

An airplane as a weapon. You had to think of things as if they would be otherwise, and so I began to think, how do we feel with that? How do we help children deal with the dark imagination as well as the imagination that opens benign or inspiring or stimulating possibility?

And I suppose that in part led me to think again about how if we can't really separate the imaginary from the ethical or from the political, that somehow or another we have to weave them together. So if I don't speak in a beautiful, logical, vigorous way, I seldom do anyway, but you'll know that I'm still wondering, I'm still working through it. I'm still looking at my own past and hoping that I think authentic in the things I've said, and hoping that what I try to say will help you all say.

Because I think, like many of you, I think whatever we can discover, when it comes to a disruptive and constructive, it would have to be with openings for many voices, many repressed voices that haven't been heard. And it's one of the things I take very seriously. I mean I know, as I think most of you know, I have to be aware of where I come from, of my new situation, not only about being a woman and being middle class and so on and so forth, have to be aware of the limits of my vision. Because I am that.

I'm a real New York provincial. I'm worse than that, I'm a Brooklynite. And those days Brooklyn hadn't been gentrified. And I said I never knew much about Fourth of July picnics or a whole bunch of things, parades and flags, that wasn't my world. And I realized how limited it was. It's like that Steinberg cover on *The New Yorker*, remember?

So I have to not only try to expand my own consciousness as much as I can, I have to listen harder than maybe I had listened in the past, and realize how many voices there are, and realize how much credibility I have to give to voices that are different than mine.

It's embarrassing even to think of something like contempt which I held people who read the *New York Post*. That's terrible. I think the *New York Post* and not *The New York Times*, that's not my world and so on. You have to struggle with it. You have to struggle with yourself to try to avoid being that kind of representative of power, of white power and so on.

So I say all that so you'll know I have no real truth. I'm just struggling, as I think most of you are. And I think like many of you I have multiple concerns, as a teacher, as a mother, as somebody that is struggling still to be a proper kind of woman philosopher who speaks out of a tradition and out of her own lived life, Brooklyn despite. I can only make sense if I talk out of my memories, my lived experience, what I can somehow get in touch with sometimes through the arts.

## Imagination, Oppression and Culture/Creating Authentic Openings

by Maxine Greene

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Someone who is always, like many of us, searching for meaning and engaged in a kind of ongoing effort to create, to achieve meanings in a place where there are no direction signs. It isn't quite the way it used to be.

And I try to do that with feeling, and with commitment, and with hope, and with some sense of scholarly standard. I don't throw that out. But I hope that these days, with the talk of standards, some of it nonsensical talk, and talk of standard imposed from without. I always want to think of standards that come from within.

I think of Hanna Arendt saying one time excellent means appearing as the best you could possibly be. That's what standards are, the best I could possibly be. And one of the things I've learned with Lincoln Center, at least I have one artist in Lincoln Center here, is how there isn't any teaching artist at Lincoln Center who hasn't internalized a set of standards, who won't do anything unless it's done elegantly, unless it's done well.

And I try to, again, as I try to work with memory and commitment and hope and so on, I try to think, how can I do it well? How can I do it authentically? How can I do it without messing things up? And obviously, even today, forever seeking projects that are meaningful, it may make some concrete difference in the world.

Like an awful lot of people in education, and inspired by Morton Deutsch's writings, I've long been very involved with the notion of social justice and there are more and more curricula all around, connecting somehow within the sphere social justice. Then I think what does it mean unless it has a concrete embodiment? It's easy to say, but what do I do tomorrow to make justice significant in my classroom?

It's one of the things I wonder about. How do we move from the beautiful abstract, to the sometimes boring concrete? How do we move to help people understand what it is to be fair, to understand what it is to be cheated in life, to be treated unfairly and unjustly?

I'm terribly aware, as I think many of you are, of the obstacles, of the fixities of the heavy preconceptions that seem unalterable. In a way, this may be the most difficult time. I know many people are feeling helpless, are feeling powerful, are feeling angry, are feeling outraged. But at the same time, being treated in a kind of passivity because we see so fixed and unchangeable.

Prejudiced as I am, and biased as I am, I read yesterday's paper about the State Department report about how they knew what was going to happen in Iraq, and how the Pentagon ignored it. And I read that, why don't people get furious at that? But you think back and you think that's the way they are.

Last night for a few minutes, I think it was on 60 Minutes or something, I turned it off because I couldn't stand it, it was like Barbara Bush being a paragon of what I feel so

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angry at. She's so healthy looking and so pleasant, so untouched by it all. She sort of represented that sort of take-it-for-granted-ness, that jolly fundamentalism that I think we all have to worry about. You get what seemed to be good news, I don't mean to be mean about it, but sort of good news about Rush Limbaugh, I said I knew it all the time...

And at the same time, people pass that by too and listen to the next evangelist who makes them feel good. So there's so much to do, and a good deal of it takes imagination, opening to possibility.

I always remember Paolo Freire, whose name I'm sure you know, who talks in one of his books about how important it is for people to imagine a lovelier future if they are to take, to do something to transform the world they live in. You have to imagine something better. You have to move beyond. And if you can move beyond you can see what's really wrong.

A philosopher, if you'll excuse the expression, Jean Paul Sartre, who wrote one time about factory workers in France in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century who worked 16 hours a day and never had worries, until one day somebody like a trade union person or something comes to the door and tells them, offers a vision of a better world. And he said only then did they find their lives unendurable, only then. It's when you find it unendurable that you do something.

If you say, well, that's the way things are, what are you going to do? And we all know people like that, nothing happens. We stay caught in a kind of cement. And somehow or another, without, again, being ideological or crazy or too revolutionary, we want people to wake up. I want people to feel that it is unendurable to think of hundreds of people being put into jail without charges, without their families knowing they're there, without any notion of when they're going to get out.

When you look at Guantanamo, whatever that means, we shouldn't be able to tolerate that. We shouldn't. That's not what we were brought up to believe was just and right. I guess I want people to get more and more outraged. I don't want them to break windows. That doesn't do much good. But I want more talk, more articulate talk on the part of the public. We talked about an eclipse of the public, a sort of terrible silencing when you keep waiting for people to say something and you don't hear it.

Turning to imagination, I wanted to just read one little part of a poem that I've used before and it's an old one, but there's a verse in it. And some of you will say, oh my God, I remember that poem, but it's a wonderful poem. It's John Keats. I'm looking into Chapman's Homer, and in the middle of it he says, the speaker in the poem, I should say, I found this, again, in an op-ed piece in *The New York Times*, and it was written, the piece in the *Times* was written by Philip Levine, who's a very good poet, an older man, but excellent poet.

And he's writing about when he was an auto worker in Detroit and he went to a community college and took a course in romantic poetry and came on this poem and said, which he felt on his post, and the speaker in the Keats poem said, when he came upon this poem, I guess it's interesting 'cause there's so many levels.

The name of the poem is *I'm Looking Into Champman's Homer*, so it's Keats talking about himself as a young poet coming alive when he read the translation of Homer by somebody named Chapman. It's one level after the other.

So he says when he read it, I felt like some watcher of the skies when a new planet swings into its end, or like when the eagle eyes we stare into Pacific, and all his men look to each other with a wild surmise, silent.

The thing I think that moves me so is the sudden sight of the Pacific and his men looking at each other. And I think that the men who are members of the crew who live with orders and regulation and a kind of naval bureaucracy, and they see that, and they look at each other with a wild surmise, I think how wonderful, I want my students sometimes to look at each other with a wild surmise. That's what moves me.

And then silence opens; they reflect on it, they think on it, and possibility opens. And to me it's one of several examples of what imagination can mean. There's so many others, but just the idea of opening, the opening to new possibility. You can think of others. I can think of novels. I can think of dance performances. I can think of drama. All of us can think of drama. I can think of the way imaginations meet in the space of a theater. I can think of what dance and the language of the body has meant to me when I finally dared to listen to that language. When I suffered how blind I had been, and again, how limited, because I was only allowed or only introduced to certain ways of communicating.

At the very beginning of *Moby Dick* Melville describes people who all year are trapped in their desks, who can't move in their desk, and how on Sundays they run to see the water, they run to see the ocean. It's a way of breaking free. And a way, again, of somehow being liberated by a loop of the imagination, but by realizing there is another way of being. There is another way of being in the world.

I found something almost accidental, which is, I think, another side of what imagination can do. It's by a poet, I don't read very much, he seemed so old fashioned, but this is, it's just these few lines, it's by Robert Penn Warren, and he says, be something else. Be something that is not what it is, but being what it is, it is too absolute to be. If you insist on being what you are, how can we ever love you? We cannot love what is, by which I mean the things that totally is, and therefore is absolute, for we know that the absolute, I

think I lost it. He's talking about the absolute delusion, and that truth lives only in relation.

He helps us think about that notion of not standing still, of becoming. Dewey talks about education as becoming, as the process of becoming different. Paolo Freire talks about humanization, which means, again, becoming, moving beyond where you thought you were fated to be.

And again, that's an important role that imagination plays. And I keep thinking, if we could use more metaphors, if we could make works of art integral to our classrooms, we might have more opportunities to help children get past the absolute, past the unchanging, to realize that they can do something to change their lives.

Now, I said, I listed various kinds of imagination. And I think I want to make clear, when I list them like that I don't mean there's a kind of stage theory like Piaget, you know, you go from the esthetic to the ethical to the political to the social.

Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher, talked about the stages of life, and one was esthetic, and one was ethical, and one was religious. What I'm thinking about is integrating those three, of not seeing them in stages, not seeing them, and integrating them in a way we ordinarily don't.

We talked about not leaving the arts on the fringes, but we never really think about how they ought to inform, infuse everything that we do, be the glow of imagination. Some of you remember moments, even when you studied history, or even math, I was very bad at math and then I think one day I had an 'ah ha'. I don't remember what gave it to me, but I had it. And it was somehow my imagination was set free by, I don't know, I think it was geometry. I think I liked measuring, maybe it was the half circle, I don't even remember, but it's moments like that.

And then when it comes to ethical imagination, one of the first things I think about is the other, our relationship to the other. A little bit, as Robert Penn Warren said, you can't really have ethics unless you can think of yourself in relation to somebody else. And then imagination makes everything possible. Imagination makes it possible to somehow, as somebody else said, recognize the familiar in the stranger, the ability to try to see through someone else's eyes, the ability to reach out.

There's one philosopher named [LEVINOS ?], as some of you referred to, and his focus, when he talks about ethics, is on the face, fact to face he talks about. And he says, for example, how important it is to be able to read a face, to know the difference between, or to recognize the difference between the face in the concentration camp guard and the victim of the concentration camp. This face speaks.

And he talks about how important it is to be face to face with persons, with other people, in order to experience what is the really fundamental, ethical experience. I'm here for you. If you need me, I'm here for you, or we're here for you, or we're standing for you. That, to me, is what's ethically important. That, for me, is what the ethical imagination entails. Again, the ability to come close to someone else, to see through his eyes, to see the work, the preciousness of that other human being.

Of course that's one of the reasons, one of the thousand reasons, why war is so insupportable. Can you imagine believing these things and having to shoot somebody? Having to kill somebody? The very thought that we accept that, that we let that happen, I've been reading and probably some of you have read as well Susan Sontag, *Relation to the Pain of Others* and talking about how difficult it is to imagine what it's like to be, say, a wounded soldier in Iraq, or somebody who lost her whole family in a bombing. She says it's impossible to imagine, it's impossible to share. And what one has to watch out for, and I think this is part of what your ethical imagination has to take into account, what has to look out for is the numbness that comes with getting used to those pictures.

So that a picture, you put it on a refrigerator door, and we stop seeing it. And Susan Sontag has no answer any more than I do, except to fight the numbness, to fight distancing, really to look. Sometimes, I don't want to think of looking at painting, therapeutic effect, but to look at a painting, really to look, is to see beyond, if you like, the surface of the painting.

It's a little bit what Adrienne Rich had in mind, it starts it starts with awareness, of noticing. Like I used to take the Number Four bus to Teachers College, for year after year, and if you start describing what you pass by in the Number Four bus, to somebody out of town it sounds wonderful, you know, tenements and stores and the Harlem Meer and the trees in the park, and then what was for a long time a correctional institution, it used to be the New Lincoln School.

But in any case, after a while I thought, damn it, I better notice those broken windows in the houses, in those times, when you look up Lenox Avenue, the eyes look like staring at you. And I thought, I can't, I'm untrue to myself if I look at it as a pastoral landscape. How important it is to notice, to pay attention, and not to estheticize what shouldn't be estheticized, like if you see a homeless man on a bench, and you think, boy, that would make a wonderful sculpture, the curves. You have to watch that.

American literature is full of people who do that, like Isabel Archer in *Portrait of a Lady*, because she looks from a distance, and she sees life as a painting. We have to watch that. And I want to just keep emphasizing that art experience is participatory, hopefully involving passion, and hopefully acknowledging the role of darkness.

In the things I write, and some of you know that, and in the complaints I make about art traditions and so on, I object so much to educational writing that ignores the tragic in the experience, or to reform movements that leave out the darkness, the suffering, the kiddy comes home and mommy isn't home, the little things and the big things.

And then just last night I read an article in one of the literary magazines about teaching Huck Finn, and it was a charge against people like me who see Huck Finn as dark as any work of art ever produced in America. And this one says, treat it as an esthetic object, and forget it was slavery, so there was slavery. It should be treated as a work of art, and that all these things are distractions. I threw it out. It's one of the things you get, formalism and estheticism. It's like the new criticism years ago, when you left yourself home and you had no associations to it.

Can you imagine? I remember when black literature finally began appearing, there were critics who tried to treat it that way. Let's think about the form of invisible man and the boys and so on. You should, but you should also think of *Invisible Man* as an awakening through you if you could participate in it. It's a journey for your own visibility as well as something gorgeous and full of metaphors. I think if I'm interested in social imagination, as one of the things I get nasty about.

In any case, to somehow or another fight the numbness **of oppression**, to fight the **fatigued, worn** indifference. I think, I'm sure, as afraid of that as I am of anything, not feel, getting so used to it you don't look anymore, you don't feel anymore. Remember the picture not very long ago, of a little Iraqi boy who had lost both arms, and it was almost unendurable to look at. But if you looked at it four or five or six, you got used to it. And that's the evil.

Susan Sontag says even though you can't imagine yourself into such a situation, you can say, and you can ask, and you can imagine, who did this? Who's choice was it to do this? It didn't just happen. It wasn't like a tornado or a hurricane. It was human choice, and what we know makes human beings human, the capacity to choose, the capacity to identify themselves with their choices.

Too often, what comes before, for example, to proceed in social justice, is what **Mort would call** the sense of injustice. You know, the ability to say damn it, that's not fair, or that you can't treat people like that. You can't have people stay overnight in the welfare office with their children sleeping on newspapers on the floor. You say, my God, that's unfair, that's unjust. And if you could say it's unjust, or you can say something is inhumane, or something is an infringement on somebody else's freedom, then you can say, what? This is a terrible deficiency, what can I do to repair it?

I think Dewey, in one of his books, said facts are made and repellent things, he said, unless intellect or reflection reaches imaginatively towards possibility. And he meant

that empirical thinking was limited, stopped dead, unless imagination could carry out, could reach out to find not just the consequences, but the possibilities in the discovery. And that, I don't think any of us would say that reflection was unimportant, it's terribly important. For example, in art experiences, when I talk about education and helping people encounter the arts and participate in them and engage personally with them, I always say there has to be a time for reflection on it afterwards.

I think Dewey also said that an esthetic experience is really not complete unless you think about it later, you ponder over it. Like one of the things that fascinated me, still fascinates me, about Lincoln Center is the number of dancers, for example, who can find words to describe the dance after it's over. Because it's very hard to reflect on something that works in time. And they help you do that. They help me reflect on something that passes by. But that idea, just moving, again, eventually you can see it again. If you're very lucky you feel it again.

But I think it has a lot to do with, you know, what you're talking about, which reminds me of something I quote all the time from Dewey. Dewey said that the opposite of esthetic is anesthetic, which I always appreciate. That's that numbness that I think Gunther Grass once wrote a book called *Local Anesthetic*, and that's what he meant, Novocain-centric of local anesthetic.

And then I thought maybe the only thing we can do is really in that tension. We shouldn't be afraid of the tension, the tension between the desire to give it shape, to give it form, to create a building, to think of those blue lights going up in the air, and the horror. It's like the end of *Heart of Darkness*, the horror, the horror. You have to say that even as you say we can build a beautiful building like Liebeskind, and make it go away because something beautiful grow where so many people suffered.

If you forget the suffering, if you forget the horror, if you forget the images of people jumping, holding hands with somebody else, I think we're doing a bad turn to art as well as to yourself. Is that crazy?

That's where I think the social imagination and political imagination comes in. What can I do to repair, to make it better? I just realized I'm going on too long? Would somebody clear a throat very loudly if they want me to stop? I can go on?

Again, the imagination in social philosophy involves quite a few things, among others, I think it is so important in all the things we do, in all the things we think about, to somehow take issue with two viewpoints. One is the viewpoint of the individual as autonomous, as living in a space all by herself.

Individuals become individual through participation, through membership, through being like, I used to go to Cape Cod years ago, and I thought, and they always think that's



where the true individuals... on Cape Cod, but they are not there the least likely to be individuals, those people who live apart from others. It's that you become a person, I think many of us realized, the more perspective, the more viewpoints that you can internalize, the more eyes you can look through, the more people you feel are your brothers or sisters.

And that takes imagination as well, especially in a country like this that puts so much focus on privacy, which certainly is important, but which pays too little attention to solidarity, to comradeship.

I was reading somewhere, I can't remember, it was talking about it, but one of the differences between the '30s and the '60s was in the '30s, say in the time of Roosevelt, solidarity was important. The pronoun 'we' was important. We talked about feeling connected with labor unions, with artists who worked in post offices and stuff. And he said in the '60s a lot of things were important, but altruism was more important than solidarity, you know, what you can do for others. What you can do for others is a little different than saying, what can I do with others? What can I do to share their feeling of their social vision? What can I do to share in the creation of a social vision?

And get past, like I was thinking of Hemingway, all the things that influenced me. Once upon a time, women weren't supposed to like Hemingway, but now he's coming back, his style. But I remember in *Farewell to Arms*, Mick saying he had no use for abstract, abstracts, like glory and courage and so on and so on. And I feel the same way. We need to give concrete embodiment to our dreams, to our beings, and ask ourselves, what kind of practice is involved? How do we move from here to there?

One of the things that appeal to me so much about Paolo Freire was his connecting of ideal with practice, that you could think of praxis without thinking of theory. And you couldn't think of theory without thinking of praxis. And what can I do? What do I do in my classroom? What do I do in my artwork to involve people, shaping a vision of how life might be, and coming together to try to shape some aspect of the world, not the whole world, but the aspects that are close to you, into something closer to that vision.

I think, again, I would hope that if you could think about it, if you don't think I'm totally crazy trying to search out these different views and imagination. I hope you'll see the values of the arts, which are, you know, you cannot release imagination for the good life, for the fair life, for the just life, without going into yourself in the way that the arts make possible.

I looked up and down thinking how could I end this? I have no way of ending it. And then I thought about Adrienne Rich and a poem she wrote, which I can't recite, but she talked about how poetry moves from dread to possibility. And I think she meant poetry moves from an awareness of darkness, an awareness of tragedy, an awareness of

## Imagination, Oppression and Culture/Creating Authentic Openings

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suffering, to an opening, to a possibility of what might be, and that's what I think imagination is about, and that's why I think and hope we can change the world.