When I was Commissioner of Education I heard heated debates over whether art education should be viewed as an academic discipline or a creative act—if I might oversimplify a complicated subject.

I do not diminish the convictions of my colleagues, but I have long believed that the arts' fundamental goals must serve both objectives. There is, I believe, an academic context in the arts—just as there is in every other form of language. Great art, like great literature, has a legacy to be remembered and forms to be more fully understood. Further, the connections between art and culture should be carefully examined.

But I also believe that, through the arts, we should free the imagination of our children. Through most of history, each culture has defined rather narrowly the artist's mode of expression. For example, ancient Egyptian tomb paintings are practically indistinguishable from one millennium to another. Think of it. Picasso went through more artistic styles in less than one century than Egyptian artists did in 2,000 years.

And culture can even be oppressive. In 1974 while traveling in the People's Republic of China, I was occasionally taken to the galleries where contemporary art was on display. One prize mural I was shown pictured a recently constructed hydroelectric dam in the interior of China. It was disquieting to see displays that sought to celebrate the state rather than the creativity of the human spirit.

The harsh truth is that today, in all too many classrooms, creativity is denied. We are systematically training pedants who have lost a powerful view of themselves as creators, as significant makers of meaning, and as interpreters of personal experience. We can teach our children about the history of art and the rules of perspective—and we should. But how do we stimulate children to respond to the primal messages that seem unmediated by our culture?

Our society is desperately in need of individuals who are able to look at the old and the familiar in startling new ways. People who can—as William Faulkner phrased it in his Nobel Prize address of 1950—"make out of the material of the human spirit something which was not there before."

Carl Sandburg expressed it when he wrote:

"Once having marched
Over the margins of animal necessity,
Over the grim line of sheer subsistence
Then man came
To the deeper rituals of his bones.
To the time for thinking things over.
To the dance, the song, the story.
Or to the hours given over to dreaming.
Once having so marched.

Now more than ever, our children need to see clearly, hear acutely, and feel sensitively through the exquisite language of the arts."

This column was adapted from an essay presented to a conference of the Getty Center for Education in the Arts and is printed with permission.

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