MUSEUMS
AS
AGENTS
OF
CHANGE

A Guide to Becoming a Changemaker

MIKE MURAWSKI

AMERICAN ALLIANCE OF MUSEUMS

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American Alliance of Museums

Museums as Agents of Change

A Guide to Becoming a Changemaker

Mike Murawski

To my son Holden.
May we always be changing, learning,
and working toward a better, more loving future.

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Acknowledgments

For me, writing a book like this has been a journey that could not have been possible without so many other people. As I write these pages of gratitude, I am thinking of the words of educator and organizer Mariame Kaba: "Everything worthwhile is done with other people." Nothing could be more true. Rather than isolated individuals striving to achieve our own greatness in this world, we are all parts of intricate networks of human relationships. Our ideas, inspirations, and creativity flow out from this river of inseparable interconnection, and we all owe immense gratitude to those around us—near and far—throughout our lives. While the list of people who have had a role in shaping my ideas, beliefs, and values is far longer than could ever fit in these pages, I want to recognize many of those whose guidance and patience helped make this book become a thing you are now holding in your hands.

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Preface

Museums as Agents of Change

Museums everywhere have the potential to serve as agents of social change—bringing people together, contributing to local communities, and changing people's lives. Yet, for far too many institutions, this potential continues to go largely untapped. Many museum leaders and professionals remain ambivalent about the social responsibilities of museums and uncertain about the capacity of museums to function as agents of positive change in society. Given the ongoing pandemic and our current moment of continued political polarization, highly contested social debates, and widespread global efforts to confront oppression, now is the time to challenge the entrenched traditional notions of museums and proactively shape a new future.

I think in moments like these, it's important for all of us—whether you work for a museum or not—to pause and reflect on the roles that these institutions serve within our communities. Yes, museums are largely institutions that hold, preserve, and exhibit objects and collections. But they are also living institutions that serve a powerful role as active spaces for connection and coming together; for dialogue and difficult conversations; for listening and sharing; and for care, healing, and repair. Museums have the potential to tell new and diverse histories; amplify marginalized voices; celebrate unheard stories; and recognize the creativity, knowledge, expertise, and lived experience that is already thriving within their local communities. They can be spaces for acknowledging and reflecting on difference, and for bridging divides. They can be spaces for justice, growth, struggle, love, and hope. Now is the time for us to become changemakers and realize the potential of museums as transformative spaces of human connection, care, listening, and deep learning.

So how can we, as individuals, radically expand the work of museums? How can we more fiercely recognize the meaningful work that museums are

doing to enact change around the relevant issues in our communities? How can we work together to create change within museums and make a bigger difference in society? Questions like these are increasingly vital for all museum professionals to consider, no matter what your role is within your institution. These questions are also important for all of us to think about more deeply as citizens and community members. This book is about the work we need to do—as museum professionals, visitors, civic leaders, community organizers, and the broader public—to become changemakers and demand that our museums take action toward positive social change and bring people together into a more just, equitable, compassionate, and connected society. It is a journey toward tapping the energies within all of us to make change happen.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR MUSEUMS TO BE AGENTS OF CHANGE?

On May 27, 2017, the Portland Art Museum in Portland, Oregon, hosted its first-ever Upstanders Festival, a day of spoken word performances, music, interactive workshops, and art making in support of social justice activism and positive community change. Produced by the Monica Montgomery and Museum of Impact in partnership with Don't Shoot Portland, the festival was part of a series of programs I helped develop to expand community ownership and bring communities of color into the work of co-creating programs at the museum. Just hours before the festival was set to kick off, a white supremacist fatally stabbed two people and injured a third after he was confronted for shouting racist and anti-Muslim slurs at two teenage girls on a MAX Light Rail train here in Portland—less than four miles from the art museum.

Rather than canceling the festival in light of this shocking and horrific attack, we were more committed than ever to open the museum as a place for people to come together as a community and to engage with the arts in ways that celebrate difference and build empathy, dialogue, and understanding. Teressa Raiford, community organizer and founder of Don't Shoot Portland, later remarked how much the museum felt like a sanctuary that day. Another artist involved in the workshops and activities of the festival, Karina Puente, also reflected on how a program like this gave the Portland community "a place to heal." The art, music, dialogue, and energy of the Upstanders Festival brought more than eight hundred people together at the museum that day—just hours after the traumatic attack—to stand together against hate, discrimination, and violence.

Events and partnerships just like the Upstanders Festival have occurred at many museums across the country, pushing these institutions beyond being

just a collection of objects. These museums are working toward being agents of positive change, acting upon the inequalities within and outside their local communities as well as contributing to a more just, equitable, and connected world. It is essential to recognize that becoming an agent of change does not happen because of a single event or project, and it certainly does not happen alone. The transformation happening right now at so many museums is the result of the passionate dedication of staff across departments as well as a rapidly growing network of community partners and so many individuals dedicated to making change happen. This work involves an enormous amount of listening, developing trust, and building relationships—both within a museum as well as with its audiences and communities. It involves understanding the human-centered role of museums, defining what *community* truly means for an institution, and shaping a set of core values that reflect a commitment to accessibility, inclusion, justice, and human rights. It involves rethinking power dynamics and ideas of leadership. It involves developing practices of care and healing, and growing a community of change to do this work together. And, last but not least, it involves a lot of love. Love for museums, and love that emerges among the relationships we build throughout this changemaking process.

There is considerable consensus among scholars about the core social responsibilities of museums, yet the idea of museums as agents of social change is still a contested and uncomfortable proposition for many institutions, their directors, their boards of trustees, and even across the field of museums as a whole. In the work that I've been involved in shaping museums, there has been no easy pathway to making change happen. Each collaboration, partnership, and project presents new barriers and requires creative thinking, persistence, and passionate resolve, from museum staff as well as members of our communities. There is a lot to be learned from our experiences as changemakers and the challenges, tensions, and dynamic collaborations we encounter along the way, which is why I repeatedly reflect on my own experiences throughout this book as well as the challenges faced by others advancing this practice. At the end of the day, becoming a changemaker is about taking risks, sticking to your core values, doing good work, and converting talk into action.

BECOMING CHANGEMAKERS

So how do we start to make a bigger difference? How do we more fiercely recognize and support the meaningful work that museum professionals are already leading to support open dialogues around the challenging, relevant issues of our time? And how do we radically expand this work to build a stronger culture of

equity and social justice within museums—one that measures future success through our capacity to bring people together, respond to local realities, foster conversations, and contribute to strong and resilient communities?

This book is about embracing our role as changemakers, taking these principles seriously, and recognizing the essential need for museums to lead and take action rather than just follow, react to, and reflect the times in which we live. Throughout the following chapters, I set out to explore the work of museums as human-centered and community-centered institutions, discussing successes and challenges from a range of institutions doing this work as well as my own experiences as a changemaker. Throughout each chapter, I explore key issues for advancing change within museums as well as practical strategies for making this change happen. I hope that these pages can become a resource and guidebook for those stepping up to become changemakers in their own institutions and communities, providing questions for personal reflection, critically analyzing the work of museums, and reimagining the future of museums.

While writing this book, I was reminded of how important my conversations with other changemakers have been to my own thinking about museums. My ideas exist in dialogue with so many others. Therefore, I have included several meaningful conversations within the pages of this book to honor this process of dialogue and the learning we do collectively and collaboratively. These conversations bring in leading voices in the field of museums and nonprofits to address key issues related to museum transformation and our roles as changemakers. At the beginning of each conversation chapter, I have highlighted a few key ideas that we can bring into our own process of becoming and being changemakers.

Chapter 1 begins by expanding on the idea of a human-centered approach toward museum practice, inviting us to consider the essential value of building relationships and connections across museum communities. This "people first" mindset is an important foundation for becoming a changemaker and cultivating a sense of personal agency in this work. Chapter 2 takes a deeper dive into how we define the concept of "community," and identifies ways to break down barriers between museums and their communities as well as build relevance through local community partnerships. As changemakers, it's important to bring community into the core of our practice and have a thoughtful, clear sense of what that means for ourselves and our institutions. In chapter 3, we hear these ideas come alive through my conversation with museum leader and changemaker Nina Simon, who reflects on her team's work at the Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History, building relationships and recognizing the assets within our local communities.

Becoming changemakers means fighting for an equity-based transformation in museums, and chapter 4 examines white dominant culture and white supremacy as one of the single greatest barriers to the change needed in museums today. Learning to identify our own role in these systems of oppression and working to dismantle racism within museums are both key actions for those advocating for change. Through a conversation with La Tanya S. Autry about our work with the Museums Are Not Neutral initiative, chapter 5 discusses ideas of collective action, mutual aid, and building networks of changemakers through social media activism in the work of erasing the oppressive myth of neutrality in museum culture.

Chapter 6 turns to a focus on leadership and the need for changemakers to challenge conventional ideas about what it means to be a leader and reflect on the values and skills that are truly necessary to shape the future of museums. Through this chapter, I explore ideas of human-centered leadership and collaborative leadership, offering key strategies for making change happen within institutional structures and workplace culture. This chapter is followed by two conversations with changemakers who occupy director or co-director positions in museums and arts nonprofit organizations. First, in chapter 7, I talk with Lori Fogarty, director and CEO of the Oakland Museum of California, about her efforts to shift organizational structures and advocate for a focus on social impact. Then, chapter 8 explores the possibilities of collaborative leadership through a conversation with the co-directors of the Five Oaks Museum, Molly Alloy and Nathanael Andreini, and co-CEO at Fractured Atlas, Lauren Olivia Ruffin.

The final three chapters of this book bring attention to the urgent need for changemakers to develop a practice of care and adopt a mindset of healing within museum institutions. The work of being an agent of change is not easy, and chapter 9 addresses how changemakers can resist the culture of burnout by embracing healing justice in their lives and workplaces. Chapter 10 shares a conversation with museum leader and curator Monica Montgomery about community care and centering an architecture of empathy, advocacy, and social responsibility in our work as leaders of change. The concluding chapter ends with a daring call for us as changemakers to see love—yes, love—as a driving force and core value in the unending work to radically transform museums.

At its core, this book is about our work, individually and collectively, as changemakers to ensure that these institutions live up to their potential to bring people together, build a more equitable future, and change people's lives. I hope something you read in these pages sparks new thinking and new questions, and I look forward to the conversations with many of you about the ideas presented here. Throughout these pages, I also want to reach

outside the museum profession and embrace the important role we *all* play in demanding, creating, and supporting the change we need to see happen in museums. These conversations and actions cannot take place solely behind museum walls or in the isolation of professional conferences and existing networks. We need to work together to realize the full potential of museums and discover how a human-centered focus on social action can transform your practice, your museum, and your community.

Let's be a part of making this change happen together!

1

Museums Are Us

Let's start by making an important foundational point about how we talk about museums. When we talk about them more as buildings or brick-and-mortar institutions, it becomes easier to distance ourselves from the human-centered work we do. So it's absolutely essential to remember that museums are made of people: directors, board members, donors, curators, educators, front of house staff, registrars, conservators, security guards, volunteers, maintenance and facilities workers, members, visitors, and community partners. Museums are us.

I am reminded of this by Anna Cutler, director of learning at the Tate Museums in the United Kingdom, whose insightful 2013 Tate Paper titled "Who Will Sing the Song? Learning Beyond Institutional Critique" discussed institutional critique and cultural learning in art museums. In it, she quotes artist Andrea Fraser: "Every time we speak of the 'institution' as other than 'us' we disavow our role in the creation and perpetuation of its conditions" (Cutler 2013). Fraser's work as an artist explores forms of institutional critique that problematize the museum as a complex social site, a view that can be expanded upon as we envision our role as changemakers in museums. Thinking about a museum as the monolithic "it" might make it easier to criticize from the outside; yet gaining an understanding of a museum as "us" certainly sparks a direct sense of the possibility of change from within as well as a clear sense of responsibility for those working in and with museums. As the people involved in the work of a museum, we have a responsibility to understand our role in the system of policies, practices, and power dynamics as well as our ability to change that system.

This is an important basis for any discussion of museums and change because it defines the vision, mission, and work of a museum as the vision,

mission, and work of *the people* who are part of that museum. So if we say "museums must be more connected to their communities," we're really talking about what the people who make up the museum need to focus on—being more connected to our communities. We are inseparable from the institution, in other words. Any critique of museums is a critique of the people working for them and making decisions for them; and any change needing to happen in museums is, therefore, a change that needs to start with the people. As part of thinking about museums as made of people, we can work toward identifying those people creating barriers to change and learn to navigate those situations with a greater sense of empathy that can drive action. On the flip side, museum professionals—as change agents and activists within these institutions—have the ability to break down institutional hierarchies and create communities of change across these people-centered networks. We are the change we want to see in museums.

This chapter establishes the human-centered approach toward museums as the foundation of our work as changemakers, inviting us to consider the essential value of building relationships and connections across our museum communities. The following pages will help you examine the importance of a people-centered institution that cultivates empathy and personal agency, and include a series of strategies for changemakers working to implement this shift in mindset within an institution.

AN ECOSYSTEM OF PEOPLE

Thinking about a museum as a connected, human-centered endeavor can sound like common sense. I first personally embraced this idea after having one of those "light bulb" moments early in my career while reading the work of philosopher and educational reformer John Dewey. I had attended the 2007 Teaching Institute in Museum Education, a weeklong intensive professional development experience at the Art Institute of Chicago led by Rika Burnham and Elliott Kai-Kee. During this unforgettable week in the galleries of the Art Institute, we discussed theories of gallery teaching, we had memorable experiences with art, and we talked *a lot* about John Dewey. I had been familiar with Dewey in my graduate studies in teaching and educational theory when "learning by doing" was the mantra of the day. Yet I did not begin to more deeply explore his writings about art and aesthetics until this particular week in Chicago. We read Dewey's writings; met with renowned Dewey scholar Philip Jackson; and, most important, had a range of intellectual, emotional, and collective experiences that opened art up to the rich complexity of our lives. We were enacting the words of Dewey:

> The task is to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience. (Dewey 2005, 3)

I left that week in Chicago with two things that radically changed my career and my personal vision for museums. First, I gained two lifelong mentors in Rika and Elliott, as well as many friendships with colleagues with whom I stay connected to this day. Second, I left with a relentless passion for seeing art as a catalyst for human connection and shared experience, and understanding that we need to bring our whole selves into museum spaces and open ourselves to these experiences. From that moment forward, it seemed clear to me that museums existed to fulfill this goal to realize the true potential of creating connections among a broad ecosystem of people. People to experience, observe, perceive, wonder, feel, question, learn, respond, create, challenge, inspire, and share. People to light up the spaces of museums with energy, emotion, love, hope, and our intrinsic drive to connect with other people through our lived experiences.

Since this initial spark for me back in 2007, I have grown to more deeply understand the essential role of those who are working to make change happen and see museums as spaces of connection and catalysts for social change. I've seen museums become spaces for challenging questions to be asked, for people to question their assumptions, for marginalized voices to shine, and for communities to heal. I've seen museums embrace these human elements at their core and truly take steps toward changing people's lives.

As commonsensical and straightforward as it sounds to think about museums as people- and human-centered institutions, this idea has faced a legacy of rather fierce opposition grounded in outdated traditions and histories. How many museums have mission statements that prioritize the colonizing actions of "collecting" and "preserving" objects, rather than foregrounding the people-centered work of building community, growing empathy and understanding, celebrating human creativity, and cultivating engaged citizenship? How often do museum leaders and boards make decisions that value objects and collections over staff, volunteers, and museum visitors? (We have certainly seen this happen after the pandemic with the museum cuts and staff layoffs that followed.) What if museum leaders and professionals considered human relationships and human impact, first and foremost, when making decisions about exhibitions, interpretation, programs, facilities, policies, and practices? Embracing a human-centered mindset in museums asks us to do just that, advancing compassion, human potential, care, and collective well-being as elements integral to our institution's values and culture. As changemakers, we have a lot of work to do to continue advocating for this mindset within museums.

MUSEUMS IN A SOCIAL WORLD

One definite force sparking a shift toward a social and human-centered mindset for museums and other organizations has been the rise of social media and its influence on behavior across our society. At the core of the continual shift into a more digital age has been new ways of relating to one another; new ways of interacting; new kinds of groups; and new ways of sharing, learning, collaborating, and connecting. In their book *Networked: The New Social Operating System*, Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman argued that the large online social circles of familiar platforms such as Facebook and Twitter actually expand opportunities for learning, problem solving, and personal interaction. Their work at the Pew Internet Project, NetLab, and the Connected Lives Project suggests that digital technologies are not isolated—or isolating—systems, but rather networked systems built upon these social networking platforms as well as mobile device technologies.

> People's relationships remain strong—but they are networked. Neighbors, and neighborhoods still exist, to be sure, but they occupy a smaller portion of people's lives. It is hard to borrow a cup of sugar from a Facebook friend 1,000 miles away, but it has become easier to socialize, get advice, and exchange emotional support at whatever distance. Where commentators had been afraid that the internet would wither in-person ties, it is clear that they enhance and extend them. (Rainie and Wellman 2012, 255)

This extended potential for human connection is certainly something that most museums have embraced for more than a decade, launching into social media platforms in ways that connect to new online audiences across the globe. Beyond simply implementing digital technologies or using social media, museums engaging in digital transformation have been challenged to rethink notions of place, community, and culture in response to the changing behavior and demands of users—digital and analog. In her book *Museums in the Digital Age*, Susana Smith Bautista writes:

> If museums are to remain relevant, vital, and meaningful, then they must adapt to a changing society, which means not only recognizing and incorporating new digital tools for communication, but more importantly, recognizing the changing needs and aspirations of society as reflected in their communities of physical and virtual visitors. (Bautista 2014, 225)

As the behaviors and needs of our audiences change as a result of digital technologies and social media, so do the ways in which they connect with each other. Embracing a mindset of openness, participation, and social connectivity allows museums the chance to extend the boundaries of what is possible, and

serve as sites for profound human connection in the twenty-first century. In their book *Humanize: How People-Centric Organizations Succeed in a Social World,* Jamie Notter and Maddie Grant discuss their ideas for developing a more human organization in a world affected by social media and the internet.

> We need organizations that are more human. We need to re-create our organizations so that the power and energy of being human in our work life can be leveraged. This has the power not only to transform our individual experiences in the work world, but also to access untapped potential in our organizations. (Notter and Grant 2011, 4)

Through his work in digital engagement and social innovation in the museum sector, Jasper Visser has explored the connections between museums and this concept of a social business. In his paper "From Social Media to a Social Museum," Visser cites the Social Business Forum in defining a social business as "an organization that has put in place the strategies, technologies, and processes to systematically engage all the individuals in its ecosystem (employees, customers, partners, suppliers) to maximize the co-created value" (Visser 2013, 1). The model of a social business, therefore, focuses on building relationships and connections among its entire community, or ecosystem of people. For museums, this goes beyond just being visitor-centered and means thinking about staff and volunteers as well as neighbors and residents of our communities—all part of an institution's interconnected ecosystem. As Visser states, "[M]useums and most other cultural institutions are inherently social organizations to begin with. They have always thrived on intimate relations with all individuals involved in the joint creation of value" (Visser 2013, 7). This concept of a social museum relies on each and every stakeholder working together toward change, value, and impact. The key elements of a social organization—embracing networks of people, considering social relationships inside and outside the organization, and enhancing collaboration in a way that crosses traditional boundaries—are all core to developing a human-centered mindset in museums and establishing a foundation for the people-powered change work needed in museums.

THE POWER OF HUMAN CONNECTION

Another pivotal force defining this human-centered mindset for museum change is driven by new research and writing on empathy and human connection. These elements are integral to any vision of change for museums, and they are key to the work of transforming museums into places that feel alive with the spirit of connection.

"We are in more urgent need of empathy than ever before," writes Roman Krznaric, author of *Empathy: Why It Matters, and How to Get It* (2014) and founder of the Empathy Library (Delaney 2016). Krznaric is among a growing chorus of voices who see an urgent need for empathy and human understanding in an era too often marked by violence, hatred, resentment, self-interest, and toxic political and social debates. In his TEDx Talk "How to Start an Empathy Revolution," he defines empathy as "the art of stepping into the shoes of another person and looking at the world from their perspective. It's about understanding the thoughts, the feelings, the ideas and experiences that make up their view of the world" (Krznaric 2013).

In September 2015, Krznaric put these ideas into practice in the realm of museums with the development of the Empathy Museum, dedicated to helping visitors develop the skill of putting themselves in others' shoes. Its first exhibit, "A Mile in My Shoes," did quite literally that, setting up in a shoe shop where visitors are fitted with the shoes of another person, invited to walk a mile along the riverside while being immersed in an audio narrative of this stranger's life, and then write a short story about it. With contributions ranging from a sewer worker to a sex worker, the stories covered different aspects of life, from loss and grief to hope and love.

Developing empathy has the potential to create radical social change, "a revolution of human relationships," Krznaric states (Krznaric 2015). His work with the Empathy Museum is but one small example of the types of civically engaged, human-centered practices that have been instituted in an effort to expand the role that museums serve in building empathy and human connection in our communities. Staff working for museums across the globe are launching new efforts to bring people together, facilitate open dialogue, and elevate the voices and stories of marginalized groups to promote greater understanding.

One exceptional example of bringing this approach to empathy and connection into museums is the Multaqa project, which was launched in 2015 by Berlin's state museums. The award-winning project invites refugees from Iraq and Syria to serve as Arabic-speaking tour guides. The project title, *Multaqa*, means "meeting point" in Arabic. The tours are designed to give refugees and newcomers access to the city's museums and facilitate the interchange of diverse cultural and historical experiences. Through this project, the museum is able to surrender part of its authority to the participating refugees, who choose objects for their tours as catalysts of dialogue and reflection. "The point is to allow people to use the space for themselves, with their own approaches, with their own questions," says Stefan Weber, the director of the Museum für Islamische Kunst in Berlin. "Having to open up has shown us that we have yet more very different opportunities for developing our

relevance to people, if they are asked to join in the discussion and contribute their own realities to it" (Bahr-Reisinger 2016).

In their book *Cities, Museums, and Soft Power*, Gail Dexter Lord and Ngaire Blankenship discuss the human social behaviors of *bridging* and *bonding* that museums have the distinct potential to promote and amplify, especially through public programs, education, and exhibitions.

> Museums and cities have a strong role to play together in bridging and bonding. They bring people together at similar life stages . . . or with identity in common . . . where they can share their experiences. Museums also bridge among identities, offering a public place to bring different groups together around similar interests. (Lord and Blankenship 2016, 222)

These core social functions of museums have been clearly emerging as museum leaders and professionals reflect on how institutions can be relevant and sustainable now and in the future. The Alliance of American Museums 2017 TrendsWatch highlighted empathy and social justice as key forces of change in the field. In a chapter devoted to empathy, report author Elizabeth Merritt states, "[M]useums' inherent strengths position them to be effective 'empathy engines' helping people to understand the 'other' and reinforcing social bonds" (Merritt 2017, 8). To embrace these values of empathy and connection, museums are working to build experiences based in storytelling, lived experience, memory, healing, and civic engagement. Exhibitions are being designed in partnership with community members, content is being co-created between museum staff and visitors, and marginalized voices are being brought into the core of museum spaces.

The International Museum of Folk Art's Gallery of Conscience, inaugurated in 2010, serves as truly unique and visionary example of how museums are experimenting in this area. The gallery's goal is to be an agent of positive social change by engaging history, dialogue, and personal reflection around issues of social justice and human rights. Since the gallery's inception, exhibitions in this space have explored how traditional artists come together in the face of change or disaster to provide comfort, counsel, prayer, and hope through their art. This focus has earned the space membership in the International Coalition of the Sites of Conscience.

Exhibitions in the Gallery of Conscience are "community-driven, co-created, collaborative, participatory, and cumulative," according to a press release. "Visitors and community members become part of the conversation from the very beginning—helping to shape the exhibitions and contribute to the dialogue throughout the exhibition's run." In 2013–2014, the Gallery's exhibition "Let's Talk about This" focused on folk artists' responses to HIV/AIDS through artist and visitor participation, community programs,

and a digital storytelling project with LGBTQIA youth developed in partnership with N'MPower and Youth Media Project. The oral histories that were collected were incorporated into the exhibition through listening stations, and also became part of the dialogue-based programs related to the exhibition. Among many other projects, the International Museum of Folk Art is planning an exhibition in 2021–2022 that explores issues of incarceration, prisoners' rights, recidivism, and transitional justice, partnering with Gordon Bernell Charter School, the Santa Fe Youth Detention Center, the Santa Fe Dreamers Project, and the Coalition for Prisoners' Rights, among others.

As museums respond to issues affecting their communities, both locally and globally, there is a clear shift toward focusing on human connection, emotion, and experience as well as the role museums will play as catalysts for human empathy in a society rife with intolerance, discrimination, inequality, social isolation, and self-segregation. In reflecting on their decade-long commitment to dialogue and civic engagement, the leadership team at the Levine Museum of the New South remarked:

> With shared empathy, individuals can move from isolation to belonging, from division to connection, from suspicion to trust, and come together to begin the hard work of creating a cohesive diverse community that values and gives opportunity to all its residents. (Gokcigdem 2016, 235)

STRATEGIES FOR CHANGEMAKERS

So how can we begin to make this shift happen toward a more human-centered mindset? What does this change look like? What is our role as changemakers in advocating for this shift? No matter where you are in your institution, you can take steps toward embracing a human-centered mindset. The rest of this chapter outlines three key strategies for placing people at the core of our museums:

- Building a culture of empathy within our institutions
- Bringing our whole selves to our museum work
- Rethinking institutional hierarchies

1. Building a Culture of Empathy

A key starting place for this type of change is simply practicing more empathy within the workplace environment and culture of a museum institution. While this sounds very broad, it can start with anyone at any level of an organization. In many museums, especially large ones, the proliferation of

departments and reporting structures combined with an overreliance on email communication can lead to silos and barriers among staff within the organization. People are not connecting with other people in meaningful ways.

I can speak from my own personal experience, having been in plenty of tense meetings in which everyone comes in with their defenses up, ready to battle. A curator is certain that the education staff are going to "dumb down" their ideas. An educator assumes that their suggestions to make an exhibition more accessible to families will be belittled by an exhibition designer. Situations like these are happening in museums every day, and they are creating or maintaining barriers to change. We're making false assumptions about other people's values and positions without ever listening to their perspectives. However, a culture of empathy can begin to form through the basic building blocks of conversation and listening. Building empathy on an individual level means identifying those people in your organization about whom you might be making assumptions, spending time having a face-to-face conversation with them, taking a step back to truly listen, and trying to gain a greater sense of what they value and why. Being a human-centered museum starts with the human connections and social relationships we build within the institution. Getting this process started can be as easy as having coffee with co-workers you find yourself rarely interacting with or even butting heads with. With the COVID-19 pandemic, we certainly have seen this become even more challenging as staff and volunteers struggle to stay connected through online platforms and video calls. Yet it continues to be important to find new ways to connect with each other, listen, and gain a greater sense of understanding.

In addition to embracing empathy on an individual level, it is vital to consider how museums can embrace a broader form of institutional empathy. Just as individuals can practice listening to and responding to the needs of other individuals, museums have the ability as institutions to mirror those same skills in building empathy with their communities. The work of the Empathetic Museum Group has focused on helping organizations move toward a more empathetic future. According to their model, "an empathetic museum is so connected with its community that it is keenly aware of its values, needs, and challenges" (Empathetic Museum Group 2017b).

Using a rubric called the Maturity Model, museum staff and leaders can assess their own institution's commitment to building empathy across a series of characteristics such as civic vision, institutional body language, community resonance, and sustainability. For museum staff and community members just beginning to think about their work as human-centered, models such as this can provide a spark for meaningful conversations among staff about what it means to be empathetic and better reflect the values of your community. For

museums at more advanced stages of this change process, this model can help structure goal setting and inform strategic planning.

So this all sounds great, but what if just a few passionate changemakers are advocating for these ideas and models within an institution? How can these human-centered values of empathy and human connection be integrated into the DNA of an organization, and not just fade if those few passionate staff get frustrated or even leave? Beyond advancing individual empathy as described previously (an important strategy toward spreading empathy within an organization), one key strategy is developing core values and a values statement that reflect these ideas. If your museum does not have any type of core value statement, there is never a bad time to get one drafted. Traditionally, this type of institutional language would be created through a top-down process and likely not have the buy-in of most staff and volunteers. However, it's best to go through a process that allows staff at all levels (even some volunteers and community members) a chance to express their thoughts about a museum's core values. These conversations might even start during hallway conversations or cross-departmental meetings, and trickle up to the leadership team. The goal here is to develop a simple, clear, open, and transparent set of values that can guide everyday decisions and help organizations answer difficult questions and challenges when they arise. If an organization's overall culture does not seem ready for this (yet), a similar process can occur within a single department and then often spread from there. There is always a way to get this process of change happening.

In their essay titled "Adopting Empathy: Why Empathy Should Be a Required Core Value for All Museums—Period," Jon Carfagno and Adam Rozan write about the necessity of integrating empathy throughout an organization's policies and practices, including job descriptions, hiring, and performance review. Through this lens, as they state,

> the leading candidate for a museum's chief curator opening could shift from the person with the strongest publications or acquisitions history to a less experienced curator who had previously worked in the marketing or education departments at another museum because the latter candidate would command a higher qualification in understanding audiences and how to meet their needs. (Carfagno and Rozan 2016, 211)

Having established a set of values based in human connection can more effectively lead to institutions becoming more human-centered and making hiring decisions (like this one) that reflect these values.

The Oakland Museum of California (OMCA) is one institution that has successfully worked to identify, embrace, and implement empathy as a core value and ideology. According to their executive director, Lori Fogarty,

"We have been on a continuous and conscientious journey toward being an empathetic organization for the past ten years" (Empathetic Museum Group 2017a). Through a reinstallation of their collection galleries, a rethink of their programs and exhibitions, and a restructuring of the museum's departments, OMCA has more holistically embraced a connection to topics that influence their visitors and a direct engagement with their local community. While this process has had its challenges, adopting core values of empathy, human connection, and co-creation allows for OMCA to be an agent of change in its community and beyond. "At this point, I believe our staff knows what they're signing up for when they join the Museum," states Fogarty. "Having true employee commitment to this kind of work is essential and that definitely means making some hard decisions" (Empathetic Museum Group 2017a). Chapter 7 explores these ideas further through a conversation with Fogarty about her leadership at OMCA. As we embrace the belief that museums are first and foremost about people, no single museum is incapable of making these same transformations.

2. Bringing Our Whole Selves to Our Work

In addition to practicing more empathy in our work as museum changemakers, it is also important to think consciously about bringing our whole selves to this work. As museum staff, we might too often "clock in" to our jobs and check our own personal passions, values, and identities at the door. The personal communities of our lives float away as we embrace the existing institutional culture and branded identities of our museums. In her book *Presence: Bringing Your Boldest Self to Your Biggest Challenges,* Harvard professor and social psychologist Amy Cuddy discusses her research into personal power in the workplace. "Some organizations," she finds, "socialize new employees by focusing on the groups' identity and needs, failing to acknowledge those of the individuals. Workers may even be discouraged from expressing their true identities" (Cuddy 2015, 54). In most cases, these organizational or group cultures are grounded in legacies of oppression and white, male, patriarchal, colonial values, and they conflict with our personal identities, causing harm. For museums to become truly human-centered and inclusive, we must work toward valuing and celebrating the unique identities, experiences, values, skills, and passions that individuals bring to the institution.

So what does it look like when we bring our whole selves into our work? This core question was asked by Amber Johnson, founder of Justice Fleet, in her powerful opening keynote at the 2017 MuseumNext conference in Portland: "How do we bring our whole selves into our work spaces and what does that look like? What does it mean to say 'This is all of me and I'm go-

ing to put all my junk on the table?'" (Johnson 2017). Through her work with Justice Fleet, Johnson is on a mission to start a dialogue about radical inclusion and radical forgiveness, going into neighborhoods to engage their communities in discussions about implicit and explicit bias, social identity, and communicating across difference. Her MuseumNext talk titled "Revolution Requires Forgiveness" focused on the importance of bringing our social identities with us to our professional work, and what it means to allow those identities to truly influence our work. For Johnson, radical inclusion is a deeply personal act that "requires bringing the whole self to the table, [and] the dirty, nasty questions that nobody wants to answer, 'Who am I? What matters to me?'" Beyond this level of deep personal reflection, radical inclusion at the institutional level requires a lot of people within an organization bringing their whole selves to the table. Both radical inclusion and radical forgiveness, as Johnson aptly frames them, are vital to museums becoming more human-centered and ensuring that museums are places that understand, support, and value what every individual brings to this work.

Finally, and perhaps most important, how can museum professionals begin to engage in bringing our whole selves to our work on a daily basis? What are some initial strategies you can adopt right now? In his book *Museums and the Paradox of Change*, scholar and museum activist Robert Janes strongly advocates for museum organizations to connect with the knowledge, experience, and values of individual museum employees and to cultivate personal agency at all levels and departments of an institution. Janes defines personal agency as "the capacity of individual museum workers (not only leaders and managers) to take action in the world" (Janes 2013, 360). He outlines some clear, doable strategies for museum changemakers at all levels (Janes 2013, 347–70):

- Ask yourself, your colleagues, your supervisor, and your leaders "why" you are doing what you are doing. This questioning will help to move the museum beyond the "what" and the "how."
- If there is an intractable issue or situation that is adversely affecting your work, speak out. Advise your manager of the difficulty and ways to address it. Have the courage of your convictions to remedy the situation.
- Decision-making should be decentralized throughout the museum to the "lowest level" in the organization where the work can be done well. In short, staff should have as much responsibility as possible for decisions that affect their work.
- Any person in the museum, irrespective of level or rank, must be free to go directly to any person in the museum for information or assistance needed to perform his or her job.

- When appropriate, share aspects of your nonwork life, whether it be involvement in an environmental nonprofit or work as an artist. These seemingly unrelated skills, knowledge, and experience are essential as a museum broadens its awareness and engages in the interests, issues, and aspirations of its community.

3. Rethinking Hierarchies

To become more human-centered, social organizations that achieve positive impact in their communities, museums need to also rethink their internal organization structures. Most museums rely on deeply ingrained, top-down structures that rely on territorial thinking, defined protocols, and traditional reporting structures based on academic degrees, power, silos, division, and oppression. In these traditional hierarchies, communication flows from the top to the bottom, which means that "innovation stagnates, engagement suffers, and collaboration is virtually non-existent" (Morgan 2015). Furthermore, as stated in the nationwide report *Ready to Lead: Next Generation of Leaders Speak Out*, organizations that maintain traditional hierarchies "risk perpetuating power structures that alienate emerging leadership talent in their organizations" (CompassPoint et al. 2008, 25). The sluggish bureaucracy of this embedded management structure prevents a museum from being responsive to its staff and its broader community. In other words, traditional top-down museums are just not very human-centered. They tend to be leader-centered or focused on a few powerful individuals at the top. Chapter 6 more deeply examines the need for museums to rethink leadership and upend our conventional ways of thinking about authority, power, and hierarchy. So how can this be changed? What steps can we as changemakers take to think about and enact alternative structures?

To be more people-centered, museum leaders and staff can work toward more participatory, democratic, and flatter models for organizational structure. In their book *Creating the Visitor-Centered Museum*, Peter Samis and Mimi Michaelson discuss this transformation that has taken place in museums that take a more visitor-centered approach: "[N]ew ways of working ultimately shift traditional structures and may end up equalizing roles or flattening hierarchies" (Samis and Michaelson 2017, 6). Efforts to decentralize decision-making and promote broader collaboration lead to museums that are more innovative, more responsive to change, and more likely to have a shared central purpose across its staff, volunteers, visitors, and community stakeholders—its human ecosystem. When we rethink and replace the outdated hierarchies, there is clearly a greater potential for a broader base of individuals to feel personal ownership over the meaningful work of museums in their communities.

In 2011, the OCMA made major changes to its structure that resulted in a new cross-disciplinary and cross-functional model focused on visitor experience and community engagement. Referred to within OCMA as "the flower," this new organizational structure attempted to rid the museum of some of the barriers formed by outdated ways of operating. In 2016, the updated organizational chart had "visitor experience & public participation" at its very center, and only text references to the CEO and executive team floating around the outside. What started as a "rake" of institutional silos, according to executive director Lori Fogarty, became a "flower" of cross-functional teams emphasizing transparency, input, and communication. The more decentralized structure has positioned this civic-minded institution to better serve and engage its community, and we have seen that evidenced in the institution's decisions and response after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Aside from reinventing your entire museum's organizational structure (which is awesome, but quite challenging and rare), there are smaller action steps that changemakers can take within their own institution. One way to make these types of changes happen is to work toward flattening communication and expanding participation in decision-making. Seek ideas and input from staff and colleagues on a regular basis. For example, instead of using staff meetings to passively report out information about upcoming exhibitions or new policies, use these times to also discuss critical issues and gather input. Even a large staff meeting can be a platform for two-way communication. In addition, empower staff at all levels to participate in setting goals for their departments and for the museum. While this may take a greater investment in time, it will lead to broader feelings of ownership once those goals are being implemented and achieved on the floor with visitors. Involving staff at all levels of an organization in goal-setting and decision-making can also work toward cultivating leadership at all levels. Human-centered museums are institutions that recognize leaders across all levels and departments, not just at the top.

Finally, one important strategy for embracing a human-centered mindset in museums involves replacing outdated "org charts" with new ways of visualizing connections. Everyone reading this is probably familiar with the org charts that have each position in a box, and lines that connect everyone based on management and reporting. Who manages who? Who evaluates who? Who has power over who? These charts fan out from the director or CEO box at the top, ending at the bottom with lots of little boxes filled with part-time staff, security guards, volunteer docents, and so on. Not only are these charts confusing (and often quite ugly), but they emphasize oppressive power relationships and do not accurately represent the way a museum works and how staff interact with each other.

We need to replace these old org charts with new maps that emphasize human connection and collaboration. And you don't need to be the human re-

sources director or CEO to give this a try. Draw a circle to represent yourself, and then begin adding in other staff based on your working relationships with them. Who do you collaborate with on a regular basis? What working group meetings or committee meetings do you attend? What are some of the social connections you have within your organization? (Yes, these count, too.) Soon, you begin creating an organic map of your organization based on human relationships and connection. Not only is this a great way to visualize and map your existing connections with others, but you can also use this as a way to identify individuals or departments in your organization that you are currently not connected with. What are some ways you might begin to develop new connections to those people? What effect might building new connections have on your work, their work, and the museum's work in the broader community?

In her widely watched TED Talk titled "The Power of Vulnerability," researcher and author Brené Brown talks about connection as a fundamental human experience. "Connection is why we're here," she says. "It's what gives purpose and meaning to our lives" (Brown 2010). During a time when we are surrounded by an increasingly fragmented society of "us versus them," museums have the potential to be powerful catalysts for empathy and human connection. As changemakers, we need to truly embrace, value, and celebrate the people who make up museums—its staff and volunteers as well as members, donors, visitors, neighbors, community partners, and the broader public. These people, more than anything else, give museums their meaning and purpose, and it is the people that form the basis for any process of making change happen.

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2

Let Your Community In

During the summer of 2017, I made my first visit to the Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History (MAH)—a pilgrimage of sorts to this institution led, at the time, by author and change agent Nina Simon. She had invited me to be a "camp counselor" for their summer MuseumCamp, and I could not turn down a chance to visit the MAH, see what makes it tick, and be a part of this community of changemakers. Not only have I been a longtime reader of the *Museum 2.0* blog and a huge fan of Nina's books on museums, but the MAH had just officially opened Abbott Square, an adjacent public plaza that the museum converted to a bustling community gathering place and food market. For me, the Santa Cruz museum and Nina's leadership has been one of the exemplars in turning an institution toward a focus on its local community. In addition, Nina and several members of her team at the MAH have been inspirational changemakers for so many across the museum field. After arriving as executive director at the MAH in 2011, Nina worked with her team to tirelessly transform the MAH into a thriving museum and community center for Santa Cruz.

It's one thing for a museum to talk the talk when it comes to community engagement, and entirely another thing to walk the walk and make change happen. After spending several days at the MAH, going on a "running meeting" with Nina at a nearby state park, and meeting staff that develop programs and exhibitions, I knew that they meant business and were truly dedicated to making the museum a place at the core of their community, and bringing community into the core of their institution. I was fortunate to visit during their exhibition *Lost Childhoods*, an issue-driven exhibition that the MAH staff created with their community. Showcasing the stories, struggles, and triumphs of youth who are aging out of foster care, this powerful exhibition

was co-created with the Foster Youth Museum and a group of over one hundred local foster youth, artists, and youth advocates. This community was at the core of the exhibition, and there was even a large wall text that boldly declared, "We made this with our community." Through years of getting to know its local community and becoming intertwined with its people, the MAH team has embodied a shift from being a museum "for" its community to being a museum "of" and "by" its community. And it has continued to do so in exhibitions, programs, and community-based partnerships ever since.

Being at the MAH for MuseumCamp was just icing on the cake. Starting in 2013, the MAH hosted MuseumCamp as a professional development experience that is part retreat, part unconference, and part adult summer camp at the museum. It always brought together a wide range of artists and creative professionals working in diverse contexts and communities. Amid all the workshops, small-group discussions, beach trips, and conversations with over a hundred passionate changemakers, one moment back in 2017 resonated with me more than any other—perhaps because of how simple and straightforward it was. Portland-based writer, game critic, and creative entrepreneur Josh Boykin stepped up to the microphone during a series of fast-paced lightning talks. Josh works outside museums, yet cares a great deal about building community. Although he lives and works in Portland, Oregon, our paths had not yet crossed. His lightning talk was personal and inspiring, yet there's one simple thing about his talk that has stuck in my mind. Projected on the screen behind him during the entire duration of his talk were four words, large and bold: "Let Your Community In."

Since that moment, Josh's message has become one of my mantras when it comes to being a museum changemaker. How do museums make the shift to "let community in"? Is community always separate from and outside museums, in need of being "let in"? What does *community* even mean? Like many museum educators, I have grappled with these questions my entire career, yet the complexities and challenges of engaging communities came into focus through some of my more recent work in community partnerships.

This chapter will guide you through the essential process of defining the concept of *community* with your work as a changemaker, identifying ways to break down the barriers between museums and their communities as well as build relevance through local community partnerships. It's so important for museums to be a local place intertwined with and inseparable from local realities and issues. Museums are located in our communities, but they're also a part of those communities. How do we as changemakers within museums work to define our place, our town, our city, our neighborhood, and our community, and how do we learn about the people in our place, what connects us, and what brings people together into a community?

A MEANINGLESS WORD?

The term *community* may very well be one of the most frequently used words these days when it comes to describing the shifting goals, values, programs, exhibitions, staff and audience demographics, and even communication strategies of museums. In fact, I've already used this word more than thirty times in just the opening few pages of this chapter. For decades, museums (and most funding organizations, too) have been increasingly using phrases like "aiming to serve our community," "reaching out to our communities," and "strengthening our community" to create a sense of a museum's broader mission and social purpose. In describing its Museums Empowered funding initiative, the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) states that "museums are at the forefront of change in our communities" and they serve as "strong community anchors" (Institute of Museum and Library Services [IMLS] 2018a). In their thirteen-page strategic plan for 2018–2022 titled *Transforming Communities,* the word *community* or *communities* is used thirty-six times (IMLS 2018a).

Museums and cultural organizations are constantly being asked how effectively they are serving their communities and how well they represent their community. But foundations, granting organizations, civic entities, and funders do not have a consistent definition of what they even mean by *community.* We can begin to read between the lines when we are asked about the zip codes we serve, the number of Title I schools visiting, and what programs we have for "at-risk" youth or "underserved" audiences. The best sense I can get from how IMLS defines community or communities is "people of diverse geographic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds" or "families and individuals of diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds and needs." Whether we are defining these groups based on geography, interests, or experience, are we essentially talking about people who are not engaging with our institutions?

Nina Simon writes about the common misuse of the word *community* to refer to the general public or "everyone who doesn't currently visit here" (Simon 2009). Museum expert Porchia Moore discusses the dangers of using the word *community* in a reductive way, such as when it is used to describe a large group of people by focusing on a single attribute. In the context of discussions about inclusion, Moore writes, "'Community' becomes code for discussing black and brown visitors" (Moore 2015). Referring to a group as "the black community" or "the LGBTQ community" can be extremely problematic when groups are perceived as a monolithic or singular community. Moore advocates for museums to dig deeper into this language and how it reflects the decisions we make to develop one-off programs or exhibitions. Overall,

there is a generally agreed-upon sense that reaching out to and engaging with community is a good thing for museums. Yet how do we effectively do this work and advocate for it if we don't truly have a sense of what it means beyond connecting with "those other people" out there?

As museums vaguely define *community* or *communities* as groups that might not be engaging or connecting with the museum, there is also a troubling binary and divide we have created between "museum" and "community." It's so ingrained in the way so many of us talk about museum practice, myself included. We have been trained to think of museums as separate from communities; they are seen as buildings with collections, objects, exhibitions, and experts that are made available to communities on a limited basis. Referring to some functions of the museum as "outreach" just reinforces this separation. By default, museums then exist as disconnected, disengaged, and distanced from this idea of community. We might be feeding this gap by simply not addressing it.

So in many ways, the word *community* has become a vague and almost meaningless expression. Museum professionals use it too frequently and in ways that overlook the inherent complexities. I fully realize that by writing this chapter, I'm engaging in overuse of the term myself, but my interest here lies in unpacking the term and opening up many of the rich complexities tied up in this concept. Rather than stop using this word or replace it with something else, I'm advocating for those working for and with museums to gain a deeper understanding of what *community* means. I believe it is a meaningful concept, and I am thoroughly excited to see it being used more frequently by museums and funding organizations. We just need to explore and address the complexities involved with defining *community* and *communities* for our institutions. Through this chapter, I offer up a set of principles and strategies useful for museum changemakers to clearly define what *community* means to them in support of meaningfully expanding this work. Yet this is just a starting point. Each institution has to create its own definition of community and work to bring in local expertise, knowledge, and lived experiences as it works to expand this practice within the institution.

DEFINING *COMMUNITY*

Obviously, there is no single definition for the word *community*. And it does not benefit this conversation to check with Webster's dictionary, because the traditional definition of community is vague and outdated. In his influential book *Community: The Structure of Belonging,* Peter Block offers an exploration of community building and the ways that healthy, restorative communities