Paper Mache for 10-23-26 by David Read

I recently learned a new phrase that seems applicable whenever someone publicly expresses concern about something: “virtue signaling.” I’ve heard it paraphrased as when the applause becomes the point. Support a cause, share an opinion, wear a ribbon, or announce a charitable contribution, and someone may suggest you are simply advertising what a wonderful person you are. Apparently, even doing good now comes with a comments section. Virtue signaling generally means displaying your moral convictions to gain approval, especially when the display requires little effort or sacrifice. Think of it as putting a bumper sticker on your conscience. The message might be admirable, but we are entitled to wonder whether anything is happening under the hood. In general, it sounds like a negative thing.

Social media provides an ideal stage. I often joke that if it’s not posted on social media, it didn’t happen. We can declare our solidarity, change our profile picture, and denounce injustice before finishing our morning coffee. Sometimes these gestures raise awareness and encourage action. Sometimes they mainly reassure our friends that we belong to the correct team. The challenge is telling the difference, including when we examine ourselves. But the accusation can become its own performance. Calling someone a virtue signaler may allow us to dismiss a legitimate concern without addressing it. We cannot reliably inspect another person’s motives through a Facebook or Instagram post. And if we demand perfect sincerity before accepting anyone’s contribution, we may be waiting a very long time.

Those of us working in the arts encounter this tension regularly. We talk about access, inclusion, education, and the power of creative expression. These are meaningful commitments, but they only become meaningful through what we actually do. A statement about welcoming everyone gains substance when someone can afford a ticket, enter the building, participate in a class, or see their community represented onstage or in the art gallery.

The same applies to supporting veterans, young people, and rural communities. A photograph from a program can help attract participants and funding. That is useful communication. The question is whether the program serves the people in the photograph as thoughtfully as the photograph serves the organization.

Public recognition is not inherently suspicious. Thanking donors can encourage generosity. Celebrating volunteers can recruit more volunteers. Sharing a successful project can inspire another community to try something similar. Good work often needs visibility to survive.

Still, there is a useful personal test that we can apply. Would I do this if nobody knew I was doing it? Would I help stack chairs after the audience leaves? Would I listen to someone whose experience complicates my carefully worded position? Would I continue supporting a cause after it stops attracting attention? We all enjoy approval. A little applause does not automatically cancel a good deed. Human motives are usually a mixture of compassion, pride, belonging, and the hope that somebody notices that we made an effort. Perhaps the goal is less concern about appearing virtuous and more attention to being useful. Buy the ticket. Volunteer the afternoon. Make the donation. Follow through on the promise.

In theater, a convincing performance matters. In community life, what happens after the performance matters even more. When the lights go down and the audience goes home, there is still work to do. That is where our convictions earn their keep. Going forward I will take a moment to reflect on why I am considering making a social media post. Is it truly to promote a good cause or is it more ego driven and self-aggrandizing to show myself as a wonderful, selfless human…food for thought.