

The Connection Between Business & Poetry by Knowledge@Wharton

Dana Gioia (pronounced Joy-a) claims to be the only person in history who went to business school to be a poet. Having earned a degree from Stanford's graduate school of business, he worked 15 years in corporate life, eventually becoming vice president of General Foods. In 1991, Gioia wrote an influential collection of essays titled, "Can Poetry Matter?" in which he explored, among other themes, the nexus between business and poetry. Since 2002, he has been chairman of the National Endowment of the Arts where he has overseen programs aimed at making Shakespeare and poetry recitation more popular in the U.S. Gioia, who is a speaker at the Wharton Leadership Conference in Philadelphia on June 7, talked about these ideas with management professor Michael Useem and Knowledge@Wharton.

An edited transcript of the conversation is below.

Useem: You had worked for 15 years as a business executive, including a stint as vice president at General Foods. What have you carried from your poetry, into your poetry rather, from that particular business experience?

Gioia: Well, first of all let me make something clear, because people often get my career a little bit confused. I'm the only person, in history, who went to business school to be a poet. This is because I wanted to be a poet and I wanted to have a job, a career and I didn't want to be in academia. I found business interesting and I found the problems and opportunities that you work with in business very interesting.

So, I went to Stanford Business School and then spent fifteen years in corporate life. I sort of came into business as a poet. And I have to say that having attended Stanford and Harvard, that I got my education in business. It has taught me a lot of things that have helped me as a poet.

I think the most fundamental thing is that in business, I was working with very smart people who were more average [I think] in terms of their interests. They had a rather high work ethic and they were very intelligent people. And, I was able, for fifteen years to live and work with people - who were not literary people. It gave me a better sense of the language and of the kinds of issues/ideas and subjects that the average person is more interested in. And, it took me out of the "hot house" of the English Department.

Useem: Let me reverse the question. From your own experience, can business managers themselves benefit the other way around from poetry?

Gioia: Oh absolutely, but I think that my own theory on it may surprise people. I think that if you come into the business, with an arts background, you have a tremendously difficult time initially. This is because it's a very different world, it looks at problems

differently and by and large, they don't necessarily respect your background.

For that reason, I did not let anyone I worked with know that I was a poet. This is because, let me ask you a question, if you had a poet working for you, wouldn't you check his or her addition? So privately I went through a very difficult time. That being said, as you rise in business, as you get out of the lower level staff jobs and the quantitative analysis, and you get into the higher level of problems, I felt that I had an enormous advantage over my colleagues because I had a background in the imagination, in language and in literature.

This is because once you get into middle and upper management, the decisions that you make are largely qualitative and creative. And, most people who do really well in the early quantitative stages are grossly unprepared for the real challenges of upper management, at least in marketing which was the industry that I was working in, marketing and product management.

Useem: Let me ask you something along this same line. You know that Archibald MacLeish was an editor and a writer at Fortune Magazine. Would you comment on the extent to which business writers would also benefit with the familiarity of or even a direct engagement in the world of poetry?

Gioia: Well, first of all, there is a long tradition of American literary writers who have worked in business: Wallace Stevens, T.S. Eliot, James Dickey, Richard Eberhardt, as well as Archibald MacLeish. So, I think that there is a natural connectivity, at least in American culture between the creative and the commercial. Now, the best business writers, I think, are people who are first and foremost writers, but have had some actually hands-on experience in the business world, because they see it from the inside.

What you really don't want is the kind of business writing in which the writer looks with distance, emotion or even scorn on "these poor unfortunates who have to work in the commercial world." And you know someone who understands the excitement, the creativity, and the challenges and in a funny way - the sheer excitement of working in certain aspects of business, especially during certain times and in certain industries. So, I think that like everything else, to be a good writer you need to be a good writer in an abstract sense and to have a passionate and real connection with the subject matter that you're writing about.

Useem: If business and business writers can benefit from having at least some contact with the world of poetry, you've also written somewhat colorfully about keeping your early writing a secret. And I love the story about how you used to grab the 5 copies of The New Yorker that would arrive in the company store before any of your colleagues could buy one. That was quite a while ago, better than fifteen years back. As you have had contact with the culture of business, corporate culture and the like, in recent years, is that world still that unfriendly towards those who are involved in the creative arts?

Gioia: Well, you know business is deeply conflicted on this issue. I don't know any senior executive in the United States that doesn't lament the need for greater creativity, conceptual innovation and imagination in their corporation. But, they don't know how to foster it. This is because, as I said before, the very ways in which they recruit people and the way they train people are almost designed to scare people out.

It's really interesting, the fellow that created the Monk TV show, used to be like a

marketing assistant at General Foods. I don't know if they fired him or he just quit because he was frustrated. But a lot of these people who were involved at General Foods have gone on to these immense creative careers, but they didn't have a channel for that. But, it was exactly what the institution needed at these higher levels. So I think that what you are seeing is the desire for it, but I don't see much consensus on how you create it - except by hiring expensive inspirational speakers to come in for a meeting and give you a talk - which makes you feel good about yourself for 8 hours.

Useem: I am going to turn now to your contemporary or your current position. You wrote, what has become a very well known essay in 1991 titled Can Poetry Matter?: Essays on Poetry and American Culture. To quote you directly here "Society has mostly forgotten the value of poetry." I believe that you are going into your 5th year now as chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts. To what degree is that statement still applicable? And then secondly, as chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, what initiatives have you taken to bring poetry back into the mainstream of American culture?

Gioia: Well, I'd like to think and this may be delusional, self-flattery, that Can Poetry Matter -because it created [kind of] an international controversy about the role of poetry and what it was in contemporary culture when it appeared, that that article helped in a sense, reinvigorate the role of poetry in public culture. Many people that I know did things because of having read that article.

That being said, poetry is still largely marginal in our culture. It's not quite as bad as it was in 1991 when I published this. And one of the things that we are trying to do at the National Endowment for the Arts and as indeed in institutions like the Poetry Foundation of Chicago is trying to do is to make the best of poetry accessible and available to millions of Americans. We have done this in a number of ways.

We have our Shakespeare in America Communities program, in which we have helped fund 66 theatre companies. They have now toured 1,600 cities, bringing to millions of people the chance to see productions of Shakespeare, especially a whole generation of high school kids who are able to see it for free in these programs -- and 70% of them have never seen a play before. They are actually able to have a fantastic first-time encounter with the greatest English poet [Shakespeare] and this aids their study.

We've also helped create with The Poetry Foundation in Chicago, a National Poetry Recitation Contest, where we have had somewhere between 100,000 to 200,000 high school students participate in this last year. They memorize poems and then they compete, first at a classroom level, then a school level, a town level, a regional level, a state level and then finally a national level and this helps them to win scholarships.

We've turned poetry recitation into a competitive sport. And, as you know Americans like everything better if you do it as a competition; just look at American Idol. We've done these programs in addition to supporting hundreds of small presses, poetry festivals and individual writers. So, I think that we are doing as much as anyone in the country is doing. Is it enough? No - but we'll keep giving it our best effort.

Useem: Thinking about your own personal experiences over the last five years, what are the two or three most distinctive capacities that have been required on your part in order to lead what amounts to America's premier public sponsor of the arts?

Gioia: Well, I'm both pleased and alarmed to say that my job, in any given week, requires pretty much every skill that I've ever acquired in my life. But I think

that's the nature of being a Chief Executive Officer, since you're helping shape something -- you put yourself into it fully. But I think the thing that I've learned from business, which most artists never learn, is the Number 1 quality that I'm happy to have in this job and that is the ability to create win/win partnerships with other agencies and with individuals - so that by doing a worthy project everybody comes out ahead.

I also need creative judgment in this job because the problem is not so much separating the good ideas from the bad ideas, which I know people have made an issue of in the past. It seems to me the real issue is how do you separate the superb ideas from the merely very good ones? And to, especially for our national initiatives - to create a few programs of the highest quality that you then can bring as broadly as possible.

I think the third thing is just simply, and once again this is something that I did not develop in the arts, but I did develop in business, and that is skill and management. This is just knowing how an idea happens, how it will fall apart, what stages is it in, who do you have to inspire, when do you have to check up on it? And you know I'm a real believer in the David Packard and Bill Hewlett system of "Management by walking around" that just by dropping into people's offices, talking to them about it --you become very visible, very involved and people know that you really care about what they're doing.

Knowledge@Wharton: I wonder if we could go back to the collection that you published in 1992, this was Can Poetry Matter. One of the really fascinating essays in there was on Business and Poetry, which you began by quoting Wallace Stevens, who was an insurance executive and also one of America's finest poets. Stevens wrote, "Money is a kind of poetry." What do you think he meant?

Gioia: Well, it's a metaphor and not an allegory, which means that I don't think he just meant one thing. A metaphor radiates meanings. I think that at least two of the things that he meant were that if you are in business, money has a kind of imaginative power on you that's not really something denominated in dollars and cents. But also, if you think about money as a metaphor, money is the one thing in society that you can literally turn into almost anything else. I think that he just took the idea of money, which we think of as just purely utilitarian and dull - and endowed it with a certain amount of poetic pizzazz.

Knowledge@Wharton: Why do you think American poets exclude business from their poetry?

Gioia: Well, the interesting thing I think is, I would take your question one step further. Why do American poets, who have worked in business, exclude business from their poetry? This is because you know the conventional answer would be that American poets don't know anything about business; they think it's dull and boring and so why should they write about it? And even if you accepted that, there would be: why didn't Stevens write about it? Why didn't Eliot write about it? Why didn't Dickey write about it? Why didn't MacLeish write about it? And that is the much more interesting question.

That is one of the things that I tried to answer in my essay. And I think it was because those people felt that in order to separate their business lives from their imaginative lives, they literally like Wallace Stevens, he had this briefcase and when he opened it up he said "This side is poetry, this side is insurance and you don't mix them." So it's male compartmentalization perhaps.

But also, American poetry has never really been very good in the 20th century, about talking about public, social issues. Even our political poetry [I think] is actually quite weak as a tradition versus many other nations. American poetry tends to be better at writing about private or domestic personal experience, or empty landscapes, the imagination or private life, rather than the common life or the social life. And what is business, but in a sense one of the most utilitarian forms of social interaction.

Knowledge@Wharton: As you have correctly pointed out, many poets have worked in business and there are also business people who write poetry. What does that tell us about the relationship between business and poetry?

Gioia: Well there is the old quote that "The business of America is business." In America, overwhelmingly the most talented people in our society go into business. Now, I know people in our English departments don't like to believe that, but it's true. You meet people who are just fantastic, sharp and talented people in the business world. And they could have chosen any number of fields and succeeded in them. A lot of them come into business with another passion; it might be for music, it might be for literature -- it might even be for sports. And sometimes, very talented people can maintain those interests throughout their lives.

One of the interesting things about publishing *Business and Poetry* was that after I published it, no one had ever even noticed before this essay that there was a tradition of American businessmen who were poets. They always treated Wallace Stevens as this singular example and as I've just shown there were dozens of people like this.

The funny thing though was after I published this, I kept getting letters from dozens and dozens more. I think I had put a footnote, in one of the later editions with about 30 names; I could now give you another 50 or 60 beyond that. I think what a lot of business people enjoyed about reading that essay was that they were not alone - they were not "total weirdo's". And so, I think it really is a function that a lot of talented people go into business and they continue to do something else as well, whether it's playing the piano, collecting art, or writing poetry.

Knowledge@Wharton: You referred a couple of times to the fact that as you rise in business, imagination and creativity become assets. Extending that point further, what do you think poets and entrepreneurs have in common? Aren't entrepreneurs poets, but just working within a different medium?

Gioia: Well, if you take the word poet in the old Greek sense of "a maker", what entrepreneurs and artists have in common is that they imagine something that they then bring into reality. And, as any poet or any composer or any entrepreneur knows, you imagine something, but to bring it to reality you revise and recalibrate it a million times to get it just right. So, I think the ability of envisioning something and then bringing it into being goes back to the ancient meaning of the word poetry -- Poesis which means the made thing.

Useem: We have you as a featured speaker on June 7th at the Wharton Leadership Conference. The topic of the annual conference this year is "Developing Leadership Talent." And just by extension, if you could just say a couple words about the extent to which you see the American public becoming more developed in their ability to engage in and appreciate the arts whether it's in poetry, theatre, music or beyond.

Gioia: The arts have had an enormous expansion during the last 40 to 50 years. There are now opera companies, dance companies, theatres and museums in virtually every large town in the United States. So, the numbers of arts participants have gone way up. And so I think consequently the arts play a broader role in more of America. It's not just people that live in Chicago, in Philadelphia, in New York, in Los Angeles and in San Francisco -- it's now everywhere in the country.

I also believe that most Americans understand that if they want to have a thriving and healthy community, the arts have to be part of civic life. The definition of a town that a new business wants to relocate to... that a company that's trying to attract talented people will be looking for is a community with a really wide and deep selection of the arts.

Knowledge@Wharton: I actually will not ask a final question but would love to hear one of your poems.

Gioia: I just thought that I would read the shortest of poems, it's only six lines long and it's called Unsaid. And it's about how much of the existence we lead is invisible to anyone but ourselves, because it's internal.

Unsaid

So much of what we live goes on inside--
The diaries of grief, the tongue-tied aches
Of unacknowledged love are no less real
For having passed unsaid. What we conceal
Is always more than what we dare confide.
Think of the letters that we write our dead.