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# I Still Wonder at How Unaware I Was of So Many Frequencies . . .

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(2000)

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Windows have been opening for many of us. There have been sounds we never heard, images we never saw. There has been a program of contemporary music played by an amazing pianist, Nurit Tilles. She played a sonata by Samuel Barber and part of one by Charles Ives. Both were American, both became known to the public (to some degree) at mid-century. Both experimented with dissonance, with the rhythms of jazz, with tonalities still unfamiliar to many of us. Barber enclosed the extremely modern in a classical frame; Ives made folk songs, hymns, and marching tunes part of his startling harmonizations. To attend to their music even today is to find ourselves pushing back the boundaries of what we have thought of as beautiful music. I still wonder at how unaware I was of so many frequencies; and I wonder how many remain unheard. Encouraged, challenged by our teaching artists, asked to explore for ourselves the modalities of sound, many of us have found entries into this “new” music. We have had what we now think of as aesthetic experiences we might never have had without the kind of listening made possible by our teaching artists, without the exercises we accomplished together, without the unfamiliar perceptions of structure and form. Not only did our musical experience expand and deepen; the sounding world around mysteriously changed.

We were fortunate enough, as a growing community, to be present at a workshop performance of a brief version of Mozart’s *Così fan tutte*, called in its adaptation *Così Cosa*. The wonder of it came in part from the way, from the first moments, it tapped our imagination and drew us into an “as-if” world brought into existence on the bare floor of a studio room. Made

conscious of the performance as one still in the making, we became vicariously participant as members of a small audience, each with memories of Mozart and, perhaps, that great comic opera. Some of us felt the relation between *our* Mozart and modern composers like Barber and Ives, all three perceived anew. And there were the feelings aroused by the singers, the actors: their young voices, their gestures, their facial expressions. And there was the tantalizing thought of its becoming, of what the scenes that followed would be like, what was still to come and was not quite yet devised. Openings again, a sense of the unpredictable, of the incomplete—and of our own agency in helping to bring the work of art alive.

As you can guess, I am trying to convey what we mean when we speak of aesthetic education and when we say, as John Dewey did, that the opposite of aesthetic is anaesthetic. The simplest explanation is that it is a mode of nurturing an increasingly informed attentiveness to a diversity of art forms. We often make the point that the more we know, the more we see and hear. And we realize that our seeing and hearing are often enhanced by whatever explorations we have done in the media of the different arts—how we have sought our own symbols, our own images, even our own melodies; how we have tried to make imprints upon the world.

You are familiar with the importance of encouraging encounters with subject matter (including the arts) that involve a sense of agency, of achieving dimensions of that subject matter as meaningful, not uncovering some hidden meaning others have predefined. We know as well the range of understandings that are necessary in the ongoing effort to *create* meanings, efforts going beyond the cognitive, to include intuition, imagination, feeling, perception—all the acts of consciousness, perhaps especially where the arts are concerned. This becomes particularly clear when we become engaged with works of literature, considered as an art form. Some of us, reading *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison this summer, made conscious efforts to find out what it signified, to approach it in the light of gender, color, class, the intersections in which we were located in the world. Each of us made the text an object of our experience, grasping the language, the figures of speech, the images in such a way that new perspectives kept opening on the events and characters being revealed. As in the case of other works of art, the text (like a dance performance, or a play) exists at what is called the “artistic” pole. Created by an artist, we can assume, it presents itself to be felt, interpreted, resonated to, on a number of levels understood. The perceiver or the listener exists at what is called the “aesthetic” pole, at which a consciousness reaches out to grasp the work, to lend it (if you will) the perceiver’s or the listener’s or the reader’s life. In the space

artistic pole      people      aesthetic pole

that opens between the two poles, Pecola (let us say) is brought to life, certainly from the narrator's perspective, but a perspective affected by the reader's lived life, memories, injuries, moments of pleasure—or desire, or delight. What happens in that space is always distinctive, an event like and unlike the event of others' reading.

Aesthetic education focuses on that space and what may happen there as a work of art is realized or fulfilled by a human being, present as "who, not what" he or she is, to quote Hannah Arendt (1958, p. 182). And the questions must multiply and not be covered over by the answers. A reader who has at any time sought to construct a narrative or write a poem is more likely to attend to the work of literary art with a different quality of interest, even of empathy. Like the experiences in our workshops here of shaping kinetic patterns in space and time with our own bodies, or trying to render in water color our perception of sky outside or a neighbor's profile, we may relate our sense of what it is to shape or construct or to give form to raw material to our experience with dance performances or paintings—or whatever is encountered as a work of art. If we do so, the mystery may deepen, but we may come closer to what we think of as an aesthetic moment.

We are forever hoping that the feelings, indeed the passions so often palpable here can be kept alive as the reflective and (I trust) ardent teacher works to involve her own students (with due allowance for age, level of development, life experience) with works of art. Her capacity to do so, I am convinced, depends in large measure on her capacity to keep her wonder and sense of mystery alive and the questions open. It is in connection with this that I think of a poem by Mary Oliver my poet-friend Madeleine Holzer shared with me. It is called "The Swan." The poet writes first about the delicate white swan floating near, turning its dark eyes and trailing its webbed foot, rearranging "the cloud of its wings." Then the questions, perhaps the necessary questions arise:

*Oh, what shall I do  
when that poppy-colored beak  
rests in my hand?  
Said Mrs. Blake of the poet:*

*I miss my husband's company—  
he is so often  
in paradise.  
Of course! the path to heaven*

*doesn't lie down in flat miles.  
It's in the imagination  
with which you perceive  
this world,*

*and the gestures  
with which you honor it.  
Oh, what will I do, what will I say, when those white wings  
touch the shore?*

(1999, pp. 27–28)

Read it as you will, as you choose. You cannot (I cannot) subdue the questions that touch upon the aesthetic experience and the risks it makes us run.

That makes me think of the energizing character of dance, even in the face of emotional risk, often the risk of experiencing something new, for which we do not feel prepared. Some of us know the bond that can develop between perceiver and audience, the muscular sympathy and emotional empathy, the ways in which visual and imaginative activity combines with bodily perception to provide a kind of unity of being. A signal experience that marked the summer for some of us was the experience we had with a dancer who transmuted poetry into movement, most movingly Elizabeth Bishop's poem, "One Art." She spoke it aloud as she danced; and it is difficult to communicate the effect it had on those who were participants and spectators at once, feeling the universe expand, feeling the symbol become fused with the world. I will read it because it is brief and somehow necessary to read, and it is up to you to imagine, if you can, the movement, the shimmering moments. And (yes, again) the mystery.

*The art of losing isn't hard to master;  
so many things seem filled with the intent  
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.*

*Lose something every day. Accept the fluster  
of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.  
The art of losing isn't hard to master.*

*Then practice losing further, losing faster:  
places and names, and where it was you meant  
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.*

*I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or  
next-to-last, of three loved houses went.  
The art of losing isn't hard to master.*

*I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,  
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.  
I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.*

*—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture  
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident  
the art of losing's not too hard to master  
though it may look like (Write it!) a disaster.*

(1997, p. 173)

For most of those present, I believe, the dancer (Susan Thomasson) made possible a complex and memorable emotional experience, one that highlights for me important aspects of the aesthetic experience. There is the origin in the concrete and the ordinary (keys, wasted time), the transition to abstract places, lost opportunities—none of it truly painful. The odd calm in losing a mother's watch and then the houses, an expansion now to a continent, perhaps to the cosmos itself. But what is beyond disaster is the loss of the particular person, the desperately induplicable. Perhaps the only way of mastering the loss is to write about it—a poem, conceivably, a savage scrawl. Who can know? Who can guess? What part can be played by the arts?

What can be pointed out is the number of modalities that come into play when engaging actively and authentically with a work of art—be it a Vermeer painting, a Bach cantata, a Shakespeare (or a David Mamet) play, a Twyla Tharp dance. Imagination, cognition, intuition, emotion: all interweave, highlighting one another. Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962/1967), speaks of a “network of relationships” (p. xx), says in fact, “We are network of relationships.” And, in another place, he says we are “condemned to meaning” (p. xix). It seems to me that encounters with the arts, because of the interrelating of capacities, the play of human powers, lead to the kinds of insight and awareness unlikely in other contacts with the objects and living beings in the world. When we connect such insights with the kinds of communities that form when people come together with their unanswered questions and their sense of mystery, the diversity of perspectives about what is shared makes possible a unique dialogue.

In a chapter called “The Search for the Great Community” in *The Public and Its Problems*, John Dewey had much to say about the potency of the

arts. He spoke about people's conscious life of opinion and judgment often proceeding on a superficial and trivial plane.

But their lives reach a deeper level. The function of art has always been to break through the crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness. Common things, a flower, a gleam of moonlight, the song of a bird, not things rare and remote, are means with which the deeper levels of life are touched so that they spring up as desire and thought. This process is art. Poetry, the drama, the novel, are proofs that the problem of presentation is not insoluble. Artists have always been the real purveyors of news, for it is not the outward happening in itself which is new, but the kindling by it of emotion, perception, and appreciation. (1988, pp. 183–184)

When we ponder our experiences here as audiences and as participants in workshops, we cannot but recognize what Dewey meant by saying that our lives “reach a deeper level” when touched by the arts. And we would add, especially when we know enough to be reflective in our engagement with them, critically conscious of what is happening in our encounters, eager to break through that crust Dewey described.

The so-called partnerships may lay a groundwork for a community attentive to the deeper level, so long as they are conceived in interpersonal and not simply inter-institutional terms. Much remains to be done if we are indeed to find a language of community, perhaps a common language stemming from dialogues that had their origin in spaces some of us have opened and may continue to open in the corridors and studios and even the classrooms of our schools. In her poem, “Transcendental Etude,” Adrienne Rich writes, in part:

*But there come times—perhaps this is one of them—  
when we have to take ourselves more seriously or die;  
when we have to pull back from the incantations,  
rhythms we've moved to thoughtlessly,  
and disentrail ourselves, bestow  
ourselves to silence, or a severer listening, cleansed  
of oratory, formulas, choruses, laments, static  
crowding the wires.*

(1978, pp. 74–75)

She appears to be charging people like us, as Dewey did in his way, to break with pious talk, bureaucratic talk, media talk, technician talk and with, again, “the crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness” (1988, p. 183).

I find myself reaching back once more to Elizabeth Bishop's words; and then I recall the virtuosity of the storyteller and the part he plays in breaking through that crust—if only by giving up the linearity of a single voice, a single direction in a children's story. And there was Ronald K. Brown's "March," his duet enabling us to hear the words of Martin Luther King afresh through their being put into motion by dancers. Not all touch the "deeper levels" in the same fashion, but because they break with the customary and the overly familiar, they move us to reflect upon the way we apprehend them. They may move us to trace the networks in our experience, the web of relationships that free us to construct new meanings, to shape new visions of what is and what might be.

We are teachers after all; and many of us are eager to communicate some of the passion we feel about openings, about possibilities. We want our desires to be contagious, like our excitement about the several arts. We want to celebrate the sense of agency, every young person's right to go in search of her/his own voice, and own vision, even while recognizing the connection between freedom and discipline that makes the arts what they are. And if indeed the arts are the "chief purveyors of the news," I hope that what they purvey gives rise to a dialogue that has to do with decency, compassion, and concern. I quoted Sartre a while ago writing that "at the heart of the aesthetic imperative we discern the moral imperative" because "the work of art, from whichever side you approach it" (1949, pp. 62–63) is an act of confidence in the freedom of human beings. We feel that freedom here—to interpret, to reflect, and (now and then) change our lives.

I trust as well that such freedom can become an act of confidence in human connection. "Only connect," it resounds. And then there is Edward Said writing about traditions and continuities and telling us that "survival is about the connection between things; in Eliot's phrase, reality cannot be deprived of the 'other echoes [that] inhabit the garden'" (1993, p. 336). For Said, and I think many of us, it is more rewarding to think concretely and sympathetically about others than only about "us." But this also means not trying to rule others, not trying to classify them or put them in hierarchies or to silence them. And—I want to add—to prevent them from coming in touch with that deeper level so many of us have touched through our encounters with the arts. There is so much to do, so much to imagine, so much that is not yet. Remember that Emily Dickinson quote once more: "The Possible's slow fuse is lit / By the Imagination." A slow fuse, indeed. The questions remain open. The work remains incomplete. But what work it can be!

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## PART V

# SPREADING THE WORD

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The opportunity to speak at an occasion sponsored by the New York State Board of Regents was particularly significant, not only for me, but for the Institute. We are, and have been, eager to see ourselves as full members of the educational community, as well as the arts community. It was especially meaningful because the Regents were giving awards that evening in dance, literature, music, and drama—with an emphasis on "the creative spirit."

No matter what the year, a connection with the Regents, so distinctively representative of those concerned with teaching and learning, would be memorable. To find ourselves playing a part in the celebration of the best, most humane, most imaginative of human capacities in this context could not but give us hope for the young people of New York and for art in their lives.