

OFFICE OF
ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS

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NOTE TO DR. BOYER

Dr. Boyer --

Here is a clean copy of your speech at
the Kennedy Child Study Center. If you
approve, we can go ahead and copy it
for distribution.

Thanks,

Peggy
Peggy Rhoades

Attachment

*Let not
this minute
beget to someone
who may ask*

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Remarks of
Ernest L. Boyer
U.S. Commissioner of Education
at the 20th Anniversary of the
Kennedy Child Study Center
New York, New York
February 24, 1979

I

I like this theme, because I'm convinced we must have art in Education. The arts are basic -- not a frill.

I am often asked what I consider to be "basic education." I have one response. In my view the core of education is ~~the~~ "centrality of language." Language is what separates us from other forms of life -- the porpoise and the bumblebee notwithstanding. Our capacity to communicate determines the structure and civility of our culture. If language is not well in place there is no formal education and there is no social structure.

The arts are an essential part of the symbolic process and, indeed, the extent to which we become civilized as a people, and exquisite in our communication, is the extent to which we extend our symbolic language to include the arts.

Language begins almost spontaneously, and usually with very little conscious help. Some of my earliest academic interests had to do with the development of language. It always seemed to me a

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miracle that amid all the babbling, all the clutter, all the confusion, a child in the earliest of months begins to convert the real world into the "symbolic world." In the first few months, certainly during the first few years, the child begins to come out with those marvelously formed expressions of "mama" and "dada," and we immediately, with great elation, take those verbal playthings and connect them to something we call reality. Communication has begun. A miracle has occurred.

And yet, we don't pause to understand how remarkably subtle the formations of "er" and "ah" and "oh" actually are.

When a child moves on to formal education, oral symbols become written symbols which we convert into something we call "the printed word."

But my point is, this culture can permit its symbol system to stop with auditory symbols alone or with the printed word alone, Gutenberg notwithstanding. Any culture that is called "civilized" extends its symbol system into the nuance of communication, where meaning, feelings, and ideas can be even more powerfully extended--through the dance, through music, through mime, through the theater, and through visual arts.

About six months ago we had a marvelous luncheon at the Kennedy Center. We heard a panel that was sponsored by Arts for the Handicapped. I've been enthusiastic about Arts for the Handicapped precisely because many of our handicapped children do not have skilled capacity to speak clearly or to write clearly.

To deny them the full use of symbols is to deny them the opportunity to say who they are, and to affirm their own talents and their own identity. The arts and the handicapped belong together.

One of the panelists was Linda Bove, who appears every day or so on "Sesame Street." This beautiful woman is deaf. She cannot "hear" a sound and, therefore, cannot speak "sounds," except in a crude and guttural way. She communicates magnificently through dance, but at that luncheon she used the signing methods with which the deaf very often speak. Linda spoke to us a Robert Frost poem, "Two Paths Diverge in a Wood."

As she talked about the paths diverging and who she is and what she wants to become, and about the universe about us, a peculiar thing happened to me and, from what I could sense, to the rest of the audience. Suddenly I found myself not listening to the auditory interpreter, who was bombarding my ears from across the room. Although I don't "sign," I was captivated by symbols of communication that were "meaningful and poetic" and "visually powerful."

It became exquisitely clear to me that the spectrum of communication must be as broad as the human experience itself. If I had any single test for the "civility" of any culture, I would ask one question: What is the breadth of its language?

The crudest cultures have one method of communication: They use a club and they say, "I hate you."

The first step of refinement is oral language. The next step is to put language into printed form. The next step is to extend language through the visual arts and through dance and through miming to provide all of the nuances of feeling that a culture has within it and wishes to release. The test of the quality of a culture is its breadth of communication, and that's why I say again, the arts are essential as a "basic," because they represent communication at its best.

It has been said that humans are distinguishable from animals because of language. I would take one further step. I'm suggesting that what separate humans from humans-at-their-best are art, color, rhyme, rhythm, form, sound, and movement. The arts give expression to the profound urgings of the human spirit, which very often "words and phonemes" cannot capture. The arts validate our feelings in a world that deadens feelings, and they organize our perceptions and give meaningful coherence to existence.

Wallace Stevens in his poem "Anecdote of the Jar" put it this way:

I placed a jar in Tennessee.
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill,
And the wilderness rose up to it
And sprawled around no longer wild.

The arts, represented by that jar in Tennessee, can in fact tame the slovenly wilderness of modern life. They can give order and shape to chaos, and establish for us patterns of meaning and beauty that other symbol systems cannot.

II

The arts are essential because they are the highest form of language. They are essential also because through them we experience not only "creativity" but joy as well.

A very exciting thing happened last fall. Every year we celebrate something called American Education Week, and I write a canned speech or statement that I release. Usually no one reads it, but this time I got a call from the office of Mrs. Mondale, who cares deeply about the arts. One of her assistants said Mrs. Mondale would like to do something for the arts during American Education Week.

I don't know who suggested it first, but the idea emerged that possibly Mrs. Mondale and I could send a letter to the schools across the country and ask children to send some art to Washington. Either nothing would happen, or everything would happen.

Well, in this case -- not because of the Commissioner, I suspect, but because of Mrs. Mondale -- just about everything happened. As of a recent count, we have had 10,000 responses. These have ranged all the way from sculpture to composition to music.

to poetry to painting to collages to drawings and crayons from schools all across the country. All of them are creative -- and all of them suggest something I call joy, something spontaneous, something that allows freedom. As someone has said, people engaged in the arts generally seem free. I have been filled with great excitement, and our offices from coast to coast are now hung with art.

I have always been touched by Lowell Russell Ditzen's little story of what happened one day when he and his two-year-old daughter walked from the house to the barn on the family farm. On that brief trek this little girl stopped to pat the dog goodbye, she broke away to catch a butterfly, she paused under the cottonwood tree to watch the wind shake the leaves, and she studied the caterpillar that humped its way across the path -- all of this in the short distance from the house to the barn.

Ditzen asked himself: "When and why do we let living stop being fun? . . . Why do we quit observing and asking questions? How can we permit the precious, powerful self within us, that wanders and ponders and appreciates, to be suffocated?"

I care not about our age or our academic position or our curriculum -- we cannot shake that central question. Why do we make the transition from creativity to grimness, from perception

to insensitivity, from beauty to grim survival? If it happens in an individual, and if it happens in a culture, we are moving toward what I guess, in a sociological sense, one calls decadence.

Vachel Lindsay wrote:

Let not young souls be smothered out before
They do quaint deeds and fully flaunt their pride.
It is the world's one crime its babes grow dull,
Its poor are ox-like, limp and leaden-eyed.
Not that they starve, but starve so dreamlessly;
Not that they sow, but that they seldom reap;
Not that they serve, but have no gods to serve;
Not that they die, but that they die like sheep.

The human tragedy is not death. The human tragedy lies in that quality of life and death like sheep.

I wish to make just one or two other points.

III

I am committed to the arts in education, not only because they represent language at its best and creativity at its best, but because they are powerful as teaching tools as well.

I never really understood the power of the arts pedagogically until I visited the Soviet Union and China and discovered that, on a mass scale, these nations have understood the power of the arts.

to communicate a message. It's true that in those countries very often the message is national and ideological, but never mind that. I'm speaking of "pedagogical power."

I have visited in cities all across the Soviet Union in which the central social activity is the arts theater, in which they are using the power of the stage and the manuscript and the artistic function to get messages to children at a very early age, and pedagogically -- again, never mind the nature of the messages -- pedagogically it is absolutely sound.

We have picked that up in our culture through television. Some television is artistic and some is trash, but the fascination with it is in part the fascination of being taught through alternative strategies -- and the schools of America and the classrooms of America have some catching up to do.

My point quite simply is that, while the arts do serve affective education and we often use them for that, they can serve cognitively as well. We are beginning to discover what great artists have always known. The theater can teach history. Dance can teach social science. Photography can teach science and mathematics.

While I was still in New York with the university the legislature established something called the New York State Children's Theater, which is now an in-residence company spending half of the year presenting productions and the other half going out to

schools for a week or two to use the arts to teach about the history, the culture, and the science that grow from a particular production.

I am suggesting that the arts can be a powerful vehicle by which we teach far more than the beauty of the arts themselves.

IV

One other point: The arts are important in education because they permit us to deal with something I call values. I know we all get a bit squirmish, a bit uncomfortable, a bit embarrassed when we have to confront the concept of values in a culture. I think that's a very unhappy response. Without getting into the nuances, I can say at least this with confidence: The arts are important because in the arts we can talk about good and bad, we can talk about the power of values, we can talk about what seems to be better and best.

There is still a debate as to whether there are "standards" to be taught. I'll just have to make it very clear that in my opinion the arts are in fact imposing upon us judgments, values, standards of goodness, badness, excellence, and non-excellence, and that there are very few places in our formal education structure where we can deal as straightforwardly with the making of judgments as we can in the arts.

George Miller, in his book "Faith and Learning," said that a decent tentativeness is a wholesome expression of scholarly humility, but that these days we seem to have a kind of dogmatic tentativeness that makes it intellectually indecent to make up our mind. Actually, I think we are becoming more honest with ourselves. We are beginning to understand that education does not inevitably humanize. George Steiner reminded us of this in a powerful way when he said:

We know now that a man can read Goethe or
Rilke in the evening, that he can play
Bach and Schubert, and go to his day's
work at Auschwitz in the morning.

Steiner asks what grows up inside literate civilization that releases barbarism. One answer is the loss of something called values. No frame of reference, whether esthetic, or intellectual, or ethical provides the seeds of barbarism."

What I'm suggesting is, that through the arts our schools can help every student achieve what on another occasion I called "the educated heart."

The educated heart means to me an expectation of beauty, a tolerance of others, a reaching for beauty without arrogance, a courtesy toward opposing views, a dedication to fairness and social justice, a love for graceful expression.

I recognize that these are lofty goals -- some may say sentimental -- but I am convinced they are within our grasp, and certainly within our dreams.

In his poem "The People, Yes" Carl Sandburg put it this way:

Once having marched
Over the margins of animal necessity,
Over the grim line of sheer subsistence,
Then man came
To the deeper rituals of his bones . . .
To the time for thinking things over,
To the dance -- the song -- the story
Or to the hours given to dreaming,
Once having so marched.

During the long years of recorded history, civilization has marched for many of us, at least some of us, over the margins of animal necessity, giving us not only the opportunity for freedom but obligations, too. What do we do with those moments available to us once we have marched over the margin of animal necessity? I believe that's the challenge that educators face, and it is time for us to turn to what Sandburg called the deeper rituals of our bones.

That is what the Child Study Center is all about.

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