



THE *Arts,*
Education, and
Social Change
Little Signs of Hope

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INTRODUCTION

Mary Clare Powell
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Yes, they are little signs, but they are still signs of hope—that precious commodity. Hope seems a little wimpy compared to something sturdy like faith or love, yet hope is there at the bottom when it looks as if wars will never end and as if oppression will always be our human condition. Hope grows and always grows up. Why little signs? Because the work of the people in this book is local, where the real work gets done. Because in the great scheme of things, perhaps these results don't show up, at least not yet. But the artist-educators in this book are all over the globe, where, in many separate countries, they are convinced that their work is important.

Stories

Here you will read stories about 8th grade girls in Newton, Massachusetts, using dance to undermine racism and Bedouin women living in tents in Israel who use drawing to empower themselves. There are stories of Saudi-Arabian students teaching their teachers about the possible misuse of the arts, and immigrants in Vancouver producing plays with a Chilean director to confront the pain of severance and transplantation. Ghanaian village women use theater to become equal partners in the transformation of their village life, and an arts center in North Carolina rebuilds itself by really reaching out to its roots in the community. We have women in a prison in New York State and women imprisoned by poverty and homelessness in urban Boston who are finding ways out through the arts.

Children in Thailand and kids in Massachusetts use storytelling to learn about and value their cultures, to see from new vantage points. Dancers in a New Jersey university learn to really see each other; elementary teachers-to-be and kids on opposite coasts of the United States connect through the arts. South African children use drawing to be heard, to reconnect with themselves, to learn to speak, and find their voices. Adolescents use theater to explore theirs. One artist tells the lifelong story of involvement in social change, and another uses collage to help teachers-to-be “unhinge” linear frames of thinking and dominant ideologies and practice that often go unchallenged in the classroom. A Jewish professor reflects on her work with Israeli teachers in a time of war and comes to understand positionality in a new way. Conflicts are resolved using the arts.

Mary Clare Powell’s Story

All my adult life I have been telling stories like these about the power of the arts. One group in particular stands out in my memory—the low-income women of Chicopee, Massachusetts, who wrote their way out of poverty, who moved from breakdown to breakthrough, simply by beginning to write their stories. Led by Pat Schneider and myself, they came to believe they were writers; they began to explore their lives, write their lives, and heal their lives. As they wrote, they began to assume that they had something to say and the power to say it. Evelyn wrote about her Polish family, Teresa wrote dark pieces about drugs and sex and her son fishing in the river. Enid explored her childhood as a brown Puerto Rican girl in a white world. Maryann described how she made wallets all day at a factory and raised her granddaughter. Robin mourned her mother’s death with the group. These women, week by week, liberated themselves and each other; they mined diamonds in stories and poems; they generated freedom. They broke their own silence, risked telling the truth about their lives, turning into, not away from the pain, neglect, failures, severe limits, abuse, poverty, discrimination, fears, and dangers of their lives. Most of the original group of eight women went to college, some got master’s degrees, and they began to lead writing workshops for their neighbors and their neighbors’ kids to pass along the healing power of creating in the arts.

I learned an enormous amount from these women, but mostly I learned about the power of making words and making people. This experience forms the heart of my deep belief in the arts and education, which supports my belief in how social change can come about.

Vivien Marcow Speiser's Story

My story is a multicultural one. Born in South Africa, I was exposed from an early age to social injustice and inequality, and as an adult living in both Israel and the United States, I have witnessed the often-devastating results of such historical injustices. I have never given up hope that I can do something to impact the situation.

As an artist-educator, arts therapist, arts administrator, and performer, I have learned that the arts can create form from formlessness and from feeling. Suzanne Langer (1962) writes that, "There is an important part of reality that is quite inaccessible to the formative influence of language: that is the realm of so called inner experience, the life of feeling and emotion." The arts can be a way of expressing that which is otherwise inexpressible. Many of the authors in this book touch on unique ways of working with this inner reality within a social context.

The South African poet, Breyten Breytenbach (1980) speaks to the issue of creating form from formlessness when he writes:

To dance as one should
You must be blind and groping
With as your audience
(A Season in Paradise, p. 250)

I know from my own engagement with the creative process that something will emerge even from the bleakest darkness. I have made dances about the Holocaust, about war and about peace, about the most painful moments of the human experience. I have photographed the fires raging in Wyoming and Montana and lamented over these and other conflagrations. I have hoped even when all hope seems gone. I have curated art shows such as *After/Before: Artistic Encounters Following September 11th*, and arts events such as *Seeing Both Sides of the Israeli-Palestinian Context*.

Like many of the authors in this book, I believe the arts are a call to action, to education, and to empowerment. The arts, as Neale Donald Walsh says, "help us search again not only for the meaning of life but also the purpose of our individual and collective experience...for ways we might re-create ourselves anew as a human species, so that we may end at last the cycle of violence that has marred our history." (p. 17) I see the little offerings I make through my art forms and through my teaching as the manifestation of that hope. I see the contributions of the writers in this book as exemplars of that hope.

Artist-Educators

The contributors to this book offer to others what they themselves have experienced—the opportunity to create. They value authenticity more than perfection of execution, so they offer art making that heals. Teaching grows organically from their lives as artists, often impelled by a social or political vision. Often their work grows out of a community or out of their own experience of liberation. Suzi Gablick writes, “The capacity to move beyond the old art-and-life polarities is precisely...the starting point for new modes of relatedness, in which the paradigm of social conscience replaces that of the creative genius.” (1989, p. 76)

The teacher/artist couples her knowledge of people and groups and all the skills of working with them with the knowledge and experience of the arts—which they know have the power to transform. Lori Wynters, one of our contributors, describes her work with women in prisons as transformational, where “art making has the potential to open the heart, liberate the individual, social groups, social processes and even liberate societal institutions.”

We have educators acting in small and local ways, working with discrete groups of individuals. That’s the way artists always work—small. And they work in the faith that it matters how you work. How can poets stop a war by gathering on the street corners? We don’t know, but still we gather, in hope.

In this book, we see education in the truest sense—transformative education. *Educere* (from the Latin) means to draw forth, to evoke that which is within. And it is this process we see happening in the work of these artist-teachers. When you couple the process of evoking what is within with the creative process, which helps people find their words and images and believe in their power to put them out into the world, the result is social change—not always monumental, but real social change from the inside out.

In her work with children in a post-apartheid South Africa, Angela Rackstraw, whose chapter has given us our title for this volume, knows that even though there is little real chance that the living situations of the children she is working with will change, still there are “small bright moments” that engagement with the arts brings to them: “What we can offer the children is a space where they will be heard and listened to, a space where they will hopefully reconnect with themselves, learn to speak, and find their voices.”

Arts

The arts help people find what Tillie Olsen calls “the will, the measureless store of belief in oneself to be able to come to, cleave to, find the form for one’s own

life comprehensions.” (1965, p. 27) Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldua says she writes to discover herself, to preserve herself, to make herself, to achieve self-autonomy... “To convince myself that I am worthy....The act of writing is the act of making soul...alchemy. It is the quest for the self, for the center of the self.” (1981, p. 168–69)

In the minds of these teacher/artists, creativity is linked to wholeness, to the well being of persons. M.C. Richards writes, “Why does the human being long to work artistically? Why are the art programs in the public schools and communities so popular? Because there is a natural enthusiasm for creative activity built into our bodies. There is an essential connection between artistic activity and human nature...[The arts] are the ground of our intuitive understanding of ourselves and the world around us.” (1980, p. 94)

The arts, writes Maxine Greene, professor at Columbia University Teachers College, raise awareness and open clearings. “To move into those spaces or clearings requires a willingness to resist the forces that press people into passivity and bland acquiescence, a refusal of ‘normalization.’” (p. 27-28) “One of the functions of the arts is to subvert our thoughtlessness and complacencies, our certainties even about art itself.” (p. 33) This is how the arts enable true education ... “to feel oneself *en route*, to feel oneself in a place where there are always the possibilities of clearing, of new opening: this is what we hope to communicate to the young....” (p. 37)

Social Change

It happens as the people in this book do their creative work with others. Often they don’t really know much about the impact of their work, or its scope. They simply do it in hope. From time to time they see how limits are transcended, how the word gets out, how hope is generated far more broadly than they anticipated. They are doing nothing less than changing the world, one small group at a time. As Margaret Mead asked, what other way of changing the world is there?

This is social change one person at a time. Slow but lifelong and lasting. This social change is really about developing an inner sense of confidence—faith in what is potential in oneself. This is the same definition of creativity for Erich Fromm who writes that being original means that one experiences himself as the true center of his [or her] world and the true originator of his [or her] acts.” (1959, p. 63)

Maryat Lee, founder of Ecotheater in West Virginia, challenges us all, “What if people are endowed with extraordinary gifts, but all access to them is mis-educated out of them? What if it is now the calling of artists...to draw their fellows

into the dance instead of leaving them to sit stuffed on the sidelines in their endless misery with glassy admiring eyes? The sense of connectedness and equality with humankind which we all need, are deeply missing. It once was possible through artists..."(Letter, March 20, 1987)

And it still is. Beverly Naidus, in this book, says, "I remain optimistic that more of us will use the arts to provoke dialogue, empower the invisible and alienated, raise questions about things we take for granted, educate the uninformed, heal rifts in polarized communities and within individuals wounded by society's ills, and provide a vision for a future where people can live in greater harmony with each other and the natural world."

It is our hope, and not a little one, that you will be inspired by the work of the women and men described here, and that it will encourage you to find ways to pull those around you into the dance, helping them become participants, to see themselves as they truly are, to envision new possibilities for their lives, and to change their worlds. As Vivien and Phillip Speiser write, "The arts mobilize passion and will power in the service of our common survival."

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