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Remarks of
Ernest L. Boyer
U.S. Commissioner of Education
at the
Kennedy Center
Washington, D.C.
April 1, 1979

Good evening ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to
Imagination Celebration 1979.

When Saul Bellow was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1976 --

o he urged his fellow writers, with
elegant simplicity, that they come
back from the "periphery" of life.
He said.

This evening we too are being urged to move from the
periphery to the center -- to recognize those unusual
feelings we all share, regardless of our age. And to
recognize as well that we communicate not only with
speech and written symbols but that we also communicate
through theatre, through dance, through music, and through
the visual arts.

Last year here at the Kennedy Center, Linda Bove spoke at an arts for the Handicapped panel. Linda is a Sesame Street star. Linda also is deaf and cannot speak using her voice and tongue and teeth. But that afternoon Linda did speak to us with signing -- the symbol system of the deaf.

Linda spoke "Two Paths Diverge in a Wood," by Robert Frost. She said "two paths diverge in a wood. And I took the one less traveled by and that has made all the difference." Suddenly I found myself captivated by symbols of communication that were "meaningful and poetic" and "visually powerful," and the speaker who interpreted this beautiful message became an awkward interruption.

Clearly the spectrum of communication must be as broad and rich and versatile as the human experience itself. If I had one test to measure the "civility" of a culture, I would ask one question: What is the breadth of its language?

It has been said that humans are distinguishable from animals because of language. I would take one further step. I'm suggesting that what separates 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.

I have always been touched by Lowell Russell Ditzen's little story of about a visit from his granddaughter. Together the two walked from the house to the barn on the family farm.

- o On that brief trek
- o this little girl stopped to pat the dog goodbye,
- o she broke away to catch a butterfly,
- o she paused under the cottonwood tree to watch the wind shake the leaves,
- o 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?"

Regardless of our age -- 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.

This evening is dedicated to the conviction that education and the arts belong together, to the proposition that children must develop not only their intellect, but their imagination too.

It was Vachel Lindsay who 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,

. . .

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.

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.

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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 Imagination Celebration is all about.
