

A Mountain of Gold

Stephen Nachmanovitch

New Orleans, 1 November 2001

Keynote address to the International Network of Performing & Visual Arts Schools

It's really a privilege to be here with so many courageous people. What all of you do takes a lot of guts – because in our society, the arts, of all our important social activities, usually go to the back of the bus. When I was asked to think of a title for my talk today, what came to me was “A Mountain of Gold.” We have become increasingly used to hearing, especially in the hard language of money, that our lifework is a frill, that the arts and education don't amount to a hill of beans. I am here to tell you that they amount to a mountain of gold. I am here to tell you that the arts are not frosting on life; they aren't an extra little entertaining piece that you add in when everything else is taken care of. They are life itself. Art is life itself. Since September 11th, I think we've come to understand that better. Many of you either have been in New York or have seen pictures from New York of the incredible shrines that have sprung up on the streets, an explosion of folk art and poetry and music. Poetry is suddenly flying over the Internet, people are sending each other things, people are putting things up on walls. There is a profound hunger for the spiritual connectedness – and the sanity – that comes from making art and participating in art. People feel that now. I think there's a way in which, strangely enough, the events of Septem-

ber 11th are going to help move what we do from the back of the bus up to the front.

There are other things that have been at the back of the bus in our society. One thing that I've noticed, talking to young people since the tragedies, is that there is a profound hunger for cultural understanding. I'm fifty-one years old; when I was seven, the Sputnik went up and there was a huge explosion of realization in our country that we were way behind in education in science and technology. I was one of those little kids who was energized to go out and be a scientist; I was eagerly cramming myself full of math and the physical sciences. And it was true, we did need to do that, but I think the events of 2001 are teaching us – and kids now feel this very intensely, especially high school and college-aged kids who are coming into their lives in this very, very different world – that we are profoundly deficient in cultural understanding. We're deficient in fields like anthropology and comparative religion and comparative arts. We're deficient in the kinds of understanding of other people that come from the exchange of arts. It's not just us. As we know, there are other societies around the world that are equally or even more deficient in such understanding, which we now need desperately. It's got to be at the core of our attention as we go on into the coming years.

You've probably all heard this poem many times now, because of all the poems that have circulated since September 11th, this may be the one that's been out there the most – Auden's "September 1st, 1939." I want to read you the last stanza of it:

Defenseless under the night
Our world in stupor lies;
Yet, dotted everywhere,
Ironic points of light

Flash out wherever the Just
Exchange their messages:
May I, composed like them
Of Eros and of dust,
Beleaguered by the same
Negation and despair,
Show an affirming flame.

Auden speaks of “the Just” exchanging messages. Who are they? What makes them just? Let’s read another little poem, by Jorge Luis Borges, one which surfaced from obscurity only a few years ago. Interestingly enough, it is called “The Just.”

A man who cultivates his garden, as Voltaire wished.
He who is grateful for the existence of music.
He who takes pleasure in tracing an etymology.
Two workmen playing, in a café in the South, a silent game of chess.
The potter, contemplating a color and a form.
The typographer who sets this page well,
though it may not please him.
A woman and a man who read the last tercets of a certain canto.
He who strokes a sleeping animal.
He who justifies, or wishes to, a wrong done him.
He who is grateful for the existence of Stevenson.
He who prefers others to be right.
These people, unaware, are saving the world.

Today, the question of saving the world is no longer a metaphor. It is utterly real. It has been real since the invention of nuclear weapons and the discovery of global ecology, but today in 2001 it is more clearly in our faces than ever. As we contemplate the spread of anthrax spores now, I’ve been trying to imagine another kind of epidemic. I’ve been asking everyone I meet to do whatever they can do, in their personal sphere, to spread an epidemic of sanity. Mental and spiritual states can spread, and sanity can be just as contagious as insanity. We must remember the purpose of our work: the arts are a primary means for

transmission of sanity. I mean “arts” very broadly, of course. As in the Borges poem, there are many activities that are not virtuoso expressions of one’s theatrical or musical ability; there are many activities that we engage in that would not win prizes and awards, that might be technically flawed and clumsy, but which still carry some spiritual essence of communication about the nature of sanity from person to person.

One of the other funny patterns that emerged in our Western society in the 19th Century, and that is still partly with us, is the idea of the solitary genius. That idea posits that creativity is something completely inside you; it’s some quality or ability that belongs to you. Perhaps you’ve got it, or haven’t got, or have a little of it; it’s yours; it’s not somebody else’s. You go to your private place, whether you’ve got a beautiful music studio or a tiny garret, and do your thing called creativity. You make a product. Then it either gets out into the world or it doesn’t. I’d argue that the nature of creativity is very, very different – that creativity is a relational activity. Creativity is always about society. Creativity is always about relating to other people. Even if you are that poet writing something in your garret and your work doesn’t get out to an audience, there’s an implied audience. There’s a passionate desire to communicate. There’s a deeply felt relationship with our mentors, living or long dead – even if we are struggling against them or trying to overthrow them, we are always conscious of them. There’s a passionate desire to spread the seeds of something to other people; and even if that desire isn’t fulfilled, it is there and it’s fundamental. Part of our job in this room as artists and educators is to make it easier for that work and those aspirations to spread, to make it easier for people to spread their creativity around rather than have it locked up in their little garrets or their little dorm rooms or other private places. We want to bring it out into the sphere of public discourse. The social function of art, and the

social nature of art, are primary. We are always responding to our ancestors, to the people around us, receiving gifts of inspiration from them. We are, in our turn, giving away such gifts, to our children, our students, our audiences, to people we will never meet who have not yet been born, or who live today in a distant place, whom we reach in the mysteriously effective telephone game of human communication.

A wonderful book appeared a few years ago that you may have seen, by Louis Hyde, called *The Gift*, in which he analyzes different kinds of economies. There's a money economy in which certain kinds of value flow around, and then there's a gift economy in which certain kinds of value flow around, and creativity is in the gift economy. We talk about being inspired. When we're inspired, we're breathing in. We are taking in. We are taking in from our teachers, from our ancestors, from our friends, from the little things that we spot in the environment; and we're putting out, and that constant exchange, that ecology or economy – both the words “ecology” and “economy” are the same word – it's from the Greek word for “housekeeping – and it's all about the circular flow of information, of material, of ideas, of products, throughout the world. The gift must move. The gift only exists when it is in circulation. That is what we are engaged in as artists. Now, Hyde makes a very interesting point that the activity of creative people is partly embedded in both economies, that there's the money economy and the gift economy, and they intersect a little bit but not very much. But since every artist also needs to put food on the table and have a place to live, and every art form needs some economic sustenance in order to be spread into the world, we're also engaged in the money economy, and the requirements of the two economies are often contradictory. That again is one of the particular challenges that the people in this room grapple with every day. Imagine the Venn diagram, that region of intersection of

two circles. Our question is how to widen the Venn diagram that connects the money economy and the gift economy. One of the principal things that we must do is recognize that while both economies are significant for our survival, that the gift economy stands on its own and is fundamental. That's why I say that art is not window dressing or trimming or dessert after you've had your meal of work at the office; I say that art is life itself.

I am honored to be sponsored here by Interlochen, Idyllwild, and so many other great music and art schools. One of the people who made Idyllwild what it is was Herbert Zipper, whom I got to know near the end of his life in Los Angeles. He was a neighbor of mine. Herbert died at the age of 93 in 1997. He was a conductor and composer from Old Vienna. He was a Viennese Jew, an intellectual, artist, composer; he was primed to lead the urbane artistic life that people took for granted at that time. Then Hitler took over Germany, and eventually marched into Austria, and Zipper was thrown into Dachau. From Dachau he was thrown into Buchenwald. In Dachau, Herbert Zipper created a clandestine orchestra in the latrines. The orchestra was made up of guys who knew that most of them were going to die. Their daily life literally consisted of shoveling mountains of shit from one place to another, and many of them died buried in it. They were living in a place where every possible accoutrement of civilized life had been stripped away, where their names had been stripped away. But they discovered something amazing. Herbert began reciting poetry there, and suddenly the prisoners started standing up and breathing a little deeper. They created some instruments out of junk material that could be cobbled together from the trash that was lying around in a concentration camp, and he wrote music on scraps of propaganda fliers that he glued together. They held concerts in the latrines. There would be a 15 minute

concert, and then another group of prisoners would come in for their turn. They pasted sentries to make sure the SS sentries weren't coming. It went on like this for a while and, fortunately, it was before the war actually started and his family was able to bribe him out of there. He got bribed out to Paris and was immediately offered a job as conductor of the Manila Symphony and went to the Philippines just in time for the Japanese to invade, and he ended up in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp. He got out and spent the rest of the war working as a spy, he and his wife scuttling from one bombed-out building to another and working with the underground there in the Philippines. The day that Manila was liberated by the Americans – and by liberated, we mean there was a 30 day battle in which the entire city was essentially destroyed and a huge part of the population was killed either by the retreating Japanese or by the crossfire between the Americans and the Japanese – he decided that they had to have a concert. He marched into General MacArthur's office and said, "We're going to have a concert," and General MacArthur said, "Where?" Zipper said, "We're going to have it in the bombed-out shell of the Santa Cruz cathedral." Most of the musicians had been scattered or killed, but Herbert, when the Japanese first invaded, had already buried the instruments in a basement someplace out in the country, preparing for this. He dug out the instruments and found the musicians who were still alive, and requisitioned lumber from the army and built a stage and gave a concert of the Eroica Symphony and the New World Symphony.

I can tell you that that concert would not have gotten a great review in the *New York Times* as one of the top ten performances of the Eroica Symphony from the point of view of technical virtuosity and perfect orchestral playing. But the people who attended that concert came alive

– and they learned then and there that art is life. It doesn't come after you have already built your skyscraper and your B-1 bomber. It is life.

I was sitting in my hotel room this morning, getting dressed and noticing my surroundings. Those of you who are staying here may have noticed that this is a weird hotel. Everything is very fancy and beautifully decorated, with all the lovely lighting and material on the walls and so forth, but the shapes of these rooms are strange and feel cramped even if they are large in size. This hall is actually the first good-shaped room I've seen in this building. You have probably noticed the lobby, all the private rooms and public spaces, they're all oriented in lopsided ways with strange proportions, there are all kinds of funny little angles, passageways that are too narrow or too wide, and that sort of thing. The building seems to have been built on strictly utilitarian lines – that is, how do you divide up the spaces with walls in order to maximize your economic use of the space. Then, having constructed these odd-shaped spaces, they threw on some beautiful trimmings. If you've read Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, he talks about Quality with a big Q, and he talks about some of the very strange manifestations of attempted Quality in our culture where you have something that's very banal and then put some golden decoration on it, a trellis with curlicues and so on, slapping a little Quality on top. That is something like what we have done with art in our culture – we have this very utilitarian culture where the business of America is business, and then we slap a little bit of art on top. So I found myself thinking, as I sat in my weird-shaped hotel room, about spacecraft and space stations. We may try to send people to Mars sometime soon, which I think would be wonderful. One of the problems of prolonged space travel, of course, is sanity. How are people who are shut up in a little, very technologically marvelous, but still lit-

tle tin can going to stay sane if they're on a nine-month voyage to Mars, and if they're on even longer voyages in the future. As you know, there are all kinds of research projects in NASA about mental states and various psychological factors, and I'm sure they're trying out different kinds of psychiatric drugs to see what helps. And I was thinking, I hope somebody there is thinking about the shapes of the rooms. We've known for at least 2500 years, since the time of Pythagoras, about the golden rectangles, the golden sections, and these proportions which not only define what is a good feeling room to be in, but what are the great proportions of art and architecture, what are the proportions of musical scales. Musical scales from around the world, from Arabic culture, ancient Greek culture, Balinese culture, Japanese and Chinese culture, all come from the Pythagorean proportions of perfect whole number ratios. African cultures use ratios of seven, which we don't use in the West; this is the origin of what we call the blues scale. All these mathematical proportions which define various species of beauty also define various states of mind that in their own cultural style bring about a kind of sanity that people feel good about. Why did people feel good going to Herbert Zipper's thrown-together concert? It was a little dose of sanity in the worst place in the world. Now, Herbert Zipper went on with his life – after the war he came to the United States and devoted the rest of his life to creating art and music schools. He started the artists-in-the-schools programs in the late 1940s where poets and musicians would go around into public schools – it's continuing to this day – and he had an effect, probably, on many of the institutions that are represented in this room. It's of fundamental importance to spread this stuff around, and Zipper was one of those people who could stand up and be sane and spread that sanity to others. Now, in building a capsule to go to Mars, I hope they're thinking about the proportions of the cap-

sule, because what is going to be better – to have people confined in a little room which is beautifully proportioned, which feels good to be in and which somehow satisfies their aesthetic impulse and therefore they feel calm and sane in, or are you going to put them in a utilitarian odd-shaped box that fits the requirements of the machinery and then pump the astronauts full of psychiatric drugs so they won't go nuts while they're sitting in it? There we have a metaphor for our larger society. In our larger society we often have to fit into schemes of work, schemes of school, schemes of government institutions which are all there for a good purpose. The people who design these things are not trying to do bad to other people, but by thinking only of the utilitarian, we inevitably create environments which range from the merely uncomfortable all the way to the insane. When we have people who are feeling anywhere on that scale from uncomfortable to insane, then we have to create another entire social apparatus – or medical apparatus or military apparatus or police apparatus – in order to deal with the resultant insanity. We're expending a tremendous amount of energy that could otherwise be applied to positive purposes. In physics, energy is the ability to do work, and power is the capacity to apply energy to actually move things; a system has more power when its energy is not dissipated in side-effects like heat or noise. The metaphor of physical power applies to power in the sense that we're talking about it here today, to the power of art. If we construct our society by utilitarian, unaesthetic principles so that a tremendous amount of wasted effort has to go into dealing with the insanities that result from those utilitarian principles, then we're wasting energy and losing power. All that energy is getting dissipated as heat and as waste matter and as pollution rather than being used to do some work that does good for somebody, whether it be economic good or aesthetic good or educational good or social good. So, to

have aesthetics be recognized at both the bottom line and the top line or our social balance sheet is a fundamental survival value. Art is power.

When nations are taken over by governments that attempt to control people's minds, governments that attempt to turn people into robots, they make a special point of attacking the arts. The first thing that Hitler did was get rid of the artists. The first thing that Stalin did was get rid of the artists. The first thing that the Taliban did was banish the arts. There is a whole set of negative efforts that go together in these controlling societies – suppression of art, suppression of free speech, and suppression of women's rights. All of these things have to do with suppressing the voice of human relationship, and spontaneous communication about feelings and ideas. People can only act as a mob, people can only act as robots in large numbers when they are unaware of their numbers, when they are isolated in their little garrets. They might be in a huge crowd marching in an army, but each one is still isolated in his or her garret, a psychic containment unit walled in by fear, answering only to authority. When you have free speech, when you have art, which may be beautiful or challenging or disturbing, when you have dialogue in which people are arguing, when people are presenting contradictory visions of reality and complaining about other people's contradictory visions of reality, it's impossible to have this automatism, this robotic behavior on which totalitarians depend. The totalitarian states fall when you begin to have art, when you begin to have free speech, when men and women's voices are heard as equals. Art is power. Stalin spent an enormous amount of energy suppressing Shostakovich, suppressing other composers. When you think about it, that doesn't seem to make much sense. Here was the dictator of an enormous continent, with vast armies at his command, controlling gigantic economies – why did he busy himself with a composer of operas and chamber music?

Because art is power. Because dictators are afraid of the power within people that art touches and opens up to consciousness. Such opening is contagious. The more we can do to spread these little seeds of sanity, the harder it will be for totalitarianism, for repression, for fundamentalism to take root anywhere in the world. This is true in spite of the limitations of our individual voices. Most of us can only operate in one small sphere. When Herbert Zipper created that orchestra in Dachau, he didn't kill Hitler, he didn't overthrow the Nazis, he didn't fill the Nazis with peaceful feelings, the whole war proceeded with tremendous horror and loss of life – but he created a little area of sanity that affected other people, and some of those people who survived because of what he did lived to affect other people, and some of those lived to affect other people. So it is in the Borges poem that we read earlier, in which two guys are simply playing chess, playing a good game of chess in a calm atmosphere in the south of Argentina. This does not seem to be a world-shaking event, but it *is* a world-shaking event. What we do here has enormous power. It's at the very center of what our society is about, and all of us who are in the position of dealing with kids who have that creative impulse have a duty to encourage those kids to do what they do and to nurture what they do and to find ways to connect them with each other so that they can find their power. Art is power, art is life itself.

Thank you!



©2001 by Stephen Nachmanovitch
www.freeplay.com