

Skills for Expressive Living

JACK BOOKBINDER

"Many a person is unhappy, tortured within, because he has at command no art of expressive action."—JOHN DEWEY, *Art as Experience*.

WE ARE A NATION of would-be's. We are rich in would-be painters, sculptors, writers, musicians, and firemen. We are rich in would-be happiness. Our violins are locked in the attic and with them a part of our hearts. We have conformed to external demands upon us at the cost of the progressive atrophy of our inner natures.

We are efficient, mechanized, chain-stored, corporated, mass-producing, and unhappy. We are robbed of the deep satisfactions that even our parents knew: seeing things grow under our hands and the world whole and uncomplicated. Our daily bread is baked and packed and sliced for us. The baking of it in the home—a poem of toil, anticipation, surprise, and pleasurable taste and smell—is gone. What our children know about milk is that they find it on the doorstep; its relation to a cow is vague. To be sure, all this change must be accepted if one is to be "realistic." Besides, it has brought cars within the reach of millions; it has also brought us

ice boxes and gadgets. But with these gifts have come frustration and disbalance in our psychic life.

Science and invention have given us more hours of leisure, so it is said. Yet, paradoxically, we are the most hurried people on earth. "Hurry up" stamps the American abroad. Matthew Arnold's lament that his generation was driven by a "... sick hurry and divided aim..." applies even more to our own. In his time the mechanization that whipped men to competitive frenzy had not yet gained the momentum witnessed today. It takes the East to remind the West that enjoying one's life is still worthwhile. Hence Lin Yutang's "The Importance of Living."

The leisure that we do possess is often oppressive and many seek escape from it as from boredom, which it often is. Hence the "bridge" brigades and the packed movie houses. Of such persons, it may be said with Cicero—"He was never less at leisure than when he was at leisure."

Oil Heat and Orange Squeezers

It need scarcely be pointed out that technological progress does not in itself assure greater happiness. We are technologically the richest nation on earth; yet our hospitals hold more mental cases than all other ills combined. This is

No discussion of "Skills" would be complete without a consideration of the place of the arts in our society. In this article, Jack Bookbinder, of the Summer Workshop for Teachers, Philadelphia, amply supplies such a discussion, pursuing with both charm and challenge the provocative theme that "for so many of us, life is a postponement of living."

quite natural since with high efficiency comes high blood pressure and the thousand natural shocks that the nervous system is heir to.

Let us grant that a weather-proof home, oil-heated and equipped with telephone, television, washing machine, and orange squeezer, offers opportunities for greater enjoyment of living; but they do not in themselves assure it. There will always be a Diogenes to remind us that happiness is not a matter of worldly goods. Every man knows this, but this knowledge leads not to appropriate action but to the false rationalization that one can keep on accumulating the means toward enjoyment while postponing the enjoyment itself. For so many of us, life is a postponement of living.

The marvels of modern invention are infinite in their application. Science has not only changed the face of the earth; it is now changing the face of mankind. It is no longer necessary to hide a weak chin by a beard nor need noses be in imitation of our ancestors. Plastic surgery has put heredity in its place. It would indeed be a wise father who today would recognize his glamor-encrusted daughter after a minor operation. All this is as it should be, no doubt. The chromosomes and genes that make us what we are can stand a bit of alteration. But the point we wish to make is that science cannot glamorize that peculiar and evasive entity for which we still have no better name than soul.

Art in Arid Splendor

To suggest that man's ineptness at living can be altered by art alone would be quite absurd. The word "art", capitalized, italicized, graced with inverted

commas, bowed to on a Sunday afternoon in neo-classic temples, or simply ignored, has become too esoteric to be on speaking terms with life. Art has been refined, circumscribed, fumigated, and placed on a high pedestal of arid splendor. In this unfortunate position, it is scarcely seen by the multitude, on whom it takes pride in looking down. The intellectual snobbishness that preserves this schism chooses to forget, or simply never knew, that all the arts were born out of common needs; and that their only vitality springs from that fact. For the culturally confused and insecure, it is difficult to accept wash-board rhythms as music or a child's painting as a work of art.

No, art alone will not cure all our ills, however broad a meaning we give to it. And yet, given a meaning consistent with what we accept in psychology and education, art becomes the indispensable element in any normal, happy life. This meaning of art is that of expression.

We All Have Feelings

Painting, sculpture, music, ceramics, the dance—all are the products of human expression. In any one of these a man has embodied feelings concerning the world. Each such person thus fulfilled a need: that of releasing energy through meaningful channels. The result of this process of expression is twofold: the world is given new material form through the art object; the self is given new form through a personality enriched, composed, and happy.

Once produced, the art object can stir in others feelings similar to those experienced by the artists. This is the value of appreciation.

This definition of art is incomplete, but completeness is neither intended nor necessary. As given here, art is revealed for its essential value to the individual and to mankind. We all have feelings; we all must express them; we all do this in numberless ways. A poet does it best in verse, a milliner through hats (properly called "creations").

It should be observed that we said of the poet that he expressed himself at his "best" in poetry. This qualification implies that he may also express himself in other ways. In fact, he does—not only in one or two other ways—but in all ways. His expression is at its best in poetry because in it his personality functions at its fullest. He cannot express himself with equal success in painting. For the painter, the opposite is true. The milliner has chosen his way. Various materials differ in their potentialities as vehicles for expression. Words, paint, sound, stone, and a few other tools offer the best opportunity and so have become the accepted media for artists. But to deny this potentiality to other media, comforting and convenient though it may be for some, is in the long run futile.

Every Man an Artist

It will be pointed out that the foregoing remarks make of every man an artist and of every thing a work of beauty. This is intended. Every man and woman is to some degree an artist. Those who have more to say and say it better are better artists; that is all. As for the second point, Santayana is willing to say (in *The Sense of Beauty*) that "Everything is beautiful to someone to some degree." To this we might add that everybody is beautiful to

somebody to some degree—and a good thing it is too! ¹

Furthermore, being a means of expression, art is the instrument of learning, experience, and growth. As such, art is part and parcel of the very process of education. As a means of realizing one's endowments and of the cultivation of individuality and initiative, the arts are unsurpassed. And, finally, the artist on any level attains in his work a job of which he cannot be robbed. "Only the artist or the free scholar," said Beethoven, "carries his happiness with him."

"I Can't Even Carry a Tune"

It is not easy, however, to live an expressive life. Standardization, the inevitable by-product of modern industry, has induced into daily life a passivity that leaves much of our creative faculties dormant. Our push-button civilization saves us the trouble of stirring ourselves on our own behalf. But, worse yet, we have been conditioned to believe in our own inability to create. Thus we readily assert, "I can't even draw a straight line," "I can't even carry a tune," and "I can't even drive a nail straight."

When with sympathetic encouragement and a little practice we do create our song and our picture, we are too often plagued with the ridicule of the ubiquitous critic who reminds us that we are not as good as someone else; that we better leave art to the "artist." One would be regarded as vain and

¹ These concepts are further elaborated in "Industrial Arts in Education," by Jack Bookbinder, which may be obtained without cost from the Curriculum Office, Room 208, Board of Education, Parkway, Philadelphia, Pa.

presumptuous if one argued, "I can't sing like Caruso or even like the third man on the left in the chorus of *Po-dunk*—shall I then stop singing? Van Gogh couldn't paint like Rembrandt—did that prevent him from painting? Must one live up to an approved standard in order to live at all?" Indeed, though our schools have encouraged song, they have often done so with this unwitting prescription: All ye that enter here to sing, leave song outside.

Art Knows No Creed

Art education has for the most part been the cultivation of ancestor worship: the "old master" cult. The stress has been on the superiority of "genius," rather than on the universality of experience. Art has come to separate rather than unite—as if art were not the most powerful bond between man and man, nation and nation.

Art knows no creed, no national boundaries. Laughter and tears, the stuff that art is made of, are universal. Walls of hate may be built around a song but the song will out: the "Lorelei" will outlive armored walls and National Socialism. No tyrant's hysterical command can halt the passion of a poet's pen, and where once a heart was moved to speak all uncorrupted hearts can hear. Beethoven spoke for all art in the dedication to his "Mass"—"From the heart, may it reach the heart."

Our hearts are full. We must all speak to other hearts. We must, as we all say, express ourselves. Art drains an overflowing river by its rivulets and keeps the human dam from bursting. In an age of competitive struggle and standardization and impersonal machines, the personal, the individual, the non-competitive, must give us pause. We must develop those skills that will enable us to create, to build, the little humble worlds we can call our own.

The chief medium through which educators create is the child; but this need not be unaccompanied by participation in the arts. Since childhood and adolescence are the most crucial periods of expressive living and since the arts play an important role in this drama, the teacher needs to be equipped with understanding through experience. Also, in a profession where work is largely verbal and results are far from tangible, those arts in which the hands manipulate materials are especially valuable.

In conclusion we should make explicit what must have by now become apparent to the reader. Living itself is a vital process only in so far as it is expressive. Non-expressive living is a contradiction in terms. What we have been urging is a fuller and freer expression of our endowments and needs, for it is possible to exist partially. The world is peopled with the partially alive. This is its sadness.



It is the supreme art of the teacher to awaken joy in creative expression and knowledge.—Albert Einstein, Motto, for the astronomy building of Junior College at Pasadena, Calif.

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