

ART AND FOOD: OR, WHO PAYS FOR THE DOUGHNUTS?

I've been doodling around in the corridors of power a bit recently, and have been told that in such locations there are occasional murmurings at my presence. "What's she doing here?" they have been known to say, as if I were a Squeegee Kid. Once in a while the B word is used, which does not stand for "bothersome," as you may have thought, or even "bossy," but instead signifies "Babe-like." And sometimes, when feelings are running high, they even use the C word, which means "courageous and cunning." I modestly protest that I merit none of these words. I lay claim only to the W word, which means, not "wicked witch," but simply "writer."

It's a pleasure to be speaking to you today, and on a subject that has been addressed from this platform quite recently. This subject is the support of the arts -- or, Who pays for the doughnuts?

I will avoid the question, "What is art?" as it is too perplexing to think about at lunch. Nor will I visit the long and peculiar history of arts patrons, noting only that it isn't always the best thing when those in power take to dictating artistic form and content. Nero

fiddled while Rome burned, instead of organizing the fire brigade as he ought to have done, and he wasn't even a very good fiddler.

Some think the arts should be treated as a commodity, and supported in the same way that toothpaste is, through "market forces." Others believe some things are not commodities, and that the arts fall into this category. For individual artists, market forces have certainly been a factor – Shakespeare cranked out the drama partly to keep his theatre company in business -- but for others they have not. Chaucer never made a penny out of his writing; but that doesn't make him either a greater artist or a lesser one.

Now, back to food. Artists like everyone have to eat, and that rubber chicken has a price tag. If you want to have art – and that's by no means a foregone conclusion; maybe you don't want to have it, maybe you think a human society can exist without it, although so far none have -- but if you do want to have some, especially the kind with performers or those that require buildings and exhibition space and so forth, you will have to cough up for the hot dogs and potato chips. Or someone will have to cough up.

Who might that be? The possibilities boil down to five. 1. A rich and powerful individual, such as a Pharoah, a King, a Pope, a

Duke, or a robber baron in the 19th century. Nowadays corporations sometimes fill this bill, though they don't have the freedom of a Duke or a robber baron, having profit-minded shareholders to please.

2. An individual with a moderate income, such as Van Gogh's brother, or Dylan Thomas's wife, or Emily Dickinson's father, or Anne Sexton's husband; such people subsidize the arts, whether on purpose or not, by fulfilling what they regard as family obligations.

3. The marketplace: that is, the artist puts the art up for sale and people buy it. In this case the patron is the buying public, and what kind of art you get will depend partly on what this audience wants.

4. The State, which means the taxpayer. There have been all sorts of schemes – consider Russia under the Soviets; or Denmark, where artists receive a stipend; or the Irish plan of waiving of income tax for writers; or Canada, which offers haphazard and partial support through various government-funded agencies.

5. Or the patron of the artist can be the artist himself, either through a private income or else through a day job: waiter by day, poet by night, or some such arrangement.

In four out of these five cases, there is someone other than the artist who has to be pleased, or whose censure has to be avoided.

Put a foot wrong and the King throws you into his dungeon, or the Pope bans your work, or the foundation cuts you off, and so forth. Or, instead of kissing the toes of the great, you might catch yourself catering to popular taste, or currying favour with folks on juries, or looking for a newer, richer spouse when the old one gets fed up with the amount of time you spend gazing out of the window. The more other people pay for your pie, the more they want to have a finger in it, and thus the freest position for the artist is self-support. Who would deny that a private income is greatly to be desired? But few artists inherit that kind of money or are able to get their hands on it, and few performance companies are that well endowed. The dilemma for artists remains widespread: who puts the food on the table? Or who ought to put it there?

Instead of giving you a ready-made answer, I would like to turn to an intriguing parable on the subject, a story by the Danish writer Isak Dinesen. Its name is Babette's Feast, and it goes like this:

Babette is a master chef from Paris, and is spoken of there as a great artist. Due to her part in a failed revolution she has had to flee for her life, and turns up on the doorstep of two innocent, pious and provincial Norwegian maiden ladies. They say they can't afford a

cook, but then out of compassion they take in this bedraggled foreigner. Babette agrees to work for nothing. They have absolutely no idea of what they are getting.

Babette does what she can in this culinary wasteland, and greatly improves the eating standards, not only for the two ladies but for the whole village. She remains a mysterious outsider, but becomes a more or less respected one. Then Babette wins the lottery. Everyone assumes she will now go home -- back to Paris. She asks to be allowed, just once, to cook a real Parian dinner, not simply out of gratitude, but also to show what she is capable of; for, as she later says, "Through all the world there goes one long cry from the heart of the artist: Give me leave to do my utmost!" Strange items begin to arrive from France -- wine, a live turtle. The ladies have never seen such things before; they suspect witchcraft. The invited villagers decide it would be rude to boycott the dinner, but they make a vow to avoid sin by not enjoying anything.

As they slosh down the wine and crunch up the exquisite food, the villagers realize something magical and transformative is occurring. Wonder is followed by joy: they feel they've had a glimpse of the world as it should be. Babette has achieved her

moment of revelation, but it is not she who is revealed: instead, the villagers are revealed to one another. Babette herself remains behind the scenes, surrounded by dirty pots, exhausted. No bouquets for her. No applause.

Then we learn Babette has spent all her lottery money on this one grand gesture. She can never go back to Paris. Nor will she ever be able to cook such another wondrous meal.

Now, Isak Dinesen was no fool. She knew what she was doing, and one of the things she is doing here is holding up to us our secret and most desired version of the artist, and also our secret and most desired answer to the question of who should pay for the arts. Babette is just the sort of artist we long for – a starving genius who will be grateful to us for taking her in, and for letting her knock herself out to enrich our lives, and who – dearest of all to the bourgeois soul – won't cost us anything. We don't recognize the worth of her art because we're too ignorant, but she creates this art anyway, because she's an artist. And finally she spends every last bit of her money, not on herself, but on us! Instead of us putting the food on her table, she puts it quite literally on ours. This is our cherished dream of how things should be. Not only does society not

have to subsidize the artist – the artist actually subsidizes the rest of us! What total bliss!

Nor is this just a fable. It is very much like what actually happens. The artist, by and large, does subsidize the rest of us. Occasionally you hear some politician or other referring to artists as parasites. These insults feed Puritanical prejudices, but all they really demonstrate is that such politicians can't do the math. There are a million people working in the arts in this country. Some of these arithmetically-challenged politicians believe the arts should receive none of the kind of pump-priming regularly doled out to businesses. I do wonder if they have tried to imagine the sound of two million feet heading out of the country. (I calculated two feet per artist, and have not added in any family members.) That's what we'll get if the their plan is put into practice. A stampede.

We'll also have a lot less money. Here's why. If you add up what artists earn or receive, through grants or otherwise, and then add up all the arts folk in Canada, and multiply the one sum by the other, and subtract the tax grab, and then take that sum – the tax—and add to it the money made by everyone who makes money out of the arts at second and third and fourth and fifth hand, such

as hotels and restaurants and travel suppliers and printers and bookstores and the whole caboodle, and then subtract what the artists make from the huge bundle that's generated by their primary activity, you will see that the net figure is very much in favour of society. The score, simply put: Van Gogh, nothing; dealers, millions. Even when the artist does make some money, others make a good deal more. Jane Austen, peanuts; publishers and filmmakers, gazillions. Then, when we come to spiritual matters, intellectual matters, matters of the heart – matters, in other words, of the whole human being, as opposed to that pernicious two-dimensional fiction, Economic Man -- well, we won't come to such matters today, because our time has run out.

Thank you.