

M Letters

A Call to Action

Of all cultural institutions that call themselves "museums," perhaps children's museums have the greatest potential to create lasting impressions on visitors, simply because their clientele is younger. But all museums have an obligation to prepare children for a world far more culturally complex and diverse than anything we knew when we were young. It did not take the Sept. 11 attacks for us to know that we are living in a complex time, when cultural differences are more visible and more volatile than they have ever been.

How are the more than 300 children's and youth museums in the United States and children's programs in other museums tackling the tough challenges of our times? How have you dealt with the cultural differences that exist on your staff? Indeed, do your staff and board look like the people who come through the doors? How have your institutions addressed the most difficult social issue of our time—living with cultural diversity, respecting and enjoying our humanistic differences, accepting our neighbors, and participating in our pluralistic societies.

Exhibitions on dinosaurs and the Muppets are sweet and cute. But they do not provide children with formative positive experiences in encountering "the other." Institutions' reluctance to tackle exhibitions and programs that examine how humans are both different and connected has become unacceptable. Not knowing how, not having the skills on hand, not being able to get funding "for those kind of shows" mask, I fear, a deeper xenophobia. Dare we delve into the motivations behind our exhibition selections? Could they be influenced by something in our hearts and fundamental values and not just by our pocketbooks?

Museums are uniquely positioned to creatively address the difficult topics and teach the next generation about inter-cultural, inter-faith, inter-ethnic, inter-human relations. Think about it: children's museum professionals transform information by uniting fields of thought and expression—almost any dis-

cipline can be integrated into or become an exhibition. We ensure that the content is age appropriate and accurate; we know that what we say will be remembered. We engage minds, hands, and hearts like nobody else. We spin yarns and stimulate imaginations. How can we ignore the responsibility and obligation to teach people about people?

For all the trendiness of dinosaurs, we simply will never meet one. The fascination with paleontology concerns me for it only looks back. We have to look forward. We will meet people of other cultures, nationalities, and religions. It happens every day in schools and in the grocery lines. Why not in our museums through exhibitions and programs?

Please do not let latent, subconscious xenophobia guide your exhibition plans, content, or budgets. Bring up topics that may be uncomfortable but which are clearly important at board meetings. Listen to people who feel marginalized from your institutions. Create spaces in which people can see the beauty as well as the struggles and complexities of the world. Let us look with open hearts and open minds to the creativity and energy of our field and contribute actively to the moral commitment of these times.

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