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The Creative Commons is Starving Calling for a Universal Basic Income

Joe Sorbara

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Article abstract

Improvising drummer and community organizer Joe Sorbara advocates for the implementation of a Universal Basic Income (UBI) that will “provide everyone with the space to hear and recognise a calling, and . . . ensure that we all have the capacity and support to answer the call.”

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The Creative Commons is Starving: Calling for a Universal Basic Income

Joe Sorbara

The creative commons is starving.

Starving for more and different stories, more and different storytellers, more and different listeners and ways to listen.

Though human beings have an inexhaustible creative spirit, fewer and fewer of us have the space or the capacity to engage in our creativity. And not because Destroyer Culture* has somehow managed to exhaust the inexhaustible, but because that culture is intent on colonising and extracting; it is violent and oppressive by its very nature so that it can't help but fail to nourish us, and so we're starving and we're thirsty and we're sick. It can't help but fail to protect us, and so we're scared, we're hunted, we're numb. And we're tired. So tired. But not exhausted.

I know because I have the time to look and to listen. I have the space to see and hear both the monotonous, fearful, murderous acts of hatred and the expansive, imaginative, open-hearted acts of love that we are capable of. I have the luxury to bear witness, to feel, to despair and to hope. Insofar as I am able to recognise the extent of it, this pandemic has exposed for me the weight and breadth of my own privilege. I have been fortunate enough to answer a calling into the world of Black American Creative Music for nearly thirty years. Answering that call is at once incredibly difficult and incredibly easy for me. And deeply, profoundly rewarding. In so many ways, though, I am able to do what I am called to do precisely because I have the advantages of time and space, access to education and community support, and the benefits of my whiteness and my masculinity. Today, many of my most brilliant, inventive, determined friends and colleagues are leaving cities they have invested decades of their lives in, building and tending to art scenes. They are working jobs that pay their bills but leave them with little energy to connect with the creative work they are called to. Others are precariously housed. Some have lost their lives to desperation and mental health crises; others may be headed in that direction.

More and more, it takes a great deal of unearned privilege to be able to answer a calling. And what that means is that we are increasingly exposed to the perspectives of only the most privileged among us—through the art they create, the words they write, the policies they are guided by, the choices they enact—while the perspectives of those who fall . . . who are stuffed through the cracks of broken and unjust systems go unengaged, unshared, and so unwitnessed.

And the creative commons is starving.

One should not need a wellspring of privilege in order to answer a calling—to music and art, to carpentry and engineering, to farming, to law, to making clothing or food, to health care, to struggle against social injustice, to parenting, to anything at all. Our collective ability to

* Destroyer Culture is Laguna Pueblo writer Leslie Marmon Silko's term for the toxic ideological mess of settler-colonialism, white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism, hetero-/cis-normativity, ableism, environmental destructionism, and myriad other forms of oppression and negation. I would encourage the curious reader to seek out her work, to which this piece is indebted.

recognise and engage inspiration is a basic human right. And so, where the normative arguments around this are so often overwhelmingly mathematical, I am placing human creativity at the centre of my argument for a universal basic income:

A society should provide everyone with the space to hear and recognise a calling, and it should ensure that we all have the capacity and support to answer the call.

The most inventive, most effective, most sustainable solutions to the vast array of problems that we face are only going to arrive when our collective creativity is at its full strength and when we have the space to listen to one another, to celebrate our differences, to acknowledge our interdependencies, and to recognise how much human knowledge is being stifled, how much we're all missing out on. I believe that providing a universal basic income, with sincere concern for equitable access to the commons, could begin to open up that space, that it could provide us with time and opportunity to look and to listen, to fail and to learn, to care, to feel, to critique, to nourish and to be nourished, to risk chasing dreams.

The needs and priorities of Destroyer Culture should not be at the centre of the choices we make around caring for ourselves and for one another. We can choose to nurture the wellbeing of our communities not because the math works out, but simply because we *can* choose to nurture the wellbeing of our communities.

The creative commons is starving. We're calling for help. It's time to answer.