

Imagination is the capacity to invent new realities, perhaps new worlds. It is, according to John Dewey, the ability to look at things as if they could be otherwise. I am sure most of you remember 'let's pretend' when you were young. We often played school and argued over who would be teacher and who would be pupil. I happened to have a particularly reserved teacher in the 3rd grade--not mean, but not interested in children, at least not in me. So I imagined a teacher who asked you questions about yourself and maybe your unbearable brother, someone who sort of giggled now and then, who pretended to clap when you got the right answer. Because I imagined a lovelier school than the one I knew, I found more and more wrong with it; and I suspect that, when I grew older, my ideas of what a school should be might have been planted there.

To learn, I believe, is to become, to become different. It is to continue making new connections in experience, new meanings, if you like. Meanings are funded, we are told, and offer continually expanding perspectives on experience. But that depends a good deal on a willingness to go beyond what is--to reach beyond mere facts to widening cognitive or intellectual possibilities. Surely we know that is what inventive scientists and explorers do, what people who opened frontiers did in the past, those who kept searching for the territory ahead.

Young children, as you know better than I, keep looking, touching, smelling, reaching, finding out what the world is like--unless adults close them in, try to channel curiosity and wonder, try to 'school' instead of educating, to impose basics and discrete bits of knowledge, instead of creating situations in which children, using their own initiatives, learn how to learn. They do that by futuring, moving beyond where they are. This is the power of imagination--to break through the crusts of the conventional and the routine, to light the slow fuse of possibility.

We know that nothing activates imagination as strongly as making and encountering what are believed to be works of art. At the Lincoln Center Institute, as you surely know, we put great stress on finding out what it takes for people of various ages, to bring works of art alive. That happens, we believe, when a perceiver or listener attends to a particular work--a flamenco dance, for instance, a Schumann improvisation, a Dickinson poem---from the vantage point of her/his lived life nurtured by some awareness of the distinctiveness of flamenco dancing, its sources, its context, even while engaging with the movement, the music with the body, the nervous system, even the pulsing of the heart. We think that an experience like this can best be assured if those now encountering a work have moved with a flamenco dancer, perhaps devised some steps some patterns of their own.

The balance, the tension can be captured in the visual arts as well, I think of The Migration Series and suggesting to children that they try to draw or paint what it was like for people to crowd on trains and leave their homes in the south for Chicago or Detroit. Then I might show them some Jacob Lawrence paintings--people waiting for the trains,

hanging on fences, expecting, hoping that thing might be otherwise. Too often they were not. But even the thought of new possibility and the courage to pursue it can open eyes.

I think I want mostly to argue for a centrality of imagination because of its power to enable persons to reach towards alternatives, to reach beyond; and I want to argue for the arts because of the ways in which they open windows in experience, provide moments of freedom and presence, enable us to break with terrible moments of apathy and numbness keeps us, in our ongoing conversations with the young, ardently in the changing and problematic world.