

## WHAT I LEARNED IN SCHOOL

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Speech delivered to the Presidents Club, University of Iowa

May 9, 2009 in Coralville, Iowa

I am a product of the University of Iowa. For what now comes out of my mouth, you must partly blame the university, for it was here that I was taught, here that certain ideas were planted in my head. For what you are about to receive, may the lord make you truly tolerant.

John Adams is said to have said: "I must study politics and war so that my sons may study science and engineering so that *their* sons may study art and poetry." I am normally an admirer of John Adams but here I must disagree. The sort of third generation he describes, strikes me as pretty flaccid. The blood must have run very thin by the time we get around to art and poetry, which seems to anticipate a sort of Utopian, lolling about on clouds while rhyming couplets. Heaven without the wings.

But I attended the university of Iowa and I learned that art isn't separate from engineering or politics; it is integral to them as it is to all society. Sir Kenneth Clark observed that a civilization keeps a record of itself in three books – the book of its deeds, the book of its words and the book of its art. All three books are written and must be revised concurrently. Civilization consists of the cross fertilization of the contents of these books.

These reflections on the nature and status of art are prompted by a sinister trend I have lately observed in our culture. That trend is called stupidity. That trend views music, literature and the arts as some kind of frivolous self-indulgent, add-ons, as if they were extraneous and not fundamental to any society.

To dispense with art or poetry, to dispense with Beethoven or Shakespeare or Cezanne or John Huston, is ultimately to dispense with ourselves, certainly the best of ourselves and to forget about what it means to be human beings. Take away art and music and all we have left is plumbing. This I learned at the University of Iowa. I learned it in the Writers Workshop, where they teach writing and also reading. I learned it in the theatre department, where we put on King Lear, a play as capable of changing your life as a bolt of lightning; I learned it in our now abandoned art museum where I looked at paintings that opened my eyes to life and convinced me that a world with such things in it was a world worth living in – and contributing to.

It is no excuse to say that because money is tight that the arts must therefore be the first thing that gets thrown overboard. The arts should be the *last* thing we dispense with. At Iowa, I learned what Nietzsche said: "Without music, life would be insane." Are we insane? Without art, what is the meaning of life? Why are we here? When the ship is sinking you don't lighten the load by throwing away your soul.

At Iowa I learned what Tolstoy said. Tolstoy said: To be or Not to Be, is NOT the question. We're HERE. For whatever reason, some agency has seen fit for us to be born. The question is: now what? Okay, we need to eat, we need to sleep, make love, procreate, earn money and so forth, but what is the end point, the object, of all this activity if it isn't merely just to keep us busy - until we die? What profiteth it a man if he gain the whole world but has never heard

Beethoven's 9<sup>th</sup> symphony? Or beheld Michelangelo's David? Or read Huckleberry Finn, the book that defines America. Or seen Mr. Smith Goes to Washington? You lose out on life.

Worse. You lose out on the *meaning* of life.

Someone suggested that when we're born they throw you off the top of the Empire State Building and sure as shooting, one of these days you will hit the pavement and go splat. The question is, not To Be or Not To be. The question is: what are you going to do on your way down? Will you spray paint Screw You as you pass the sixty-third floor, or will you write a symphony or discover the Van Allen radiation belt? Leave some useful trace of yourself behind? Almost twenty thousand years ago our ancestors, painting on the walls of caves in the French Dordogne, understood that civilization required art to complete it. What're we by comparison, dummies?

Tolstoy said that the purpose of art is to teach us to love life and that to love life is to love God. I am not sure about exactly *what* the purpose of art is, but I very sure what life is like without art, which is to say without beautiful things to look at, to listen to, to contemplate, to stimulate, disturb and inspire us.

Without art everyone just winds up going about their business, performing a series of repetitive activities with no respite for exaltation - only sports, sex and sleep. And while some may argue that such emotion and such respite as I speak of is provided by religion, I would have to ask, where would religion be without art to buttress its tenets? We know the theory that religion inspires art but how about the reverse? How much of the Bible's impact is attributable to the poetry of Genesis, the soaring cadences set down by those translators of the good book into what we know as the King James' version? What are churches with their stained glass and steeples, temples with their altars and triptychs but versions of art in action? What is religion - ANY religion - without Bach's B Minor Mass? Art helps us give shape to our feelings - and not just any feelings. Our finest feelings. Art goads us to feel but also to think. Art is where ideas are born. Art is the great glamorizer of thought.

Art is soul food. Man does not live by bread alone. It wouldn't astonish me to learn the man who said that was a baker. During the height of the civil rights movement and after 9/11, what did people do? They SANG. We sang America the Beautiful; we sang We Shall Overcome. In the Nazi concentration camps, where people waited to be exterminated, they created art; they produced orchestras, they composed music. In the face of death, they defied mortality by insisting on art.

But now we live in a time when we are told that there is no time for art, no money for art and certainly no place for the study of art, of literature, of what we like to group under the convenient umbrella term, "the humanities". Have you ever noticed? It's awfully easy to dismiss something when you can label it.

Oh, yeah, this guy came and gave a speech about saving the humanities. Blah Blah.

But it's not saving the humanities that I'm talking about. It's about saving the *humans*. Saving ourselves. This is what I learned at the University of Iowa. Once you throw five thousand years of human achievement into the ash-can (and trust me on this, when you stop teaching this stuff, it IS going into the ash can), you are throwing away the noblest and most precious part of the species - you are throwing away *yourselves*. (In fifty years, if we are not determined, we might mistake The Lion King for HAMLET). It might be tempting to quote Santana at this point, to the effect that those who do not learn the lessons that history teaches are condemned to

repeat those lessons, but that puts a sort of profit-loss complexion on the matter. The gains I speak about derived from the preservation and study of art, are not quantifiable. I guess that too works against them. What do we get out of art? the Dean asks, when faced with his budget deficits. What is art good for? Can you bank it? Cash it in? Invest it?

Well, let me turn that question on its head: what do you lose *without* art? I promise you, in the long run, it is a lot more than money. If you think art is expensive, try living in a world where all walls are blank. If our universities and high schools and grade schools dispense with the exposure to and study of what is beautiful, whether it be pictures, words, movies or music, we cease to be universities and become merely vocational schools. Learn to fix what's under the hood and you're home free. But you are neither home nor are you free. This is what my university showed me. All education is good for is showing you how to earn a living?? Nonsense. Education must also show us *reasons* for living. Education must not merely enable us; it must inspire us. Without that inspiration, the acquisition of money becomes the mindless activity that we pursue, Day in and Day Out even as its repetition deadens us. If you don't believe me, check out Charlie Chaplin as the benumbed assembly line worker in MODERN TIMES, whose soul-destroying job is merely the endless repetition of tightening two bolts as they pass before him on a conveyor belt. Chaplin was an artist, showing us ourselves...

When I was invited to speak here today, the assignment was to tell you something about myself... and this I am endeavoring to do. I am trying to explain the enormous influence on my life that was exerted by my four years as an undergraduate at the University of Iowa. I could simply have paraphrased my resume and we would all of gathered that I have been fortunate enough as *an artist* to have a reasonably successful career in books, in films and in television, but I believe that such a superficial account might be redundant – (you could always Google my credits without leaving home) – but more significantly, it might not reveal as much about me and the effects of my schooling in Iowa City as I would like to convey.

The real purpose of an education is not merely vocational training but to expose young people to the possibilities life has on offer. We do ourselves and more dangerously, our progeny, a disservice if we short-change them regarding human achievements, denying them access to sources of inspiration, philosophical inquiry, outrage and also joy.

It could be argued that the greatest human invention in all history is the symphony orchestra. A gigantic, hand-tooled machine for doing nothing – except making people happy. It has no other purpose. You can't conquer territory with it; God knows, you can't make money with it; you can't use it to proselytize; music devoid of words has absolutely no intellectual content. It is merely sound – and the sound is produced by people who are just like us. The orchestra is an idealized metaphor for community, a team with no goalposts. As individuals, they may be men, women, white, black, Asian; they may be alcoholics or wife beaters, kleptomaniacs or fascists... but put them all together playing Dvorak's New World Symphony and for 60 minutes they transcend themselves and add up to something infinitely greater than the sum of their flawed, mortal parts. It would be dangerous folly to abandon the orchestra and to never let our young people know that such a miraculous thing exists or what it can do for the heart. (Incidentally, you might remember that Dvorak spent a fair amount of time in Iowa).

Here, at the University of Iowa student union, I was introduced to the Verdi Requiem in a performance that, to my way of feeling, (like that of King Lear beside the river), has never been surpassed.

Like many of you, I listened with attention and admiration to President Obama's address to Congress last February. Speaking of our present innumerable difficulties, he said: "None of

this will come without cost, nor will it be easy. But this is America. We don't do what's easy. We do what's necessary to move this country forward.”

And, while we're on the subject, let me remind you of something else: *“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these number life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”* That's not just policy; that's poetry. That's art - and don't you forget it.

I submit that in order to move this country forward it is essential that we know and care for the role that the arts play in our society. That we don't just grudgingly tolerate the arts; that we treasure them, the way we treasure our identities and our self-respect. It isn't just about sports or science or law. Art is the nation's handwriting. The book of a civilization's art keep must keep abreast of that civilization – for art, indeed, is the conscience of civilization.

So, hard as it may be, let's open those checkbooks – and open your hearts. This is about saving ourselves.

On behalf of the University of Iowa, whose proud son I am, I thank you.

