

On creativity and politics



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As told to Brandon Stosuy, 1167 words.

Tags: [Culture](#), [Politics](#), [Inspiration](#).

I wanted to talk to you about the influence that music, film, and other arts can have on social change.

I come from an artistic family, and grew up doing theater and writing creatively. I've always been interested in the power of storytelling and interpretation, and I really feel that politics, or all of the economics and law and policy that goes into it, is really about storytelling.

It's about finding meaning and making meaning out of your place in the world and the other people who share your world, and determining who deserves what and what your status is and who belongs. Those questions are often the core questions that writers and artists engage with.

I was an American Studies major in college, and the discipline of cultural studies teaches you to look at a society at any given moment and place, and ask yourself why a culture is telling itself that story at the time. We can see trends and developments in a culture, oftentimes earlier, when we look at the art that is being consumed—both within the popular culture and what's going on at the leading edge of the arts.

That can help a good reader of culture who wants to make social change recognize where the openings are for potentially transformational movement building.

I think of politics as a form of creativity. When there's not creativity in that realm, that's part of where the problem comes in, when people are not great at doing what they do.

There's a lot of received wisdom in politics. There are a lot of artificial barriers to what's possible in politics. We talk about "the confines of the public debate."

Politics is an inherently conservative domain, particularly with the structural rules that make it hard to get involved in politics, hard to vote, hard to make office unless you're wealthy, hard to really feel effective with your legislators.

So creativity, thinking outside of the box, letting your imagination and your passion and your compassion guide where you go, is seldom what happens in politics. At the same time, the problems that are common to all of us and that deserve common solutions need creativity.

I think we're experiencing, right now, a population that is growing more diverse, more creative and self-actualizing, and more ambitious and hungry to live up to our highest ideals.

This is happening at the same time as the structures of our democracy that were created in a very different time to actually concentrate power in the hands of a few are inhibiting America from becoming what I believe it's destined to become—which is a real new world where all people have met and rejected the idea of racism and sexism and embraced a sense of our common humanity.

You have an expertise in building conversations and have ideas regarding how we can start conversations with people we might not agree with. Since there are already a lot of people having conversations with people they agree with, how do you go about starting the other kind of conversation?

First, I should say that this is an extraordinarily diverse country, in culture, in race, in class, in orientation, in the media we consume, and in the rites and rituals that make up our lives. We are not a nation that comes from one historical cultural background. We're a nation of migrants, immigrants, and the descendants of enslaved people. So the need to forge connections is a decidedly American imperative, and to do it across difference.

One of the ways that forging connection across difference gets easier is through shared stories. We may have different political beliefs, but we all have a story about our own family, about growing up, about the first time we fell in love, about the first time we wondered about sex, about losing someone that we care about. We all love music and the arts and media and consume culture, all of which is, itself, a story.

How do you become a good storyteller?

There are a lot of things that I had to unlearn to become a better storyteller in politics. Progressives often look for complicated narratives about problems that we face. Progressives often shy away from having a villain, and also often shy away from having a hero, even.

I've learned, over the years of talking to farmers in range halls in Iowa and veterans in VFW halls and black congregations in church basements that people know their own story well, and the story of us, the story of our evolution as a country, has a thousand points of connection to any individual's own story of how they got their first job, how their family bought their first house, the opportunities that were shaped for them and the doors that were closed or opened for them.

The more you can connect how it was that Theresa got to go to college on a scholarship, but her cousin had to take out loans to the public policy decisions that are made by powerful people, the more that you're able to help people interpret what's going on in politics and the political choices that could affect their lives on a daily basis.

I have found that when trying to create conversations that connect across difference, starting with a story is one of the most powerful things you can do.

Heather McGhee recommends:

[Dog Whistle Politics](#), a book by Ian Haney Lopez. Ian was my law professor at Berkeley and then became a Demos Senior Fellow and a collaborator on work that we're doing to recognize the way that race has been used as a weapon in the class war against working class people and how we can forge a new, inclusive populism.

I'm a huge fan of [James Baldwin](#). His entire body of work. It should be a collection on everyone's book shelf. A cheat sheet is to see [I Am Not Your Negro](#), which I had the honor of doing a talk for at the new Smithsonian African American Museum with the director after the film's premier. His ability to unpack our racial illusions is just unparalleled.

I also am a huge fan of a band called [Sinkane](#), just for fun.

I think reading [Robert Kennedy's speeches](#) from the last few years of his life is a really interesting way to get into the mind of a white leader on a journey at a moment of the Civil Rights Movement in America.

I love festivals. I'm obsessed with festivals. I think we don't have enough of them in America. They are things that create solidarity and culture and ritual and we could always use more of them. I love the [Afropunk Festival](#) in Brooklyn, and I also love Oktoberfest. Very different festivals! [laughs]

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