HEALING OUR SOCIETY THROUGH CREATIVITY:
UNDERSTANDING YOUR BIRTHRIGHT AS AN ARTIST

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Good evening. I’m Robert Alexander. I’m going to say a few thousand words, and then we can have a dialogue. I’ve been thinking all day why I decided to give this talk. It’s because I’m getting older, and not only hasn’t anything changed in the world, it’s become worse. I’ve been working with young people for over forty years, and it’s always been an adult chauvinistic society - always, always. It still is, and now our children are murdering each other all across the country. I don’t see anything happening to make any impact on society so that there’s some love and compassion instead of misery and hatred.

In the forty eight years I’ve been working in professional theater, I’ve made a lot of discoveries. I know that everybody that does their thing thinks their thing is gonna save the world. People who teach Latin think that if everyone learns Latin then the world will be saved. I know that about the artistic process. The reason I wanted to do this lecture is to share my heart, my mind, my bloodstream, my flesh, with those of you who are interested in discovering or rediscovering what this process is about: what art is about, what the artistic, creative process is about and the difference between creativity and artistry. There’s a big difference. It’s the difference between sex and love. Sometimes they go together, but all too often they don’t. That’s what I want to talk about.

I spent a year and a half a long time ago doing studies of infants - newborns - from the day that they were born to about nine or ten months, sometimes a year and a half. It only reinforced what I had already known and over the years have come to know even deeper: the human being is an artist. That is our biological function. Mother Nature, who is the supreme creator and who never mucks up, created fish to swim. That’s the biological function of fish, they swim - and birds, they fly, and deer, they run, and why do they do that? It’s because they love it. They enjoy it. With a great deal of energy and joie de vivre, they love it. The human being was born to think, to learn, and to create. It’s our natural, biological state. So when I say that everyone is born an artist, that means that everyone is born and lives, until they die, an artist. Whether or not you’re in touch with your artistry, whether or not you revere your artistry, that is something else. But that pilot light is still alive. Maybe there’s a lot of garbage heaped on top of it and maybe it’s very, very, very, very, very dim, but it’s never extinguished. What we as a people need to do, individually and collectively, is to remove the garbage and the crap and the dirty ashes from that pilot light and find some fresh kindling. We need to blow on it very caressingly and gently, fan it, and nurture it until it becomes a tremendous bonfire.
Please, it would be a great idea if, as you listen to me, you say, "Yes, I'm an artist, and I'm listening to this other artist share his life with me."

My definition of an artist is a human being - a child, a woman, a man - who has an irresistible urge to express and communicate their deepest, most profound feelings and thoughts to the people with whom they share the planet at whatever time they live. Let me say that again. An artist is a human being with an irresistible urge - irresistible - not something that you do if you feel like doing it, not something that you may or may not do, not something that you can put aside for a busy weekend - but something that is irresistible. You know when you fall in love with someone. They're irresistible and you can't keep your eyes off of them. You call them up every day. You send them flowers and chocolates. You love them. You are in love. Your whole body is on a high level of excitation. When you are an artist, that is what you are about. You are in a high level of excitation, and you must, you must communicate. You must express and communicate. That's two different things. Expression is self-expression and you can go all over the place and self-express. That's not art. Art is the communication of that expression in a codified symbol that lets someone else know how you feel: who you are, what your name is, what your passions are, what your fears are. An irresistible urge to express and communicate your deepest, deepest, deepest thoughts and most profound feelings. It's not like Mad comics. It's not something superficial. It goes to the core of who we are.

Viola Spolin is the mother of improvisational theater. Her definition of talent is something that we should embrace. It's very simple, but it's spot on. "Talent is the ability to penetrate the environment" or embrace the environment, depending upon what state your heart is in that day. The ability to embrace the environment. The sensibility, the sensitivity to be affected by the environment, a-f-f-e-c-t-e-d by the environment. Then having the creative wisdom to find a code, to find a form to communicate to somebody else how you were affected by that environment. So dig this: to embrace the environment means you're not a leaf that's blown in the wind hither and thither, wherever society or your mother or your father or your teacher or your sergeant, or whoever wants to blow you around. You're not just there, letting it happen. You're not going with the flow. You're rooted and you penetrate or embrace the environment. You make a move, an aggressive move, out into the world. Then you're strong enough to be soft enough, to be sensitive enough, to be affected deeply. To be deeply affected means you have to be very, very, very strong. You cannot be weak and be affected. You have to be at the essence of your strength and then you're affected. Then you have some smarts. Your intellectual prowess takes over and you can create something that communicates to someone else how you were affected by that environment.

If you just forgot about art and listed those qualities, they are what we all need to have in order to make a decent society where people don't hate each other. As far as recorded history goes, there's always been the 'Other.' People have always hated the 'Other.' There's always been the 'Other' that someone else can hate. If they're not like you or look like you, or believe what you believe in, they're hated. So here we are in the
1990's in the United States of America, which is fraught with hatred of the 'Other.' That can't happen with the qualities I've just described. That would be impossible, impossible, unless you hate somebody who wants to destroy you and those qualities. Then that's an enemy, someone who wants to take you away from you. An enemy is somebody who wants to make sure that you are not sensitive, that you are not affected, that you are not smart enough to find a code to communicate.

In the moment of artistic creation, the following phenomena occur:

*** In the moment of artistic creation, you are whole and sane. This is true regardless of your neuroses or any pathologies that might have been visited upon you by this insane society for as long as you've lived. Even if you are psychotic, in the moment of artistic creation you are sane, for psychoses cannot function in that moment.

*** In the moment of artistic creation, your five senses - what you see, what you smell, what you taste, what you touch, what you hear - are all operating at one million percent maximum efficiency.

*** In the moment of artistic creation, you are outer focused. To be outer focused means that you care about what happens to the other five point three billion people who co-inhabit this planet with you.

*** In the moment of artistic creation, you are others-centered. Dr. King used to divide the world into two kinds of people: people who are self-centered and people who are others-centered. You center your focus and you point the concentration on other people.

*** In the moment of artistic creation, self-consciousness does not exist. You don't worry about yourself. You don't think about yourself. You don't care about yourself. The focus is not on you. You are not conscious of your self, which is what self-consciousness means. Somebody says, "Oh, I'm so self-conscious. I can't get up and do my poem." What does that mean? It means all their concentration is on themselves. You're worried about what your hands look like, and what your body looks like, and how your voice sounds.

*** In the moment of artistic creation, you are alive. You're as alive as you're going to be. There's nothing you can do about your state of aliveness at that moment, so you don't have to worry about yourself. You don't have to think about yourself. You have to do.

*** In the moment of artistic creation, you are in action. What is the action about? The action is about expressing and communicating to the whole world, those co-inhabitants of your planet, those five point three billion people, wherever they are, how you feel. The action is about expressing and communicating how you feel and what you think.
*** In the moment of artistic creation, you are the goddess/god Mother Nature intended you to be. You stride the earth like a Colossus. In the moment of artistic creation, you stand on top of that sacred mountain and you say, "This is my name. This is my birthright. This is my dance. This is who I am." And when you speak everything stops. They stop farming, they stop working in the steel mills, they stop planting the rice in Cambodia. They stop because the goddess is talking. The goddess is talking and what you’re talking about is essential to their lives. So they must stop their work for a time and listen, because what you’re saying is gonna help them live a self-examined, loving, compassionate, productive life.

Now take away the word art - and just talk again about those qualities. You know we’re supposed to live by the good book and the golden rule and all that stuff. Yet we know that’s nonsense because there’s just a microscopic number of us who even strive to do that. If you take away the word ‘art’ from what I’ve just described, what have you got? You’ve got decent, loving, compassionate, strong human beings who will fight for their families, who will fight to preserve their land, who will get angry at the boss and not at their wives or husbands, who know how to love their babies and not be afraid to be soft, especially men, and not be afraid to cry and say "I’m sorry." In the moment of artistic creation, you’re a beautiful, unified, wondrous marvel. If we could create twenty-three hours a day, then our world would be a paradise. We wouldn’t wait to die to get to heaven to have paradise. There would be a paradise here on earth.

People who do not create either own or destroy. If you are creating, you are not interested in destroying. You may not like someone’s painting, but you’re not going to set fire to their studio and slash their painting. You will not do that because you’re too busy with your own painting. You just won’t see their paintings. You won’t go to their gallery. You won’t go to their party. You won’t take them out to dinner. You won’t marry them, but you won’t kill them. You won’t murder them because you don’t like their art. If we, just as a small colonial piece of government called the District of Columbia, could start creating in our neighborhoods and share our creations with other neighborhoods, if young people could say, "Hey, man, come on and look at my stuff," and they could go from Northwest to Northeast to Anacostia, back and forth, then there would be no war. When hip-hop dancing first started in New York, that was a substitute for pulling out guns and blowing people away. They had hot competitions about who was the best dancer, and they all knew it. They all agreed when someone came and danced better than they did. They all said, "Oh yeah, okay, I’m gonna go back and get my step even better. I’m gonna come back next week or next month and do better than you." So there was great competition (which I don’t really believe in for art), but nevertheless it was a wonderful, healthy substitute for gang fights about who’s better.

I keep saying "Art Empowers," and people in my theatre company keep saying that a lot. What does that mean? What does empowerment mean? What does that feel like - to be an empowered human being? One, it means to have your own conscious conscience, not to listen to anyone else but to follow the dictates of your heart. It
means, in the words of Thoreau, to march to your own drummer. It means to have a
good detector - a bell - that goes off when something is wrong, when someone is lying to
you, when someone wants to take away something that is very precious to you. When
you read the newspaper or listen to a politician, the bell will go, "Ding, ding, ding, ding.
Come on, that's not true. We know that's not true." To be empowered means that you
don't have to rely so much on the outside, that you have something within you. You
have a spirituality within you that can feed you even in the depths of misery and
oppression. There's a fire inside of you that speaks to you of courage, of greatness, of
love. Amnesty International talks about people who have been in prison and have gone
through horrible tortures at the hands of their government. They stay alive because of
that spirit inside of them. Nelson Mandela was on Robbin's Island for twenty seven
years, and Winnie Mandela was in horrible solitary confinement for eighteen months.
Those people are able to do that because there's empowerment - self empowerment.
That's what the artistic process does.

In the moment of artistic creation, you are empowered. You stick up for yourself
so it's not just one Ralph Nader, not just one Sydney Wolf. We all become Ralph
Naders and Sydney Wolfs and people who say, "No, that's not good for people. That
product is poison for people. I don't care how much profit you're going to make, you
cannot do that." We become people who are not afraid to speak up for the truth. Dr.
King once said, "A person dies when he stops fighting for that which is right and true."
If you stop fighting for that which is right and true at the age of twenty and live to be
eighty, then for sixty years you've been dead. So that's what happens in the moment of
artistic creation. You become this gargantua of a loving, compassionate human being
who cares not only about herself and her loved ones, but also about the life quality
wherever you find it, so no one falls through the cracks. Every child becomes ours.
Every injustice to every human being is an injustice to us. Every person in prison means
that we are in prison. Every person in slavery means that our hearts and legs are still
shackled.

No compromise. People say, "Oh, I had to compromise." You don't have to do
anything. Why compromise? What happens when you compromise? What happens to
your poor soul when you compromise? What happens to that part of us when we go
against the very grain that we know is our truth, is our life? If a redwood tree
compromised, it would fall over dead because the roots would be cut. That's what it
means to compromise: your roots get cut. If you are an artist and live your life as an
artist, you do not compromise ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever,
ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, because it's not necessary. You can enter into agreements,
but you can't compromise your ideals. You can't compromise your beliefs. You can't
compromise what you feel is the life quality in yourself, in anyone else.

That means if you're a parent, you fight for your child. Children go to school now
from the age three to sixteen for compulsory education and are almost entirely
murdered. Every day their imaginations just stop in that system. Teachers, psychologists
and counselors come to tell you what a bad child your child is. You know better. You know maybe that’s what your child is doing in that environment, but your child doesn’t do that in other environments. For the past 40 years, I have seen over and over again that children show different behavior in an artistic environment than they do in school. It’s the same human animal. What happens? What’s the difference? It’s because in an environment that validates their creative genius, they are nurtured. In that other place they’re not. So if you want to live your life as an artist, you don’t compromise. You go up to the school. You take the day off from work and you say, "Hold it. I hear my child is having a lot of problems with you. What’s going on? You don’t understand that he’s a poet? You don’t understand that he speaks out for truth and justice? You don’t understand that he’s an artist?" There was a woman who lived here in Washington in the ’60s and ’70s. She had five children and her husband was a lawyer. She sent all five children to public school and was in school every day, fighting for her kids’ rights saying, "Don’t teach him how to read; he already knows how to read. Don’t teach her how to paint; she’s already a terrific painter." She was a physically small woman and spoke in a soft, quiet tone and she was the terror of the D.C. public school system. She did not compromise. She spoke up for the hearts and minds of her children. When you live your life as an artist, that’s what you do.

Albert Einstein said, "Imagination is more important that knowledge." Imagination is more important than knowledge. He said, "I owe more to my imagination than to any body of knowledge that I had ever gathered from books or schools or dialogues." I think almost every parent would like their child to be an Einstein. I think that’s a goal that most parents have. To be a genius, to be smart, to be able to invent, like Albert Einstein. Albert Einstein got thrown out of math class in Germany when he went to school. It wasn’t that he didn’t know how to do math but he did it differently. But his math teacher said, "No, you have to do it my way," and so s/he threw Einstein out of school. And this is what this man, this genius of our age said, "Imagination is more important than knowledge." These are the 90’s. Think of a five year old who will be in the job market, twenty, twenty five years from now 2011, 2016, maybe thirty years, 2021. No one knows what body of knowledge this child is going to have to amass in order to work because everything changes so very fast. So what do you have to do? You have to be a lifelong learner. You have to have the ability to learn whatever you need to learn or wish to learn for the rest of your life. That’s what the imagination does.

We have two hemispheres in our brain. We have the left hemisphere which deals with linear, cognitive stuff - one and one is two. We have the right hemisphere which deals with our imagination, our creative and our emotional life, our holistic life. When we function maximally, both the left and right hemisphere meet each other, have a date, fall in love, get married. They work in tandem. They are in love with each other. Most of what happens out in that world (which is known as "real" but which I think is a figment of some insane person’s imagination) is of the left hemisphere. All government is left hemisphere. All schools are left hemisphere. They try to solve all the problems with the left hemisphere. They make things worse. For example, prisons. Someone
does an asocial act which is against the law of the land. It's asocial, against the social fabric of our society. Why do they do that? Do they feel terrific in the moment that they do that? Of course not. When you do something against somebody, you're feeling miserable. You feel lousy. So what do we do? We build prisons where the environment is so constrictive that this organism, which is in such a contracted state to begin with, gets more and more contracted. If you get more contracted, you're certainly not going to be a very nice person. If you feel lousy about yourself, you're not going to want to do anything for anybody else. That's a left brain solution, to create a contracted environment and put an organism that's already contracted into that environment, hoping that's going to do some good to that person when they get out. That is insane. It flies in the face of every known fact about human biology and psychology. Why do they do that? Because they're all left brain people, and they only think in a linear way.

What happens when you create with your right hemisphere, with your imagination, is that it gives you the ability to step into someone else's shoes. For a moment or as long as you wish, you can imagine what it's like to be another human being or a plant or a river that's being polluted or a rose that's being sprayed with insecticide or the egg of an eagle that's being sprayed with DDT, or the mother of that dead still-born baby eagle, or a mother whale that sees its baby harpooned or a baby whale that sees its mother harpooned. You can actually physically, emotionally, and intellectually experience the inner feelings and thoughts of another organism or object if your imagination is in good shape. Now why is that important? It's important so that we can understand what it's like for another person to live a life that's different from ours. It can arouse our compassion so that we stop looking at life through our own very, very, very narrow focused lenses. Some people say, "Oh, that person's poor, they live in a state of poverty. Oh, I guess they have to eat frankfurters instead of steak." Don't laugh. There are millions and millions of people who still believe that, who have no idea what it's like to be poor. It's completely out of the realm of their own personal minute by minute experience from the day they were born to where they are now. But when they are in an artistic workshop, they can experience the emotional turmoil and anguish of poverty. Their own emotions are touched. They can experience the courage that it takes to live under an oppressive regime, which certainly poverty is - an oppressive regime.

Right now we could do an exercise so that you could experience what it's like to be five years old and going to school. Remember your stomachaches and remember all of those fears and all of those anxieties. Once you leave that realm, you no longer know what it's like. If I had a terrible stomachache yesterday and was in really terrible pain, all I can do is tell you today, "Wow, yesterday I had this terrible stomachache. It really hurt," but the hurt is gone. You can't feel someone's hurt. When you have an imagination that's really fertile and functioning at maximum capacity, you can experience someone else's feelings so you can become one with them. You become one with the earth. You know, people can hear plants cry. Plants do cry but we just don't hear them. They cry when they're not watered. They cry when they're over watered. They cry when they're cut. They've done measurement experiments with electrodes on plants. When
they put a shrimp into boiling water in the same room with a plant, the plant reacted so violently that the measuring instruments went off the chart. The plant felt the pain of that live shrimp or that live lobster. Trees get cut down and people say they can hear them. I believe that. When we look at people, ancient Africans or ancient Native Americans, we see that they have the ability to be so deeply in touch with their environment and their nature. You can't do that if your imagination is stilted and stunted and not functioning. The imagination then becomes the most important organ of our body.

What I'm really striving intensely to do is to articulate some concepts. If all the human and financial resources were put into making sure that these concepts were realized, then the world would change, (snap) like that. I also believe that this process of being an artist changes a person. Perhaps you know the book by David Riesman, The Lonely Crowd, where he writes about people who are culturally and traditionally driven. The artistic process can transform people who are culturally driven into people who are driven by the dictates of their own hearts. That would mean that everybody - all those crazy people all over the world who do all that crazy stuff to each other - would completely stop. Imagine there's a war on. A soldier has a bayonet and he's about to shove it into someone's belly. You go FREEZE, just freeze, and look at that person. Take five minutes letting that soldier tune into the other soldier, to look at his face, his nose, his eyes, to look at the work of art that Mother Nature created. Then after five minutes of breathing together and looking, say, "Okay, go ahead, now you can put your bayonet into that belly." Impossible. Impossible.

Prejudice, bigotry, hatred, comes out of noncontact... noncontact. Suppose I hate people with glasses. I hate them. I just hate anybody with glasses. So you come into my office and you want to talk to me, but you have glasses. I already hate you. I can't hear anything that you're saying. I hear the word but it doesn't matter because it comes from my arch enemy, a glasses-wearing person. Then you leave. Through all that time that we've been in the same office, I've been out of contact with you because I have this preconception of who you are because you wear glasses. Even if I hated glasses and I allowed myself to get in contact with you, really listened to you, looked at you and allowed my own life energy to be stimulated, then I would hear what you say. I would then base how I felt about you on what you were saying. But it wouldn't be because you wore glasses.

Imagination is the most important organ of our body. I have a twenty year plan that if funded would prove this philosophy to be correct. It could stop the drug problem. I know how to get people off drugs. I know why people get high. As a theatre company, we know that because we've been working with drug abusers for twenty six years and we know what happens. I was a very heavy drug user when I was sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, nineteen...heavy. People get high because the drug that they are taking makes them feel the way they want to feel. It gets them out of their heads. It's as simple as that. Drugs are one of the few products that delivers what it promises. They will get
you out of your head. The stronger the drug, the more it will get you out of your head. When you are living a life of pain, whatever that pain might be, and it's driving you nuts and you cannot tolerate it and you don't see any way out, then either you kill yourself because you can't live with the pain or you get high and that takes the pain away. It takes the pain away. It takes the pain away. Heroin users are in seventh heaven. It's the closest to being dead without being dead. You feel absolutely nothing. So you're going to tell somebody, don't do drugs, say no to drugs. That does not work. It has no impact on someone who is in emotional anguish. "Say no to drugs" has never worked! The only prevention and treatment is when you can find something that gives a person in pain some process that gets them "as high" as alcohol and drugs, but naturally. Some process that allows their heart, mind and soul to feel fulfilled. Something that gets them out of the head that they hate into another consciousness - into another head. Creativity, imagination, and the artistic process works! When young people say, "Wow, if I could do this theatre workshop every day, I would never do drugs, because I've been high for three days in this workshop." What have they been high on? They've been high on their own creativity. Why? Because that's a part of them that Mother Nature gave to them that hasn't been used. Once they can experience it, they experience the joy of being reborn into who they really are.

Your imagination is real. It's real. It's real. It's real. It's as real as this pen, this microphone, this glass of water. It's as real as I am or you are. It's real. It's real. It's part of us and anything that's part of us can't be unreal. So all of those Skinnerists who say, "Well, if you have soul, prove it. I can't see it. You can't measure it. It can't be X-rayed. We can't take a blood test to find the soul. You got an imagination? It's never been seen so it doesn't exist. It's a figment of your imagination." You can't have conversations with those people! The imagination is real, and it's a muscle in your brain. It can be exercised like any other muscle. When you don't exercise a muscle, we all know what happens. It gets fat and flabby, and cannot function. If you don't exercise a certain muscle long enough, you can't even use it. It's the same thing with the imagination. The imagination is a muscle that can and should be exercised. Later I'm gonna give you some exercises that you can do, to keep stretching muscles called the imagination.

When I was growing up, I was told that the brain stopped growing at age eighteen. Then I heard that the brain stopped growing at twenty one, and that was a scientific fact. My mother didn't make that up. The scientists at the time were saying that. That shows what scientists are all about. Forty years ago they knew that, and now they know a whole lot more. Now they know that the brain continues to grow if properly nurtured, until you die. That means the brain cells are actually growing. The brain is growing, it's getting bigger and the brain cells are multiplying if properly nurtured. That's what the process of artistic creativity does. It makes those brain cells go pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop! If your brain cells are diminished in size or number, in quality or quantity, living the life of an artist, working with your imagination, will make the brain cells grow and get stronger. So if somebody is brain damaged, either by an accident, by
birth, or by an emotional trauma (and all of us are brain damaged to some degree by living in the left hemisphere brain of this repressive society), the creative process returns our brain to wholeness, makes it well and keeps the brain cells flourishing.

Scientists still say that we use one tenth of our brain. I don’t know how they know that, but I mean, the proof is in the pudding. We can’t be using all of our brain and still be such a visible failure at making society work. So it must be true that we use a very small part. They say ten percent. When you live out of your imagination and work out of your imagination, you are working with one hundred percent of that brain. And your brain cells are boom, boom, boom, boom. So if you’re brain damaged, emotionally or biologically, this process will allow the brain to get stronger and stronger and soon you won’t be brain damaged. Soon you will be brain whole. You will be able to marry both hemispheres, and, in the process of artistic creation, the brain and the heart are married.

There was a guy named Tillie in the sixties who once said, "In the war between the mind and the body, the world is destroyed." In the war between the mind and the body, the world is destroyed. That’s what neurosis is and that’s why most of us are crazy most of the time. We have this conflict between what we want, what our heart wants, and what society has told us is wrong. It has poisoned our brain. The whole body wants to and wants to, whatever it wants to do, and what do we do? We’ve got to sit on it and suppress it and say, "No, no, no, I can’t, I can’t, it’s bad, it’s wrong." All these moralistic judgments come down on us and we are driven absolutely stark raving nuts. We are pulled one way and another until we become schizophrenic. This is serious stuff. The absence of the use of the imagination, the lack of living one's life as an artist, the lack of understanding what the artistic process is about has resulted and continues to result in the death of the full functioning of the human organism.

Norman Cousins was the editor of the Saturday Review for a long time. He wrote a book about the healing power of laughter during illness, The Anatomy of an Illness. He was a wonderful, wonderful human being, and here is something he wrote:

The highest expression of civilization is not its art, but the supreme tenderness that people are strong enough to feel and show toward one another. Art proceeds out of an exquisite awareness of life. The creative spirit and the compassionate spirit are not things apart but kindred manifestations of response to life. If our civilization is breaking down, as it appears to be, it is not because we lack the brainpower to meet its demands, but because our feelings are being dulled. What our society needs is a massive and pervasive experience in resensitization. The first aim of education should not be to prepare young people for careers but to enable them to develop respect for life. Related
lessons would be concerned with the reality of human
sensitivity and the need to make it ever finer and more
responsive; the naturalness of loving and the circumstances
that enhance it or enfeeble it; the right to privacy as an
essential condition of life; and the need to avoid the
callousness that leads to brutalization. Finally, there is the
need to endow government with the kind of sensitivity that
makes life and all its wondrous possibilities government's
most insistent concern.

This was written in 1971 and twenty years later we have not climbed very far at
all up the ladder of civilization. "The first aim of education should not be to prepare
young people for careers but to enable them to have respect for life." What we're doing
in our school system is a big question. It's our system. We pay the taxes. We elect the
Board of Education to serve their term. Ask people who are teachers who call
themselves educators. Ask why does a kid go to school? Why does anybody have to go
to school? What is this thing about going to school. "Well, so you can be prepared." Be
prepared for what? "It helps you. Without a good education, you can't get a good job."
Ah, you go to school to get a good job. "Well, yeah." What's a good job? "Well, a good
job makes good money." Ah ha. So the definition of a good job is a job that pays you
money, not that necessarily fulfills you, but that pays you good money. So now the
object of going to school is to make money. "Well, yes, no, maybe, yeah. I guess so." So
then why do you look down on someone who's fourteen years old, making fifteen
hundred, two thousand, three thousand a night being a very good business person. He
doesn't even have to advertise because the product that he has is in great demand and
everybody wants it. They even drive from all the white suburbs right into the middle of
Washington D.C. and say, 'Gimmee some, gimmee some, gimmee some.' So why do you
say that person should go to school? Why should they go to school? They've already
accomplished what you say school was set up to accomplish.

There needs to be a tremendous dialogue in communities between the people
who make the policy about what school is about and the people who send their
daughters and sons to those places. They're not doing what I think education is, which is
leading from the darkness into the light. Leading from the darkness into the light. I had
my own school when my son who's now thirty, turned five. I would not send him to any
school in Washington because I had done workshops with many, many teachers from
school systems all through the area. I'd be damned if I would put my beautiful son into
those people's hands. So I started my own school, and I had my own school for three
and a half years. Then other people started their own school, so my son had a place to
go. I worked with children from the ages of four to fourteen, children who had been
thrown out of school, and children who had not started school yet. I helped to start
another school like that in Hawaii, on the island of Maui. On that island were two
twelve and thirteen year olds who had never gone to school, had no formal education
because they were working as farmers helping with the family farm. When this
alternative school was started, the kids wanted to go and so the father said OK. They were the best students within eight months. Paul Goodman said that in order to learn the information that we shove up the nostrils of our children, from the ages of six to twelve, any halfway intelligent twelve year old could learn in six months. It would be a good education to go and look at the curriculum. It's very, very simple. It's unbelievable how simple it really is.

Then why are our children failing at such an enormous rate? Certainly, it's because of the atmosphere. The muscles at the back of the neck are called the muscles of stupidity because when they get tight the brain malfunctions. So if you're sitting there contracted, worried and fearful, you can't think. In a school in Washington D.C., in an elementary school, there are signs all over the room about what listening is. "Mouth shut, hands folded, feet flat on the floor." That's from the first grade through sixth grade, from ages six to twelve years. Try sitting like that for even a few minutes. When I speak to people who are called reading specialists, I say that I work for an organization with a nine million dollar budget. I've been in meetings in organizations that have forty million dollar budgets. Nobody sits like that sign says to do. Nobody does that. They sit around, lounge around, chew pencils, throw things in the wastepaper basket, pick their nose, drink, walk around the room, and they're making some very, very, very heavy decisions. It's impossible to have a decision making process go on if you're sitting like that. They lie about what the listening process is. So who makes up these rules? You'd think they are androids from another planet sent to decimate this population with these rules. Teachers all buy into it. When you speak to these young women and men who are teachers, they're lovely people, smart people. They can talk a lot of theory but why do they buy into that? It goes on and on and on, for generation upon generation upon generation.

Each one of us is unrepeatable. There has never been anyone like us, throughout the whole history of this planet. There's no one like us now, and when we die, no one will ever be like us. We are an absolute unique, biological phenomenon. Biologically, we are unrepeatable. Like a snowflake. We all know that about snowflakes. When it snows there must be billions of them, and yet there are no two alike. And the next snowstorm there's billions more and there are still no two even matching up. If you look at the snowflake that happened billions of years ago on the earth and you look at a snowflake now, they're completely different. You can't even say how many zillions upon zillions upon quadrillion zillions of snowflakes have fallen, and no two are ever alike. It's the same with a human being. We are absolutely unique, biological organisms, and we are unrepeatable. That means we are all very, very, very, very, very, very, very precious. We are all works of art. Let's just take the face. If you look at the face and you say once upon a time this was a blank. There was nothing there. Like a blank canvas. Then Mother Nature said, "Oh, I'll put this there and then I'll put these here, and I'll put this there," and started putting these pieces of assemblage on the blank canvas. Mother Nature made an assemblage of this face so now we call them the eyes and the nose and the mouth and all of that. But Mother Nature is a supreme Creator,
so she never made an ugly assemblage, an ugly work of art. She never made an
assemblage where one thing doesn't make it with the other thing. She doesn't make an
assemblage where the nose is too big or the lips are too big, or the boom a doo boom a
doobop. All these judgments that we make on each other! She doesn't make works of
art that are too fat. If we start looking at each other not only as practicing artists, but
also start looking at each other as works of art, the way we look at the walls of museums
and our homes as works of art, we will see that each one is an unrepeatable, never-to-be-
repeated work of art. How it affects you depends on the time of day, the place you're in,
and your emotional state.

Did you ever see a movie about love? A good, hot love movie and you're in
love? Then, somehow, something terrible happens and the love affair ends. You feel
terrible about it. You go to see the same movie but now it's a different movie. You're
not going to have the same feeling about it. So it depends upon one's state of
receptivity. It has nothing to do with the work of art. Someone said red and pink stripes
are ugly. They're not ugly. It makes you sick and you hate it, but it's not ugly. Every
color has an action. Every combination of colors has another action. You put red with
this, it's an action. You put red with something else, it's another action. You put three
colors together, it's another action. The action is not responsible. It's how you receive it
and what it does to you. And it's OK what it does to you. You don't have to like
anything, but you can't blame the thing. You can't say that's an ugly painting. You
can't. I mean, you can. People do it, but that's stupidity and you're stupid if you do
that. Someone else can come along and look at it and go, "Wow." "Yeah, but what do
they know?" you say to yourself, "What do they know? I know. I went to college. I got
a degree in art. I'm a painter." So what? So what? You're just one human being out of
five point three billion people. So that means there's one phenomenon and five point
three billion "interpretations." And they are all right.

Now that is a very revolutionary concept, and please take it to heart. The next
time you and the person that you love very much go to see a movie or read a book or
watch a TV show and one of you hates it and one of you loves it, don't waste your time
arguing over who's right. Listen to each other and go, "Really? You liked that, huh?
What did you like about it? I really thought it was despicable, but what did you like
about it?" They'll say, "Well, I really liked that she stuck up for herself. She finally told
that guy, 'Screw you. I'm going to be an independent woman.' I thought that was a really
good thing." "You saw her do that? Where did you see her do that? I saw the movie.
She never stuck up for herself." "Did you see when he said, 'give me a cigarette,' there
was a kind of look in the corner of her mouth and her eye did not blink?" "No, I didn't
see that." Wow, I didn't see that. I'll go back and I'll see it because I'm open enough.
And I still hate it. But it doesn't matter. I want to learn from you because I didn't see
something. I didn't see something in that painting. Then if I saw it I thought, that was a
look of resignation. She had given up... No! No! That was a look of defiance. There's
no more conversation because now there's a phenomenon. One person sees the
phenomenon as resignation and the other person sees the phenomenon as defiance.
We go and kiss and eat dinner and go our merry ways, and that doesn’t have to be resolved. Wars don’t have to be fought over it. You don’t have to get divorced over it. You don’t have to hate somebody because they don’t see life the way you see it. But if you disagree on some deep fundamental level, there’s no reason why you should even have a relationship. There’s enough things that keep people who love each other together. You don’t have to agree on everything. You don’t have to insist that you are right, because what you’re saying then is that if I’m right, you must be wrong. As soon as you say, I’m right, then everyone who doesn’t see it or agree with your way has to be wrong. Then there’s no coming together. There’s no hugging and kissing. There’s no embracing, there’s no shaking of hands, no reverence, no reverence of the life force in that other human being. Without that reverence, you have wars and then you have wars with words. You have battersings behind all those closed doors. More people get killed in the name of love behind all those closed doors than they do on the battlefield in the name of politics. That’s very profound stuff.

Federico Garcia Lorca was a Spanish poet and playwright. He died in the Spanish Civil War. The federal guards killed him. There’s a poem of his I’d like to share with you.

The poem
The song
The picture
Is only water drawn from the well
Of the people
And it should be given back to them
In a cup of beauty
So that they may drink
And in drinking
Understand themselves.

Put it on your bathroom mirror every morning and look at it, because that’s what art is about. It comes from the people and then the artist shows the people what their life is about. One of the diseases of this American society and probably Western society is the inability of the citizenry to articulate their needs. They’re hurting but they can’t articulate their needs. That’s what the artist does. The artist articulates the needs of the citizen. When the citizen receives it “in a cup of beauty and drinks,” this is their contact. They go, “Wow, right! That’s how I feel. This is what I want. That’s what I love. That’s what I’m angry about.”

All the artist does is show you the art that already exists in life. What is a Renoir still life? A red and white checked tablecloth, a carafe of wine, a banana and an apple. It’s a still life. We see those things a million times a day, and all that he’s saying is, "Look at how artistic that is. Look at how beautiful those objects are that we deal with every day." The artist shows us the art that already exists in life. It doesn’t come from
outer space. It comes from here. The artist also says, "Look at this beautiful planet, and look what we're doing to it. Look at the murder. Look at the insanity." The artist is only showing us what we fail to see in our tight preoccupation with whatever is going on in our inner monologue as we hustle and bustle to and fro, missing millions of things. Do some exploration with yourself. One day ask yourself, what did you have for breakfast yesterday? You go to work the same way every day. Could you describe everything that you see on the way? Every house, every nook and corner of each house? Most likely not. Because as we're walking, we're thinking of what's happening inside. We're preoccupied and we're not outer focused. That's part of the definition of being an artist. In the moment of artistic creation, you are outer focused. You see everything, you hear everything. You touch and smell and taste everything. It's a wonderful way to spend one's life. Listen, even if you believe in reincarnation, when you come back, you're not going to come back as you. Maybe you live a hundred and ten years. So subtract how old you are now from a hundred and ten, and that's all you've got on this earth in this form, in this shape, in this spirit. So it would be important to live one's life to the fullest. We have this beautiful organism that's given to us. Have you ever seen those LIFE magazines that have the magnification of what happens inside of a body when there's an unhealthy bacteria, and the white blood cells come to try to kill that bacteria? Or what elbows look like magnified 3,000 times? I mean, we're a work of art from our tippy, tippy toes to the tippy, tippy top of our head. That's it, we don't have to go anywhere else.

Biologically, we are supreme. We are in fantastic shape. What a body, what a number, Mother Nature created - the complexity of the whole thing. It doesn't matter that we can put one heart from one body into another body. It matters what we do with our hearts and our bodies while we're alive. We can send somebody to the moon. We can transplant a heart. But we also pull out a gun and blow someone's head away because we're fighting over a parking space. Parents have come to me and said, "I don't want physical education for my child anymore. I don't care that the kid never kicks a ball again. I want some emotional education." We know, now that we're out of school, what it takes to be a successful, fulfilled human being. It has nothing, nothing, nothing whatever to do with all that stuff that we learned when we were in first grade, second grade, third grade, fourth grade, and even into college. What really matters is the state of our heart, the quality and quantity of our fulfillment, our compassion towards ourselves and the people we love, the people whom we have never even met yet, and all the unborn.

We are temporary trustees of an unimaginably long line of heritage. We have to give this planet to the ones that come after us in better shape than we got it. If I borrow your car, I'm going to give it back to you with more gas, more oil. It's gonna be shinier than when you gave it to me. It's my responsibility. We've been given this earth, and we have to give it back to the young ones who are following in our footsteps in better shape than we got it. If we live the life of an artist, that is what happens. To be an artist, one has to have a deep belief in the perfectibility of the human spirit. You have to believe
that. You have to know that no matter what, no matter what, the spirit of the human being is in fantastic shape. No matter how crazy and distraught and destroyed. Perfectibility doesn’t mean that it’s perfect in the moment. It means that it’s capable of being perfect, with a lot of nurturing, with a lot of love, with a lot of encouraging. When you say to someone, “You don’t have an imagination. You don’t have an imagination. They have an imagination. Michael Jackson has an imagination. Renoir has an imagination. Beethoven and Mozart have imaginations. You don’t have an imagination,” what you’re really saying is, “what you think and what you feel isn’t important.” If you invalidate someone’s imagination, you’re invalidating what they think and what they feel. Conversely, if you say to someone, “You have a fantastic imagination – a fantastic imagination!” What are you saying? You are saying that what they think and what they feel is terrific. If you say to someone, “What you think and what you feel is terrific,” a couple of dozen times, that person will begin to feel that they, in fact, are important. If what you think and feel is important, that means you’re important. You can’t be unimportant if you think and feel thoughts and feelings that are important. So you must be an important person. Every time we invalidate someone’s imagination, we’re saying to them, “You are not an important person.” The amount of self-deprecation that reigns king on this planet is enormous. That’s what we have to get rid of: self-deprecation, people feeling like they’re nothing. That’s what this process does. That’s what this process does.

I suggest that all of you read two books by Ashley Montague, who’s a scientist and an anthropologist. One’s called Touching, which is about the organ of the skin, and the other is called Growing Young. In the second book, he talks about looking at the skulls of an adult and a child animal. The skull is different from child to adult. The skull actually changes. They don’t look like they come from the same species. However, if you look at the skull of an adult and a child human being, it’s exactly the same thing. Nothing changes. You can recognize that this is from the child to the adult. It’s the same species, the human species. He says that’s because Mother Nature intended us to keep the qualities that we have in childhood forever. He says we should stay as young as possible for as long as possible. We should start specializing at sixty. In this book there are three or four pages in which he talks about the qualities of childhood. Then he talks about the distortion that happens to those qualities as we grow up in this insane asylum of a society and how it gets distorted. It’s wonderful, wonderful, wonderful, wonderful. And the first book is about the skin. We’re the only animal that removes its baby from its mother at birth. In other animals, if the baby is not licked within two or three hours, the baby dies, and even if it’s licked at the end of two hours, it’ll live, but it’ll become pathological. He talks about the skin as the largest organ of our body and what it takes for human nurturing to occur, what we need to do to ensure the bonding that needs to take place at birth, and the nurturing of the body that needs to take place all through life. We know how it feels when someone holds us and embraces us. Why does it feel good? Because our skin is being touched. When you get massaged, why does that feel good? Because the skin is being caressed and nurtured. Touching is a great, big, fat paperback book, and it’s a marvelous education.
Charles Dickens - everyone agrees that Charles Dickens is a good writer and is one of the Modern Library's giants. He's accepted. He has credentials. Charles Dickens' characters used to come sit on his desk and talk to him. "Hey, Charlie, let me tell you about my life." That's how he wrote. Luigi Pirandello, an Italian playwright, said that his characters used to come to talk to him and visit him. Six Characters in Search of an Author is exactly that. The woman, the sister, who's the main character in that play came to him night after night after night, and said, "Mr. Pirandello, I have this story to tell you about my family. You must listen to this story." And he said, "Get out of here. Get out of here. Get out. I'm in the middle of four different plays. I've got no time to listen to anyone's personal stories. Get out of here." And she came, and he saw her. So did Charles Dickens. He saw the characters and talked to them. You walk into the room and say, "Hey, Luigi, who are you talking to?" "I'm talking to this lady. She says she's got this tremendous turmoil of a family, and would I be interested to write this story. I'm telling her to get out of my face." The connections between our perception of that and what's diagnosed as mental illness is really important. There was a woman in my company. She didn't come to work for two days, and I said, "Patricia, what happened? You didn't call." She said, "Oh Bob, I committed myself to observation at Saint Elizabeth's." And I said, "Patricia, why did you do that?" She said, "Well, the other night I was crossing P Street, and I saw this vision." I said, "Saints and poets see visions." It wasn't the vision that was crazy. It was her perception of seeing the vision that made her think she was crazy. It's how we look at our lives and say, "This is an aberration. This is crazy." We've been sold a bill of goods by all of those psychologists and psychoanalysts saying 'You can't speak to people who aren't there.' So, Dickens did it! If you're an established person, if you're Charles Dickens or William Shakespeare or Arthur Miller, and you're seeing and talking to imaginary people, then society thinks it's OK. Alice Walker talks about how The Color Purple was not written by her. It was written by the spirits, and she was just a conduit for the spirits. In fact, the spirits told her where to live. When they first came to her, they said, "Listen, we've got this story. We'd like to talk to you, but we don't like it here. You have to move." She actually moved from the part of the country where she was living. And then they said, "No, we don't like it here, either. You have to move again." When she finally moved the second time, they said, "Okay, now we'll talk to you." But if you're a homeless person, if you're an alcoholic, or you don't have any of those credentials, and show the same behavior, that's mental illness. They'll put you in St. Elizabeth's and pump you full of Thorazine. They'll try to cure you, try to make sure you don't hear the voices that St. Joan and all the saints like St. Francis heard. They'll try to cure you of that disease. Dis-ease. A disease means you're not at ease. "One doesn't talk to one's self. You don't see those things. They don't exist. They don't exist. Don't you understand, young woman? They don't exist."

We also do a lot of work with people who are diagnosed as having mental illness. It's not that they really have such a mental illness. They are not able to cut off certain things in their lives to make it possible for them to live in this society. There are people who are diagnosed with mental illnesses who have such genius and such compassion that
they are able to show, just like that, how they feel. I'm not playing down their turmoil, their misery and their pain. This is a process that will help restore their sanity and their ability to function in this society without buying into the society, without killing the soul, without killing their voices, without killing their ability to communicate with their spirits.

There's also a class prejudice. I know a dancer who applied to the National Endowment of the Arts many years ago to do workshops with poor women, and she got turned down. She showed me the proposal and then showed me another proposal that she wrote to work with middle class women. It was the exact same proposal word for word, the only difference being that she was working with a different clientele. The National Endowment of the Arts said about the proposal for working with poor women, "This isn't art. This is therapy." Those things happen a lot. Another person a long time ago at the Endowment told me that they would give me a grant if I did Ibsen at Lorton. We have a twenty-four year program with the men at Lorton, which is Washington D.C.'s prison. I told him that I would never insult Ibsen by improvising Ibsen. Why would I want to improvise on Ibsen? He's a wonderful playwright. Why would I want to make up my own words to Ibsen's scenarios? Secondly, if you were crazy enough and insensitive enough to do that, every man would walk out of the room because Ibsen is not relevant to what these men's lives are all about. So there's a real lack of understanding about the elitism of art. You know, Mozart was a revolutionary. The bourgeoisie, the rich people in his day didn't like him at all. In fact, one of the guys who funded him told him, "You write too many notes. Why don't you just write fewer notes? It's too hard to hear. I can't hear it. I need something simpler." Who loved Mozart? It was the working class people, the poor people who loved him. Now he's played in concert halls, and who comes to hear him? Certainly not the poor people because they can't afford it. Young people never have an opportunity to hear the magnificence of that music. When I work with young people and put their ears to a speaker, I have them hear Beethoven or Stravinsky or listen to Bartok. They say, "Wow, this is cool, very emotional music."

I want to give you a prescription for life to help your imagination grow and flourish. You wake up in the morning and you say a poem. Just say some words, say a poem, make up a poem out loud before you do anything. Don't get out of bed. Don't brush your teeth. Don't go to the bathroom. Just say a poem. That takes a couple of seconds. As soon as you finish the poem, you make up a story. The story begins, "Once upon a time..." Then you find some private time during the day and you do the same thing. Before you go to bed at night, before you go to sleep, while you're lying in bed, you do the same thing. If you're a person that likes to make judgments, maybe you'll say, "Oh, this guy is crazy. This stinks. I don't have an aptitude for this. I am all thumbs. I can't play the piano with my poetry." OK, you're allowed to do that. You're allowed to say it stinks. Just keep doing it. And the second day it'll get a little better. The second week it'll get a little better. The second month it will get a little better. And I will guarantee you, triple your money back, gentle ladies and gentle men, that in nine months you will be a fantastic improvisational poet and a wonderful, wonderful
story maker-upper. Guaranteed. The reason I can guarantee it is because every time you do something, you get better at it. The more you do something, the better at it you get, whether it's playing basketball, climbing mountains, making bread, playing the piano, or using your imagination. You have to get better at it.

Let me tell you that God in her wisdom did not come down and say to different people, "You can write, you can write, you can not, you can not. You can write..." It's not like our music teacher in sixth grade who said, "Singer, listener, listener, listener, singer." People can't sing now because of the idiocy of that person in their life, years ago, who told them they were a listener. They spent three years in music class listening because someone told them they couldn't sing. It doesn't happen that way. Go back to the beginning of this talk. We are all born as artists. That's our nature. So you all have the ability to do it. Maybe you haven't done it your whole life, so now you're a little rusty. The more you do it, the better you get. People who know how to do something well now, at one point stunk. We want to do it. Someone teaches us a form, and we sit down and do it. I don't care if you tell me you've got ten thumbs and you can't possibly play two different things with one hand and another hand. Someone will give you a lesson in piano and show you where to put your fingers. If you practice enough, every day, after a while you'll be able to play the piano, play a tune, etc. You don't have a backhand in tennis? Someone hits five hundred balls a day to you, backhand. In a couple of years, you'll have a very good backhand. The more you do something, the better you get.

There's a myth, a myth about this creativity stuff. Some people are born with it, some people are born without it. You who don't have it, come to my temple, my Mecca. Bow down and pay your money. You worship my creativity because you were born without it. It goes back to what happens when you tell people they're not creative, they have no imaginations. It makes them feel worthless. That's how gardens become cesspools of Fascism. Why is it that in every Fascistic military takeover, the first people that go are the artists? The first people that get sent to jail are the artists, the first people that get murdered are the artists - because they speak about human dignity, about truth and freedom. Those words are an anathema to the tyrants and the dictators. Everybody is born an artist. Beethoven is a terrific composer. OK, but he's not important. We're important. We're alive. So you want to be a good composer? OK, then someone will teach you how to write music and how to notate it. There is a program that can teach five year olds how to notate, score, and conduct their own symphonies. So it doesn't matter that Beethoven is better than them. It is irrelevant to say or think that. Now this child and Beethoven are compatriots, colleagues. If Beethoven is that good, he's going to turn the kid on. The kid's going to say, "Wow, how did he hear that? How did he think of that?" It will spur him on to get even better and better and better and better and better. Just like if you're a tennis player, you want to know how those great tennis players did it. You're going to study their form and get to be better. Those kids want to get better, and how do they get better? They practice. You can't get better at something if you don't do it. It is instant gratification if you don't
make judgments. Because the first poem you say in the morning is going to be a lollapalooza.

I'm trying to demystify this process because now the arts only belong to a few who claim it. I'm saying it is our natural birthright, and it belongs to all of us. It is a dream - creativity is our dream. It is as important as our dreams. Langston Hughes has a poem that goes:

        Hold fast to dreams
        For if dreams die
        Life is a broken winged bird
        That cannot fly.

Think of a creature that was born to fly, and the agony and frustration that that creature must feel when its wing is broken, and it cannot fly. Then you can begin to imagine the frustration and agony of people who were born to dream, and when dreams have been denied. If the imagination is denied, the dream is denied, and nothing can be built unless you first dream. First the dream, then the reality. First you must have a vision which is the dream. Matisse says, "Creation begins with vision," but you must have a vision which is your dream. Then you work your butt off to make that dream come true. It is hard work, but you can't work at something if you don't have the vision, if you don't have the dream, if you can't dream. I ask kids who hate school - hate school, "Make up your own school. What would it be? What are some of the qualities it would have?" "More recess." Their dreams have been killed to such an extent that they can't think beyond the given. We have to step outside this mechanistic, war mongering society, and say, "If we want to build a better world, what is our vision?" When we were working in the sixties and seventies with all those hippies, we would do that. We'd say, "The war's over and all the good guys won. Now let's improvise what your world's about." They all sat around, partied and smoked dope. I said, "What do you mean, when the war is over and the good guys win, no one's going to work?" They couldn't envision a working democratic society because they were so busy fighting all the bad stuff. They had no time to sit down and plan what a decent, good, world is.

What is an education system that works for everybody? How do you utilize the amount of knowledge that this child has gotten and skills a child has learned from the day of birth to four years old? He's learned to walk and talk all by himself. If we taught kids how to walk and talk the way we teach them how to read, nobody would walk and talk. We would all be slithering along on our bellies, mute. Reading is a very, very, very, very, very simple skill. So how come we've got kids who can't read and have been to school since they were three years old? Now they're fifteen and they're semi-illiterate. The reason is that the atmosphere has been like a prison. No one has told them that the content of those books is terrific stuff. They don't know that. When I teach kids how to read, they say, "Bob, Bob, this book is so exciting." She's 11 years old and no one has ever told her that the reason you want to read is because people have shared their ideas
that way for centuries. There are terrific ideas, action, excitement in those books, but it's a simple, simple thing. John Holt, who's a great educator, put it this way, Pick up an Indian newspaper. You can't read any Indian language, so what do you see but a lot of hieroglyphics. Now look at it carefully. Turn the page and see how many of the same hieroglyphics you can recognize from the first page. Very few. That's what a child sees when she opens up a book and sees all those a, b, c, d's. They're just lines. When a kid reads, "The boy went with his mother to the store," and on the second page the word "with" is there again, the kid doesn't recognize it because she only just saw it once on the page before. So she reads, "The boy went w-a-a." A lot of the adults who are teaching these kids to read, go, "No, no, what are you, stupid? It's right there - with, with. We just went through this for an hour - with, with, w-i-t-h. It's right there." If you took that same adult and gave him an Indian newspaper, he would not be able to recognize the word "with" in that written language from one page to another.

We work with children who have never been read to, something that many people in this room take for granted. When you have a child, you read to the child. You've been read to. We've all been read to. Well, there are thousands upon thousands upon hundreds of thousands of children that no one has ever read to in their whole lives. They don't know what a story is. They're capable of writing terrific stories and making up terrific stories, but they don't know that it's an s-t-o-r-y. They don't know that it's a story. No one's ever told them that. If you haven't been read to you're not going to understand what those words mean. That's the way you learn how to read - you're read to. You sit on your parent's or grandparent's or sister's or brother's lap and you read together. You see the words they're reading and eventually you know how to read. If you can read the word 'Stop' on a Stop sign, you know how to read. Kids learn how to read a lot, but when they get into the system, and they're forced to read all of that stuff, they can go crazy. My optometrist said more and more children are getting glasses every year because they're doing close work at an age when the eyes are not ready for close work. I've walked with children down the street, and they go, "Oh, Bob, look at that cat," and I go, "Where?" A block and a half away on a fifth story fire escape, there's a cat. A young person's eyes see a quarter of a mile in the distance. Then we send them to school at a very young age, and they've got to do all this close work. Their eyes are straining because the eyes compensate, and sooner or later they need glasses.

Ursula LeGuin. Do you know Ursula LeGuin? She's a marvelous writer. She makes up other worlds, other languages, other people, all based very much on the human dilemma. She wrote,

I believe that all the best faculties of a mature human being exist in the child, and that if these faculties are encouraged in youth, they will act well and wisely in the adult, but if they are repressed and denied in the child they will stunt and cripple the adult personality. And, I believe that one of the most deeply human, and humane, of these faculties is the
power of imagination: so that it is our pleasant duty as librarians, or teachers, or parents, or writers, or simply as grownups, to encourage that faculty of imagination in our children, to encourage it to grow freely and to flourish like the green bay tree, by giving it the best, absolutely the best and purest nourishment that it can absorb. And never, under any circumstances, to squelch it or to sneer at it or imply that it is childish, or unmanly, or untrue. For fantasy is true, of course. It isn’t factual, but it is true. Children know that. Adults know it too, and that is precisely why many of them are afraid of fantasy. They know that its truth challenges, even threats, all that is false, all that is phony, unnecessary, and trivial in the life they have let themselves be forced into living. They are afraid of dragons because they are afraid of freedom."

She equates dragons with imagination and wisdom. In her Earth Sea trilogy, she says the dragons are the oldest and wisest of all of the creatures. Adults need to understand the essentialness of the artistic process and the essentialness of the creative acts in and of our children. Then we will constantly validate childrens’ imaginations and feelings.

Thank you, and goodbye. Take care of yourselves. Take care of the children in your lives. Take care of the children that still live inside of you. They are waiting for you to come back to them.

And remember to celebrate your genius. Three poems a day and three stories a day for the rest of your beautiful life.

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