

3-11-11 Celebrating the Value of the Arts

Hear ye! Hear ye! His Excellency Governor Deval Patrick has proclaimed March to be Art Education Month! Our House of Representatives has resolved to celebrate this resolution by publicizing the importance of arts education in developing critical skills for the twenty first century. Among their many “whereas-es” in the proclamation, we are reminded that teaching the arts has been recognized as essential to a basic education and has been designated as 1 of 6 core subjects in the Federal *No Child Left Behind* Bill and the *Massachusetts Education Reform Act* of 1993.

Now, whether Education Reform and its inclusion of the arts is a core subject or a sore subject for you, I’d like you to put politics and money concerns aside for a few minutes. It is a worthwhile mental exercise to, every once in awhile, separate goals from the means to those desired ends. It’s part of both the scientific method of thinking and the creative way of thinking. Instead of getting bogged down in ways and means, just brainstorm and see what happens. For instance, start making a list of what you want for your children. I bet “happiness” is high on the list, along with other goals such as “success”. In fact, think about how often have parents list “just to be happy” as their only important wish.

Now, ask yourself to think about what has brought the most happiness to your children. Think about all different kinds of happiness. There’s the happiness of doing well on a school exam, certainly. That happiness is important for confidence and for acquisition of knowledge. It is accompanied by a sense of relief, also, following the stress of studying and uncertainty. There’s the happiness experienced when gifts are received. Usually that happiness is short lived and quite often more important to the giver. The gift giver is happy and relieved with the well-received choice.

As we allow our minds to wander, thinking about all these kinds of “happiness experiences”, we list the great moments such as the birth of a child or the good news of a successful health treatment or the safe return of the soldier, and we also find ourselves smiling, thinking back about the lesser known times when there was discovery and satisfaction, even if no one else was aware of it. I am reminded of a story someone told me last fall when I was picking up chestnuts off the ground to bring home as a fall decoration and to show my grandchildren. Some of the chestnuts had already sprouted, beginning their long journey to becoming a mighty tree. A man told me that only recently his grandson had noticed an acorn with the sprout peeking out of the shell and the boy’s face lit up with the understanding of how it works. The sprout with the leaf points upward to become a tree and the sprout turning downward, worms its way into the earth to become the root. Grandfather and grandson felt a satisfaction that money could not buy but did depend on taking the time to notice and enjoy and notice and think.

Looking, thinking and making discoveries are at the heart of the Docent Art Program, an art appreciation program enjoyed by the Dennett Elementary School and Halifax Elementary School for 25 years now. For seven months out of the school year, parents visit the classrooms to guide discussions of three large, mounted fine art reproductions. It is an interdisciplinary program where children are reminded of their right to expressions of feelings and opinions. And since everyone is expressing opinions, the program also gives the children the opportunity to develop tolerance, empathy, listening skills and critical thinking. Those skills prepare the students for their annual MCAS tests, not only on visual literacy, but also and especially, for their “open response” questions requiring them to support their answers “with relevant and specific information from the” source quoted. This is a core practice of the docent art program.

For all these twenty five years, I have had the pleasure of creating and directing this program and I have witnessed the children making discoveries so brilliant that, at times, I shared them with authors and artists. There was the time I was showing the fifth grade examples of cave art and we were all wondering what the symbols meant, around the yellow horse. Were they spears? Were they stalks of grain? The light bulb went on for one boy and he discovered, on his own, the concept of agriculture possibly having its origins in following animals, watching what they ate and watching what sprouted from the manure.

I loved the boy's discovery so much that I sent the story to Douglas Mazonowicz, the individual responsible for re-creating life-size reproductions of cave art before they were ruined by the moisture and bacteria brought by tourists entering the caves. Mr. Mazonowicz told me to he had learned to never underestimate a child and added, "No true artist ever leaves a mark without trying to communicate something. So do not simply look at the paintings, observe them, too. No matter who you are or what you do, it matters little. Your personal theories and opinions are of value."

Expressing opinions and at least respecting, if not valuing, those of others are at the core of survival in an argumentative, divisive world. Works of art in all forms: dance, music, theater, literary arts and visual arts, all speak a universal language, and that language brings us closer to a world of understanding.

Getting back to money matters; It's like asking yourself to consider what you would do if you had all the money in the world. All of a sudden, you realize that money does not solve all the problems and if something such as love, trust or friendship was on your wish list, well, there they still are, goals requiring your own creative efforts, sitting right there next to the sacks of gold.

Let's celebrate arts education this month by following the format of our forefather's proclamations. Those proclamations start out with "Whereas". They lead to and conclude with "therefore, be it Resolved".

Let us be resolved to listen and learn by celebrating the arts. Let us be resolved to think of countries and cultures where self-expression is denied, where you will see ruthless oppression, mindless following and an oppressed people constantly considering the risk of revolt. We don't want to be there. Celebrate the arts.

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