

published in *Teaching Artist Journal*, summer 2006

Oh How We Sparkled: One Vision, Two Themes

by *Judith Tannenbaum*

One

When she was in the fourth grade, my daughter showed me a note she'd written to her teacher. Apparently Mr. Brooks had asked Sara if she was bored in school, she'd acknowledged that often she was, and he suggested she write a list of activities and approaches that she and other students might find more engaging. It was this list that Sara showed me. I looked it over, noting all her interesting ideas, then asked in surprise, "But, Sara. You don't have any art stuff on your list."

My little girl lifted and lowered her small shoulders, as though about to state the obvious. "I don't want them to ruin that, too!" she sighed.

Today as we in the field talk about art-integration – a good talk, a deeply exciting and necessary talk – I suggest that we don't lose sight of Sara's fourth grade observation.

- I mean, it's true, the phrase "creative expression" doesn't say much, and I too am glad
- * when in a class reading "Hamlet," a visiting musician asks students to improvise sounds based on Polonius's famous aside – "Though this be madness, yet there is method in 't;"
 - * or when youngsters in a class studying Pomo Indians along California's north coast learn native dances from an elder still living at the Rancheria;
 - * or when Coties Perry, my San Quentin student. watches from his prison cell what crack is doing to his community, demands, "We gotta *do* something," and then turns his demand into our poetry anthology *The Real Rap: A Message to the Youth*;
 - * or when a history class makes a group collage representing the year 1492;
 - * or when recent immigrant high schoolers, about to be tested on literature's vocabulary, write personification poems in the voice of their homelands.

Such projects are certainly rich and praiseworthy. Still, I want to argue that – as human beings and as artists – we speak up for nourishing the art-making instinct at its core, and not only for placing this gift in the service of other laudable goals.

For when we pick up a pen or sit down at the piano, we don't necessarily know where the impulse will take us. I can know my intention when beginning a poem, I can be skilled in my craft, but if I am true to the moment by moment nature of creation – if I follow the thread of an image or sound word by word, line by line – I can't know what shape the whole will take until it's right there before me. I can't even be sure whether the poem that began with the homeless man in a doorway will end up as a plea for insisting on human connection, an economic lesson, a political rant, a humorous glance at a grizzled old guy cuddling a ragged teddy bear, or as a lamentation against loss.

Once in a San Francisco high school I recited poems for an hour. Some poems were my poems, but most were written by South American and Central European writers who insisted on remaining human despite the heavy weight of oppression placed over their heads.

When I finished my recitation, the classroom teacher asked her students, “What do you think?”

One young man shook his head in disbelief. “It's going to take me twenty years to absorb what I just heard,” he responded. “Ask me then what I think.”

Yes. Thank you poets. Thank you nature-of-art. Thank you, young man, for your open-hearted and open-minded listening skills.

One doesn't have to extol the solipsism of “art for art's sake” to recognize that the process of creating requires surrender, trust, intuition. These qualities aren't inherently logical or efficient; they don't necessarily serve dominant social goals. Developing the skills of surrender may not prepare one for college; an ability to trust what's unseen probably doesn't belong on one's résumé. We don't know all we'll discover when Blake's doors of perception are cleansed.

A student's persona poem might speak in the voice of someone so disaffected he threatens to bring a gun to school; an elder's creation in clay might depict a vision almost too painful to behold. In today's world, a world that often prefers we continue to look through what Blake called the "narrow chinks of (our) cavern," what follows such discovery might well be a trip to the principal's office or a prescription for Prozac.

Although making art does encourage curiosity, critical thinking, and empathy – necessary tools in today's world – these very qualities may also demand that one speak truth to power or insist on beauty. Nourishing imagination may inspire one to declare along with Blake: *Everything that lives is holy*. Such a vision might make one less suited for production lines, prison cells, or political speech.

So how do we, as human beings and as artists, speak honestly about art? I'm glad that we talk about the connection between art-integration and academic progress, art's value in passing down community wisdom, and the transferable skills making art develops. But I hope we also remember to say that making art is a voyage into the unknown and therefore not a process inherently practical, politic, predictable or proper.

Two

I wish every public school, housing complex, senior citizen center, community council, and state prison offered a lush range of opportunities for making art. I wish our neighborhoods were full of murals and street theater. I wish teaching artists in 2006 remembered the work done through CETA in the '70s and the WPA in the '30s. I wish we saw the work we do as part of a field, and I wish stories from the field were passed down from one generation of teaching artists to the next.

I don't think, though, that institutionalization, certification, or quantification pave the path toward my desire.

In the 1980's, I taught poetry at San Quentin State Prison. In those years, San Quentin's arts program offered music classes, painting and drawing – both on mainline and to men on Death Row – poetry workshops, animation instruction, even classes in circus arts. In 1988, we mounted a production of “Waiting for Godot” for which Beckett himself had sent the director. Hundreds of people from the outside walked through the gates to sit in the prison's gym and hear Vladimir pronounce: “To all mankind they were addressed, those cries for help still ringing in our ears!” Bill Irwin was in the audience, as was F. Murray Abraham: both men about to begin rehearsal for their own Broadway production of “Godot.”

Oh how we sparkled! Inside California's most maximum security prison, Arts in Corrections provided fine art instruction for people in prison, jobs for practicing artists, and opportunities for the public to witness the work and the world of human beings living behind bars.

And then the pendulum – which had begun gently swaying – gathered momentum. The force of this swing catapulted California into an unprecedented prison boom. Our state went from twelve prisons holding about 45,000 people in 1985, to our current thirty-three prisons housing nearly 170,000 at last count.

As the pendulum lunged from “rehabilitation” to “lock ‘em up and throw away the key,” Arts in Corrections – for twenty years the world's largest prison arts program – wondered how it would survive. Should we quantify our results? Should we censor what might be offensive? Should talk about art in the language of prison?

At the moment, Arts in Corrections has been transformed to a workbook version of an arts program in which prisoners primarily work alone in their cells or dorm rooms. Still, when the pendulum begins its slow inch back toward a more humane approach to incarceration, AIC will still be on the books and won't have to be reinvented.

That's a good thing.

Especially as we seem to have a short memory, and fabulous work disappears almost over-night. In the early 1990's, for example, I was hired to do an arts feasibility study in Minnesota prisons. I talked to about twenty people in about ten prisons and arts organizations before I heard that there had been a full arts program in Minnesota prisons during the 1970's through CETA. Fifteen years, but hardly anyone remembered.

Similarly in the late 1980's, I talked to artists and prison staff all over the state of California in preparation for writing a manual for artists teaching in prison. I visited prison after prison and artist after artist, and I never once heard about the Santa Cruz Women's Prison Project – a project out of the University of California at Santa Cruz that, in the mid-70's, organized and coordinated a regular series of classes and artistic events at California's women's prison. No one I talked with – committed people doing similar work barely one decade later – even knew.

Since 2000, when my book *Disguised as a Poem: My Years Teaching Poetry at San Quentin* was published, I've been lucky to visit prisons in a number of states, and to see what "art class" means in a variety of locales. There are wonderful programs: Tory Sammartino's Voices Unbroken – which works with adults and youth in the Bronx as well as in New York prisons; Prison Performing Arts in Missouri; Leslie Neal's ArtSpring in South Florida; Robin Sohnen's Each One Reach One here in California; Richard Shelton's Creative Writer's Workshop which has been in Arizona prisons for over thirty years.

In Michigan, the Prison Creative Arts Project sends U of M professors and students to work with prison actors, writers, and performers. The project, begun by Buzz Alexander in 1990, offers its own model for how good programs might grow. As university students graduate and spread out to begin their work lives – often doing community arts in other cities and states – PCAP itself doesn't necessarily get bigger. But the vision, knowledge and commitment the program seeded in these young people extends into the world as a web does, woven and made strong, inch by inch.

Other good work occurs not as part of a program, but because sincere people find the right time and place. Such offerings most often don't try to grow, or even necessarily to last beyond their one blessed moment.

In Kansas, I walked into a small medium security prison with Raylene Hinz-Penner who wanted to teach a writing class in prison and found a warden who thought that was a good idea.

In Iowa, Rachel Marie-Crane Williams got a grant from Humanities Iowa to facilitate a long-term arts project in the state's women's prison.

Performer and composer, Michael Keck, takes his own single body to prisons around the country to offer theater and performance workshops.

In Connecticut Joe Lea – a teacher certified by the state's department of education and currently serving as librarian at York Correctional Institution – has brought a most amazing roster of artists inside to work with the women prisoners. He does this though doing so is in no way part of his job description.

The movie “Shakespeare Behind Bars” – a Sundance favorite now in commercial release – is a documentary about one program at one Kentucky prison offered by one committed volunteer who works under one warden who says, “I'm a warden who hates prisons.”

At California's CSP-Sac, artist facilitator Jim Carlson – without funds to bring in professional artists as in Arts in Corrections' heyday – creates opportunities for prisoners to teach prisoners. What happens seems nearly a secret: Informal classes in a small room between two huge gates; concrete and razor-wire; a maximum security prison buried on the outskirts of a tiny town.

But multitudes – volunteers from a local radio station, retired school teachers wanting to be useful, film makers from Sweden – line up to visit. Not because the program has an endowment or because the prisoners who teach have gone through a certification process. Instead people from what's called “the free world” come to New Folsom because they've heard that the

men inside are making art; each man creating from his own hunger and grief; each man helping the next man, sharing whatever that man might need.

Judith Tannenbaum has worked in the field of community arts for over thirty years. She currently serves as training coordinator for San Francisco's WritersCorps program. Her books include Disguised as a Poem: My Years Teaching Poetry at San Quentin and Teeth, Wiggly as Earthquakes: Writing Poetry in the Primary Grades. You can read more about Judith at www.judithtannenbaum.com, more about WritersCorps at writerscorps.org, and can read The Real Rap: A Message to the Youth and other work by her San Quentin students at www.chapbooks.prisonwall.org