

Address by Gary T. Johnson,
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“Talking Points of the Heart”

At your workshop today on legislative advocacy, you have been dealing with serious, practical topics. Your talking points with legislators need to stay on message if museums are to get attention in the context of rebuilding our State’s roads and schools, and the long list of other needs.

That’s all very well and good, but I want to conclude this conference by changing the subject. I want you to hear about the “talking points of the heart.”

In this world of need, I want us all to take heart and not to lose heart. What museums do, what each of us as museum trustees, professionals and volunteers, do every day, is more important than ever.

Think of our history museums. I used puzzle over a curiosity of Chicago history: certain survivors of the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 said that the financial crisis of 1873 hit the city even harder than the fire. Now I understand what they were talking about! Going into today’s crisis, don’t you wish our financial and policy leaders had known more about what has gone wrong in the past? Take heart! History has a vital role to play.

Think of our art museums. Every encounter with art is an immersion into another way of thinking. Every art museum is a courageous, even a defiant presence, in the heart of daily life. That museum stands for the proposition that there is more to our lives than what Wordsworth called “getting and spending.” Going into today’s crisis, don’t you wish that all of us had looked at our daily lives with broader perspectives? Take heart! Art has a vital role to play.

A woman I met once in Argentina said it best. She was the host when my son was spending a semester abroad in Buenos Aires, which happened to be during a terrible currency crisis – one of many that Argentina has suffered. At one point, she excused herself because she was scheduled to teach a free class in one of the local parks. I asked her why. She said, “We have learned here that during a time of crisis, people have a hunger for the humanities, for the arts, and for education. A number of us volunteer to teach free classes in order to help meet that need.”

She put her finger on an essential element of human nature, one that we see at work in America today.

I have read that enrollment is up in courses that would appear to have no connection with immediate, practical solutions to the financial crisis – courses such as art and music. Something's going on!

During 2008 when the economy already was in steep decline, attendance at our group of ten Museums in the Park was about the same as in 2007, when the economy was buoyant. People are not crossing museums off their list in this time of crisis. Something's going on!

What's going on is an essential element of human life, the hunger for the humanities, for the arts, and for education, even when times are tough.

So take heart: What we do is more valuable than ever. Never even once believe that somehow our mission takes on a secondary importance in times like these. Not at all!

So as you meet with legislators, and as you face the many challenges that we all face back home, be practical, but also listen to the talking points of your heart.

Thank you, and have a great Museum Day.