on the simple explanation.[[31]](#endnote-31)

In rebuilding a more values-based world, we, who work in institutions that create public educational presentations, must counter today’s plethora of simplistic sound bites and dramatic visual elements in all forms of public media with new practices that allow publics to gain a more nuanced and well-rounded understanding of complex issues.

I am looking for presentation systems that include a variety of sources and views and encourage further exploration without creating visual clutter or intellectual confusion. I do so because I believe that it is through useful layered strategies that we can help our visitors reach a better understanding of the real world, recognize people with opposing views as fully human, and find in compromise, a decent system for resolving matters of dispute. In this and other respects, a leader’s implicit ethical sense can be made explicit through exhibition philosophy.

Schools, especially in the early grades, have historically been based on the right answer and in previous times, rote memorization. Now “teaching to the test” has only exacerbated the assumption that data yields to a simple explanation and agreed upon outcomes which can be measured on an easily gradable system.

I believe we have become fascinated with technical and design systems that deliver information in a more manageable and easier to understand form and that is true in exhibition technique as well. Indeed, there is evidence that through technology and social media, we have become addicted to instantaneous but potentially skewed communication.[[32]](#endnote-32) The creators of this simplistic output may have begun with good intentions, but the outcome (especially with the introduction of bots) seems to have forced citizens to choose up information sides.

I am proposing that in museums, then, we innovate useful visual and intellectual formats that return the expectation for complexity, nuance, empathy, and ethics to our public. I am hoping we will consider objects as primary raw data, with a variety of interpretive aids that engender an appreciation for multiple alternative perspectives, allowing the same material evidence to be used simultaneously by honorable people who hold contrary positions, making clear that their opposing ideas do not make them an enemy.

Currently, most exhibition methodology presents the conclusions of the curator/creator who couples his/her perspective with the objects themselves. Andromache Gazi has said:

“Exhibitions are one of the main grounds on which moral battles in museums are fought. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, exhibitions are to a large extent about objects, and museum objects are by nature imbued with different values. Values may concern an object’s creation or ownership, its original use or subsequent uses, cultural appropriation, or research; they may be aesthetic, symbolic, educational, scholarly, cultural, political, or economic. When objects are put on public display, some of the values associated with them are opted for over others, and this often leads to heated debates among the various parties involved (museums, curators, citizens, indigenous peoples, governments or nations, collectors, art dealers and so on.) Secondly, exhibitions are compelling representations and as such are responsible for shaping the public’s perception in many, often unintended, ways.[[33]](#endnote-33)

I am suggesting that there is a profoundly positive effect when audiences come to expect multiple outcomes as a museum norm. Edward T. Linenthal explains it this way:

“I think the most potent exhibitions are not ones that present the hidden, omniscient voice of the curator as, “’This is the way it is, and this is the way to think about this,’” but to bring people deeper into the kinds of questions that arise. So if I were a curator, I would be most happy if people walk out of an exhibition I had created going: “’Wow, this is not as simple of a question as I thought. I think I need to go to the bookstore here and jot down some titles and buy some titles because I need to explore this much more carefully.’”[[34]](#endnote-34)

I hope I am suggesting that the visitor is a partner, a learning human interested and capable of taking personal responsibility, making an expanding series of nuanced readjustments to their life starting with his or her bedrock of personalized core values. My favorite visitor’s motivation for attending is, in part, learning as a personal quest. However, I am equally hopeful that visitors will find their expectations expanded, and that excitement about further learning will be an additional consequence.

## SUMMARY

While this paper is specifically about museums, museum leadership, audience welcoming and a change in our standard template for creating exhibitions, the suggestions embedded in it could just as well apply to any sector where leaders want to bring back a workable truce between “siloed” and hostile factions. It is about using one’s sense of morality as a political strategy.

Even in a paper written amid disparate quotes imploring the use of ethics for all kinds of things, my ending quote surprises me because it comes from such an unexpected source. It is this very quote that began my journey to parsing the place of ethics in democratic sustainability and for museums specifically.

Rex Tillerson had been a hugely successful CEO of Exxon Mobil when he became the first US Secretary of State under President Donald Trump in February 2017. He had a self-image of his life as a success, with aloofness and noblesse oblige often noted in the press. I expect he anticipated equal success in his new role. However, he failed!

Upon leaving the State Department for the last time, after being abruptly fired by President Trump, he gave a parting speech to the staff that ended this way:

“Never lose sight of your most valuable asset, the most valuable asset you possess: your personal integrity, only you can relinquish it or allow it to be compromised. Once you’ve done so, it is very very hard to regain it. So guard it as the most precious thing you possess.”[[35]](#endnote-35)

In this deeply conflicted time, I am advising that museums can and should tease out and focus on welcoming a broader swath of public participation to include those with whom we differ in political views. We need to change our internal dialectic to illustrate unreconciled complexities, and emphasize the principled judgment of our leaders. An emphasis on weaponizing ethics is an underused approach to problem-solving in civic life, and the call for its deployment is now found in a resurgence of articles demanding principled decision-making as a prerequisite for public action.

If museums consciously want to push back against the degradation of civility that threatens our democracy, we will need to reemphasize the moral and civic nature of our work. When we follow this path, museums will join others who are working hard to repair our society. And, we will be laying down the silt necessary awaiting the inevitable tipping spark that will again realign our fragile society.

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