

Aren't the skills for transforming culture much like those for creating a feast?

The feast of social artistry

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What is the work of life? Is it simple cooking, the drudge of producing meal after meal of bland food useful only to sustain the body? Or is it social artistry, a creative feast to delight and blend diverse ingredients for the celebration of life?



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Social artistry is the ability to create something more out of the sum of the parts around you. It is the manifestation of a larger whole that calls each person to a deeper meaning and truth. The social artist participates in events — seminars, workshops, training sessions, change interventions, simple conversations, elegant dialogues — with the knowing that all people can be more than they ever have been, and that everyone together can create profound transformation.

Let us take a simple recipe and see how it becomes a metaphor for creating in organizations the fullness of life around us. In the process of making this dish is the secret of the success of social artists working around the world to transform ordinary ingredients and events into a new dish. Let’s describe how this occurs with my most favorite recipe in the world: Minted Dark Chocolate Mousse. The recipe calls for 12 ounces of chocolate, 8 eggs separated, your favorite brandy or liqueur, cinnamon and coffee. Lovely things. And it turns into an epiphany.

Reframing culture and a dark chocolate mousse

The appropriate ingredients — When we enter a culture or organization, we always require that those in attendance represent both the freshest and most aged and jaded of ingredients. We will not work only with management consultants or new trainees or secretaries or teachers. You need an extraordinary medley of the low, the

high, the old, the new, the middle and many professions. We need a magical mix of people for real social artistry.

Warming the ingredients — Next the ingredients needed to compose the dish of social artistry have to be at room temperature. This requires a warming of all present through dance and jokes and songs. That is why we generally try to begin with movement. And of course, we really kid people along. People must lose their edges and become fluid in order to flow into each other. You want them to have the message that you are not some expert who is going to tell them what to do. They will be responsible, together, as partners for the changes that will occur.

Breaking the eggs — Next you break the eggs, and separate the yolks from the whites into different bowls. This means that you do not permit those who think of themselves as inseparably linked together — secretaries, teachers, government bureaucrats, et cetera, to stay yolked together. They will come to you in clots. They’ll stay together by age or profession.

You’ve got to break the egg that they are caught in. And you pull them apart so that they can develop their essence on their own or in relationship to others whom they would not ordinarily meet.

Introducing the dark and bittersweet — Then you put 12 ounces of bittersweet chocolate into a blender.

Ah, therein lies an entire philosophy of social artistry! For you immediately add to it dark things – a teaspoon of coffee crystals, a half-teaspoon of cinnamon. That means that the sweet and shadows of the culture or society are addressed, along with those things that give them piquancy or depth.

One does not balk before these shadows, one does not attempt to reconcile or offer cheery little words. Not at all! You put them altogether. The dark contains the seeds; the crystals, the stuff; the spice, the elements of the transformation.

Heat it up! And then what do you do? You add hot boiling water to it all. Why do you suppose that is? It is a stun ray of ideas, a huge emotional sweep of feeling. You really feel for the issues and the problems. You really speak from your heart. You can't perform. It has to be from the heart. Ideas and heart.

You call forth mind and heart. What are the issues? What are the possibilities? What do you feel? What local stories do you have to tell about it? So emotions and deep feelings... they're the hot boiling water.

Blend at high speed — These dark melted elements are blended at high speed into something that is neither one thing nor another. A sweet thick soup, a dark porridge of possibilities which has yet to find its identity, but stands warm and waiting. The very speed of it all dissolves most resistance.

Pour in the sun — And then you bring in the sun. Yes, into all of this is poured the 8 egg yolks. Bright yellow, full of promise of the new day. This means that the future of the society is suggested. New paradigms are presented, a fresh way of looking at old ingredients.

Blend at high speed again — Light and dark meet, and before they can establish lines of defense, they are again blended at high speed into something rich and strange, an amalgam of the old settled forces, the old boys and the bright new, but innocent yolks of the society. The result is heavy with promise, succulent, but overpowering. Suddenly it's all being blended together — suggestions for the future, ways of creating ongoing patterns, an open vision of what society can be. That's all bringing in the sun.

Nearly done/nearly undone — But almost immediately when it's stirred in — Oh! Oh! —

the ingredients want to separate. Wait a minute! This is too much! You seduced us! You carried us too far! You blended us where we don't want to go. Here comes the resistance! Questions and doubts arise.

The new brew is patently fascinated with itself, but is weighted down by its own specialness. How will the others... *out there*... the ones not in attendance in this event, ever accept so heady a concoction? We can, but *they* can't, because we are further along the path. Depression threatens. It will never work.

A dose of spirits — What we then do is we just stop and we begin to entertain them. A bit of strong spirits is added to this mousse — brandy or liqueur. So to the ordinary seminar format we add an entertainment, a musicale, a surprising performance. We alter their consciousness through great artistry.

Adding grace and vision — And then a fresh ingredient is added, one that adds renewed spirit to the whole, really larger vision, the new forms of meaning, or a highly creative experience. The egg whites are whipped in, making the brew foam and froth and become a vehicle of grace. Lightened up. All previous heaviness is gone. There is an angelic cast to the whole. Hope is renewed and with it, heart. A whole system transition has occurred. One is full of light and love. One wishes one could never leave this space, these people, these ingredients.

Time for solidifying — And yet it is still too light for complete enjoyment. It must be set and chilled for a few hours. This means that new objectives and plans for bringing these understandings, new understandings that have come out of the work into the world, must be set out. Networks are established. Plans for further meetings are made, so that the structure can be put in place, reconstituting itself into something which the world can understand and enjoy. And so it is chilled for a few hours. And the chilling corresponds to the setting up of networks, the ongoing meetings, the ongoing structures.

A final touch of life — The first bite, topped with a little whipped cream, meaning it is presented to the world with a light touch of music and laughter, is extraordinary. One is made new. One loses one's disbelief. Everything is possible. In the great words of the Mad Woman of Chaillot, "We can begin again." ♦

"But almost immediately... the ingredients want to separate. Wait a minute! This is too much! You seduced us! You carried us too far! You blended us where we don't want to go. Here comes the resistance! Questions and doubts arise."



Dr. Jean Houston is an internationally-known psychologist, scholar, philosopher and teacher, who after many years of work as a behavioral scientist, has developed and continues to develop revolutionary new ways of unlocking the latent human capacities existent in each human being. As author of over a dozen books she has both delighted and challenged readers with Public Like a Frog, The Possible Human and The Hero and the Goddess. Through her books and many workshops, conferences and a school of spiritual studies modeled on the ancient mystery schools (now in its tenth year), Jean has inspired hundreds of thousands to become what they can be.

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