

# Maine College of Art

MECA Commencement

Donna McNeil, Director, Maine Arts Commission

May 9, 2010

(Dylan video Subterranean Homesick Blues)

Today you are commencing. But...Commencing to what? I'm assuming that your education was a career move although I realize, sourcing my own life, that it might have been a stall tactic. A safe place to think for awhile. A place of practice. Nonetheless, today you step away from that safe place. Soon enough you will also step away from the great allowances for the charm and seduction of youth. You are commencing to the real life challenges, ambitions and sometimes rather terrifying aspects of life as a sole supporting professional, a working life and all that means.

Welcome to the precipice.

(powerpoint of precipice images)

Although we live in a society that has not generally understood or supported artists there are some unique advantages to the particulars of this moment, to this commencing class.

Capitalism, you see, is faltering. Artists have never been particularly attached to capitalism – not in traditional ways. Artists produce art because they want to, have to, market or no market. They give and in that giving, they receive. This makes them lovely people, but impudent capitalists. I am not even sure our society regards what artists contribute to this world as work period. Validation of an artists work can be fickle and faddish. It is relational, stratified by a happenstance star system, and arbitrary assignation of value. I suggest arming yourselves with the ability to negotiate the network

and the marketplace so you will never have to suffer compromise, be victimized or turn away from the vital act of creation. “Trust your **own** judgments, over and over, because you will rarely have clear confirmations of prior decisions before new, equally weighty ones will confront you. You can not nor should you, wait for approval. You will not deal in the realm of conventional successes, therefore hold judgment and validation privately and well maintained in relation to your **own** standards, your personal integrity and you will survive all doubt”. <sup>1</sup>Continue taking risks, play with precipice, it is your dance floor. Fear be damned.

Society, on it's behalf, needs to wholly support the creative act, understanding that not only is it sexy, it is an investment in human evolution. Economic fissure provides a perfect moment to shift the status of artists in America.

It is my job, our job together, to build patrons out of patronizers, to move this society to a place where the gifts, **the gifts** that artists bring are recognized, honored and commensurately remunerated without compromise or negotiation across all levels of creative engagement and production. That artists as citizens, as people, are enabled for what they bring and what they are: seers, puzzle masters, story tellers, answer givers, beauty makers, bards and brainiacs, free thinking sorcerers of the most unpredictable amalgamations that click click click, inventing solutions for our most complex ponderances. All delivered in a singular and unique language created by each maker individually. Astonishing work, really. Job of Jobs.

The deck has shuffled. The “recession” cast precedent into a hard light. It has forced our laid off citizenry, captains of industry and government to reflect on how we arrived at this moment and how will we move forward. All sectors, including the creative sector, are collectively rethinking their engagement with commerce. One plus one can now equal five.

It's not just Goldman Sacs mathematics. So what does this fissure in capitalism mean to creative folks? To commencing artists?

It let's the light in.

---

<sup>1</sup> Jon Calame letter to Donna McNeil May 8, 2010

We know the repetitive boring jobs will be outsourced to emerging economies. Everything a robot can do, they will be built to do, possibly you will even build them. So what's left? What's left is creativity. What's left is originality. What's left is authenticity. These are uniquely human capabilities that economies have always relied on for successful evolution and are now the **only** things of value. Those of us that deserve to be called artists are in full possession of today's most valuable and sought after skills. Artists greet the void and transfigure it into the sublime. Artists carefully observe their world and transform that looking into meaning and beauty. They dive deep. They are fearless and smart. They are inventors and problem solvers.

Make no small matter out of looking. Really looking. The ability to observe across time and discipline and class and race and gender and age and politics and economics and religion and sexuality and translate that looking into a considered and uniquely wrought response that gives us, the audience/viewer a way to reconceive our own thinking is unabashedly redemptive. Artists deliver the hard and soft messages of life through a self conceived language uniquely framed to allow us to see and hear in new ways. Artists deliver to us their decoders, their inventions, their interpretations, their glad and sad interventions which are completed by us. What should be more highly valued? How much should that cost? What defines America better?

The skills that artists possess innately and that are nurtured by life experience and education are among the most precious assets an individual and thereby, a country, possesses. Our fellow citizens and leadership are just coming to understand that in a broad way.

Imagination, innovation, creativity have become power words. While timidity turns systems toward the comfort and security of imitation and precedent, artists have already constructed a future that is pertinent to the circumstances of this moment and a zillion moments hence, moving our world forward with originality and the excitement of the new.

Grab the reins, It's your ride now. Don't forget in your solitary endeavors, that we are out here cheering, waiting to hear from you, wanting to hear you rise boldly and full throated to greet our hunger for truth. To give us new resolutions to the complex array of uncertainties we face. Your audience is your counterpoint, your fait accompli, your check point, your validation. Refrain from

isolating into ghettos of fellow creatives. Claim your essential place in the larger definition of community. "Refrain from taking part in a generation's heedlessness, denial and frail ego. Reject repeated images of weakness in others in order to prop up your own illusion of strength. Reject the self congratulatory affect of the insecure. No generation has a complete grip on the imagination and work of the next one but today is your opportunity, your beginning.

You are your own stories and therefore free to imagine and experience what it means to be human without falsity. What it feels like to be human without domination over others, without reckless arrogance, without fear of others unlike you, without rotating, rehearsing and reinventing hatreds. You have the ability, the mandate, to create your own narrative".<sup>2</sup>

Do not surrender this to laziness, circumstance or insecurity. I assure you that life gets better and richer in every way if you make it so. Hold fast to and engage deeply with the process of creativity. Nothing is more rewarding.

I urge you to say yes and keep saying yes in the face of all you are delivered. "Will saying "yes" get you in trouble at times? Will saying "yes" lead you to do some foolish things? Yes it will. But don't be afraid to be a fool. Remember, you cannot be both young and wise. Young people who pretend to be wise to the ways of the world are mostly just cynics. Cynicism masquerades as wisdom, but it is the farthest thing from it. Because cynics don't learn anything. Because cynicism is a self-imposed blindness, a rejection of the world because we are afraid it will hurt us or disappoint us. Cynics always say no. But saying "yes" begins things. Saying "yes" is how things grow. Saying "yes" leads to knowledge. "Yes" is for young people. So for as long as you have the strength to, say "yes."<sup>3</sup>

(Now play the (for)GIVE powerpoint and hold on the last one.)

---

<sup>2</sup> Toni Morrison, Wellesley College commencement address 2004

<sup>3</sup> Steve Cobert, Knox College, Galesburg, Illinois commencement address 2006