

## **Pleasure, Beauty, and Wonder: The Role of the Arts in Liberal Education**

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This essay is a slightly edited transcript of his extemporaneous remarks.*

Our nation's capital draws tens of thousands of tourists each year, and most spend considerable time on Pennsylvania Avenue. They see some amazing structures there, but how many see more than the obvious? That street not only displays beautiful buildings, but it also presents our nation's intellectual heritage reflected in the architectural styles.

At one end of Pennsylvania Avenue sits the U.S. Capitol, a building of Roman architecture. It reminds us of our country's roots in the Roman Republic and Athenian Democracy. Turn around, and there stands a huge Egyptian obelisk dedicated to one of the first leaders in human history who voluntarily resigned his power at its very height—George Washington. He was a new world leader who followed in the footsteps of his hero, the Roman Cincinnatus, and returned to civilian life because he knew it was more important to preserve freedom than to preserve his particular vision of freedom. Turn a bit more, peer through the trees, and there's the White House, a Georgian mansion, a reminder of our debt to England, to Common Law and individual freedom.

From a single street corner outside this hotel in Washington, we can observe the legacy of Athens, Rome, Egypt, and England. We can see that America is part of an enormous human enterprise. That is, we can see this legacy, if our education allows it. If not, then all we see are famous buildings. Likewise the ability of our children and grandchildren fully to appreciate American society, and fully to engage in it, depends on education.

Today there are two closely related visions of American education in practice. One aims to produce children who pass standardized testing at each level. The other is one that produces entry-level workers for a consumer society. Both targets might be interesting as tactics, but neither are inspiring objectives for education.

These are very small aims—far too small to guide and inspire an adequate educational system. Let me offer an alternative vision. The purpose of education in the United States should be to create productive citizens for a free society.

Those words and ideas are worth examining. The first term is “productive.” We are now in the twenty-first century. The twentieth century was the American century during which the U.S. was preeminent in terms of productivity, innovation, wealth, and power. The world is a much more complicated place today. The United States is not going to compete with the rest of the world in terms of cheap labor or cheap raw materials. If we are going to compete productively with the rest of the world, it's going to be in terms of creativity and innovation. America has always had a capacity for hard work and stamina, but those qualities of creativity and ingenuity are not being nurtured and fostered by our current educational system.

The next concept is “citizenship,” which is the mutual vision of society that we share as citizens. The decay of that civic principle, that vision of citizenship, within the past half-century is astonishing. We must realize that our schooling system, be it public or private, is the basis of citizenship. Education is universal and mandatory in our society. Schools remain the most important public spaces that we share as citizens, and education creates a foundation of our common lives. Wherever else we go later in life, this is the one time where we are all together.

It seems to me that the most important thing we can do for our children during those shared years is to give this next generation of Americans a sense of the possibilities of their own life. There is no way we can train people to be productive citizens in a complex, free society if all we do is prepare them to pass standardized tests. I'm not an enemy of these tests, because if people can't read, if they can't add and subtract, they can't do much else. But literacy and mathematics are only the foundation of a building. We need to add the walls and the upper stories. One of the best ways to accomplish this task is through teaching the liberal arts, and in particular, the fine arts.

The purpose of arts education is not—as many people assume, including many academics—to create professional artists. This is a narrow view. We do not study poetry to become poets. Nor do we study music to become musicians, or theater to become actors. That sometimes happens, but it is a by-product of arts education and not its main goal. The real purpose of arts education is to awaken us to the full potential of our humanity both as individuals and citizens in society.

My own childhood is an example of the power of the arts to transform a life. It was a very typical American childhood, which is to say I was raised in a family

where most people were not native speakers of English. My father was Sicilian. My mother was Mexican. I was raised in a working-class Mexican neighborhood by Castellammarese-speaking Sicilians. I had the considerable advantage not only of speaking a dialect that most Italians can't even understand at home, but also of being raised in the Catholic Church when Latin was still used as a ritual language.

I had what Vladimir Nabokov called a “perfectly normal trilingual childhood.” Indeed, it's quite typical of Americans. There is the ritual language—be it Hebrew, Latin, or Greek. There is the language of the old world—be it Castellammarese, Yiddish, Modern Greek, Spanish, or what-have-you. And then there is the new language being learned, which is the language of the common world—English.

I was also raised by people who had gone through enormous hardships and privations in their lives, and only with enormous difficulty had brought themselves to America to a town in Los Angeles called Hawthorne, which—despite being named after a great American writer—was far from Nirvana. Quentin Tarantino's films *Pulp Fiction* or *Jackie Brown* capture the special charm of my birthplace, where an argument is more likely to be settled with a knife, or a gun, than with words.

As a child, I'd never met anyone who had gone to college. The highest aspiration in my neighborhood was to stay out of jail and get a union job—and not all of my relatives managed to achieve either of those goals. Everyone had a relative in jail, whether for something small or big. Many people in my neighborhood had failed to finish high school. The reason that I am where I am today is not because of Harvard or Stanford. It is because of poetry, music, and art.

From my earliest age, I would hear my mother—apropos of nothing, except some inner wave of emotion that she could not or dare not communicate directly—suddenly begin to recite:

It was many and many a year ago,  
In the kingdom by the sea,  
That a maiden there lived whom you may know  
By the name of Annabel Lee;  
And this maiden she lived with no other thought  
Than to love and be loved by me.

I was a child and she was a child,  
In the kingdom by the sea,  
And we loved with a love that was more than love,  
I and my Annabel Lee;  
A love that the winged seraphs of heaven coveted her and me. . .

*(From "Annabel Lee" by Edgar Allan Poe)*

These moments of poetry gave me a sense of something beyond the treeless cement city of apartments and parking lots where I was raised.

Likewise we had a large, mostly unvisited depository library in Hawthorne. Political graft sometimes, inadvertently, does wonderful things—such as building this library. I'm not sure how much local officials got on the take, but it must have been considerable. Still, the officials made sure that there were thousands and thousands of books. And so, just four blocks from my house, I had an enormous library where I went every afternoon when school finished. (Both my parents worried.) I pursued my interests in those stacks and in the process discovered my adult self.

Then there was music. A wonderful nun, Sister Camille Cecile, taught me the piano in second grade. She was of that ancient order who believed piano lessons and corporal punishment were inseparable. God bless her. Sometimes it takes a little baton on the knuckles to get the attention of a 9-year-old boy who doesn't care about piano. But somehow, by the age of 10 or 11, I was playing pieces by Bartok and Mozart. Studying music opened up another vision. Suddenly, as a young boy, I was guided by three of the most dependable teachers in the world—pleasure, beauty, and wonder.

I found all three qualities in painting. At the library I began systematically to read through the books on Italian Renaissance art. It helped me to know that there was something beyond my neighborhood, something beyond the very modest practical goals of my neighbors. I became the first person in my family to go to college. I went to Stanford. And then I eventually discovered what I wanted to be, a poet.

If the arts are to have the opportunity to affect our children as they did me, they must be presented to children in at least one of two places: early education, where kids are just getting some sense of what the world is; and—probably most crucially—at puberty, when a child is coming into his or her own individuality and separating himself or herself from the family. Children at this age will define themselves either in positive or in negative ways. An example of a negative means of self-

definition, common for working-class kids, is gangs. Kids join a gang because it gives them a social and individual identity that gets them through the day.

Take a 15-year-old who is awkward, who does not feel that she fits into any social class in school. This teenager is probably not terribly interested in her schoolwork. Moreover, she feels cut off from her family. But then she auditions for a play. She discovers that there is a group of other kids just like her—alienated youth that feel that they don't belong. These “outsiders” are called theater people, creative people. Once in such a group, that 15-year-old realizes that she isn't abnormal. She is recognized for her acting, she gets applause for doing something that is very closely aligned with these inchoate, inarticulate desires of selfhood, of the self-articulation inside of her.

My high school had the best band in Southern California. Most of the first-chair musicians in our band were unruly or rebellious kids. Had they not learned trumpet or drums at an early age, who knows what destructive force they may have unleashed on society? The band gave these kids a way of socializing, a way of directing their energy and everything else that was positive.

The same thing applies to school newspapers, drama clubs, choruses, and other arts groups. When you cut these activities out of school, which the local school boards and state school boards have systematically done in the United States over the past 30 years, you shut the doors of self-realization to a generation of Americans. Those doors once invited students to discover what they are actually good at. They provided positive means of socialization instead of negative forms of self-socialization (or no socialization). They developed and refined young people's productive skills. So the benefits were not only individual or social, but also economic.

Incorporating the arts into other subjects can enliven the classroom. Pleasure, beauty, and wonder are not out of place in history class. These qualities are not decorative to learning; they are essential. But they are so often forgotten, even in English classes. No wonder kids don't read for pleasure. Pleasure has been so rarely part of their education in reading. The books assigned at every level of education are boring and pedantic. To fix this, we need to recognize the importance of these subjects, the power that they unleash, and how easily they can be incorporated across the curriculum.

Another example from my own experiences illustrates the point. I was invited to teach a graduate poetry class at Sarah Lawrence, which often has the distinction of being the most expensive school in the United States. I asked my students to memorize and recite poems every week. They were shocked. Most of them had never memorized a poem in their entire lives.

They complained, but I wouldn't budge, so the memorization and recitations began. I had one student—a truly terrific student—to whom I had given Shakespeare's sonnets. She would always recite her poem in such a dull, monotone voice that I realized she had memorized it on the wrong side of her brain. She had memorized the poem in the visual half versus the auditory half. She had a whole hemisphere of her brain that she didn't know how to use as a writer. As it turned out, most of my students were initially awkward in similar ways. When reciting, they sounded like a talking mechanical alarm clock that my mother-in-law once gave me.

But there was another student, generally my worst student, who recited poetry beautifully and expressively. After hearing her delivery, the whole dynamic of the class changed. Everyone understood that, even though this student wasn't good in analytical work, she had real talent. She earned their esteem. After that day, she began to participate in class because I'd given her a chance to show what she was good at.

I would like to see an American education system that uses the power of the arts to open doors that allow kids develop their own talents. I would like to see a system that uses the arts to take the class clown and, at least for one or two moments a day, lets him become the class star. The arts are one of the ways that we can do this. We need a system that grounds all students in pleasure, beauty, and wonder. It is the best way to create citizens who are awakened not only to their own humanity but also to many possibilities of the human world they are about to enter.