

Joy in a Fretful World

Address by actor and author John Lithgow at gala prior to the National Medal of Arts and the National Medal of Humanities ceremony, sponsored by the [President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities](#), February 12, 2012.

Good evening, and thank you so much for inviting me to be this evening's keynote speaker. I'm truly thrilled to be here. Tomorrow at midday at the White House, President Barak Obama will present to 15 Americans and 2 American institutions two of the highest honors this country bestows. To all of you honorees here with us tonight, we congratulate you, we take pride in what you do and what you have done, and we celebrate you. Sadly, in spite of your extraordinary achievements, there are only a few of you who routinely hear the sound of cheers and raucous applause—Mr. Watts, Mr. Rosen, Mr. Tillis, and Mr. Pacino. So let's give a huge hand to the *whole* group, the winners of this year's National Medal of Arts and National Medal of Humanities. Stand up and take a bow.

Every year I perk up at the news of these medals. Like the annual Kennedy Center Honors Gala, the moment gives me a little spasm of pleasure. Yes! I cry out to myself. Washington is paying attention to these essential areas of American life! Artists and humanists are getting their due! That pleasure is coupled with a certain sense of relief. The ceremonies help counteract my lurking anxiety that, in a Capitol weighed down with the appalling pressures of global conflict, economic stagnation, and pitched warfare between two political parties, the arts and humanities too often get short shrift. Celebrations like this are tinged with a kind of rueful irony: could it be that they are so uplifting because they are so rare?

Uh-oh, I hear you say. Is this going to be a polemic? Have they engaged another whiner to harangue us about D.C. philistines and the ill treatment of the national endowments? Well, fear not. In spite of the close proximity to the White House and the houses of Congress, I am in a celebratory state of mind and in no mood to lecture U.S. policymakers. I do have a few strong opinions to air about American arts and humanities, but they are scrupulously cheerful and optimistic ones.

When George Stevens invited me to speak tonight, acting on behalf of the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, I was a more appropriate choice than they even knew. The fact is, I have been steeped in these subjects, up to my eyeballs, for the last several months.

And why is that, you ask? Well, let me tell you.

Two years ago, in one of the rare recent bipartisan acts of Congress, two senators and two congressmen—two each from both parties—invited the American Academy of Arts and Sciences to form a commission on the humanities. The charge of this proposed commission was "to advance a national conversation about the value and importance of the humanities to the nation." The impetus behind the idea may have been provided by some troubling recent trends around the country. In the vast population of secondary school students, verbal SAT scores, literacy rates and the basic understanding of history have all been showing signs of decline. Background data provided by the Commission includes a Cassandra-like cry of alarm: "The ability of individuals to write, read, and narrate their lives is in peril."

I will not depress you with gloomy statistics in support of this bleak statement, but you get the drift. And it's bad news for American arts and humanities. The good news is that Congress, at the urging of those four stalwart legislators, has acted to seek ways that the nation can address these negative trends. We all owe the four of them a debt of gratitude, and they deserve to be named out loud: Senators Lamar Alexander [R-TN] and Mark Warner [D-VA], and Representatives David Price [D-NC] and Tom Petri [R-WI]. Give them a hand, too.

The Commission's assignment was to generate 10 succinct initiatives to promote the cause of the humanities and to present them to Congress later this year, with persuasive arguments for putting them into practice. Of course, given the current state of politics and the economy, this charge had an unwritten, implicit proviso: *don't ask for any money*. Recommending 10 such actions but asking for no money to carry them out is roughly equivalent to designing a 10-story building and asking for no tools to build it with. But the Academy patriotically embraced its mission and set out to accomplish it.

Accordingly, last year a 50-person blue-ribbon commission was empaneled. (One of its members, by the way, will get one of the medals tomorrow, and several others have won them in the past.) The group was made up of major figures from academia, business, philanthropy, cultural institutions, government and the media, with a smattering of four or five people from the creative arts. To my surprise and bemusement, I was included in this latter category. So far the Commission has held two of its three weekend-long meetings. At both of these meetings, I was the only *artiste* to actually show up (if you don't count the formidable George Lucas), and I was dazzled by the gathering of brainy luminaries all around me.

At first, I sat silently among them, listening to their polished phrases and their penetrating insights. In their midst, I felt like a sullen schoolboy in the slow learners' group. Finally, in a morning break-out meeting of 10 Commission members, I summoned up the courage to speak. My bottled-up thoughts tumbled out in a kind of passionate blurt. I'm an actor. Histrionics are my stock in trade. So I was predictably histrionic: "The humanities are indispensable to a rounded human being!" I cried. "We should declare that fact loud and clear! Democracy can only function with an educated citizenry, grounded in the humanities! People have forgotten that the humanities are bound up with their own lives! We have to remind them of that! The job has fallen to us! The humanities in education are the wellspring of empathy! Cooperation! Civil discourse! Collaboration in a polarized world! They create a habit of learning that lasts a lifetime! They are a source of self-knowledge! Life without them is drab and joyless! Joy! That's the word! Joy! The arts and the humanities instill *JOY!*"

Or words to that effect.

To my mortification, that afternoon this impassioned peroration was quoted, verbatim and at length, to the full Commission. In response, one of the more cool-headed and hard-nosed Commission members dryly pointed out that an American worker without a job might be singularly unimpressed with my belief in the "joy" of humanistic pursuits. Another member, a state governor and a seasoned veteran of governmental policy wars, suggested that, in any argument before Congress in favor of expanded federal programs in the humanities, the word "joy" is probably best left out. As if chastened by a pair of stern schoolmasters, I deferred to their better judgment. But I was unrepentant. In fact, I was secretly pleased that I had livened

up the proceedings and unembarrassed by my newly minted status as the Commission's comic relief.

Because in fact, I steadfastly believe everything I said that day. I believe that civil discourse, self-knowledge, empathy, the habit of learning and, yes, the capacity for joy are indeed learned skills and that they can be most effectively taught to young people through the arts and humanities. And I believe most fervently that the health of a democracy absolutely depends on these qualities in the grown-up electorate.

A lot of this conviction comes from my own educational background. In a peripatetic childhood I went to eight different small town public schools—in Ohio, Massachusetts and New Jersey. Surprisingly enough, those far-flung schools provided me with a marvelous, broadly based secondary education, one that sent me on a clear trajectory to a first-rate college by the time I was 17. This was an earlier era, of course, when public schooling was not nearly as embattled and cash-strapped as it is today; when most high schools offered classes in art, music and multiple foreign languages; when testing was not yet paramount in everyone's mind; when school standards were not yet the subject of pitched political battles; and when no one had yet coined that cold, forbidding and ubiquitous acronym for science, technology, engineering, and math: STEM!

Ah, yes, STEM! The very word gives me the screaming whim whams. I am a humanist, you see. I left behind science, technology, engineering, and math many years ago. I was never much good at all that stuff to begin with, and whatever I *did* learn I've long since forgotten. Nowadays it's all I can do to calculate a *tip*. Don't get me wrong. I fully appreciate the vital importance of STEM in every child's education. For our economy to grow, for our nation to stay competitive, and for our young people to get good work in a daunting job market, our educational system must excel in each of the STEM subject areas. But to my mind, the arts and humanities are *every bit as important* as STEM. And a balance must be struck.

The very word STEM provides me with an apt poetic metaphor to drive home my point. Let me offer it to you, with abject apologies to our poet-medalists John Ashbery and Rita Dove. Picture a flower—a big bright flower in full bloom. The flower's stem is, well, STEM! Science, technology, engineering, and math. It is the superstructure, the infrastructure, the support system of the flower itself. And the arts and humanities? Why, they're the blossom of course—the source of the flower's beauty, fragrance, and identity, the visible mark of its health, and the wherewithal for the flower to reproduce itself. The stem is functional, strong, and essential. But pare away the blossom and the stem has no purpose, no function, no value. In time it will wither and die. It cannot survive the loss. So much for STEM.

I know, I know. I've taken this way too far. I have not only strained a metaphor, I have practically strangled it to death. But here's the point (and I just *bet* that it stays with you). The blossom is what we love about a flower. It's what inspires us. It's what engages our senses and our emotions. It is the reason we plant the flower in the first place. And yes, like the arts and the humanities, it's what gives us joy.

Joy. We're back to that word. By now it has practically become the theme of my speech: joy in a fretful world. We are living through perilous times. The last few years have seen our country's most destructive terror attack, the fog of war, the gravest economic conditions since the Depression, natural disasters of incomprehensible magnitude accompanied by the ominous drumbeat of climate

change. These events and conditions beget fear. Fear deadens our spirit and darkens our national mood. It begets denial, mutual suspicion, and divisiveness. Fear polarizes us and paralyzes us. You see evidence of it everywhere you look—in every newspaper, newscast, blog and, most blatantly, in every political campaign ad on TV.

You see it everywhere but not here. Not here and not tonight. And why not? Well, just look at who we are honoring this evening and what we are honoring them for. The arts and humanities are our bulwark *against* fear. Tonight's honorees don't avoid harsh truths—they engage them. They don't divide us from each other, they connect us and reveal to us our common ground. Their gifts to us are a mixed bag, to be sure, but what a glorious mixed bag it is. And what gifts. Think of Andre Watts plumbing the depths of Schumann and Chopin. Think of Rita Dove, poet laureate and passionate ballroom dancer. Think of Mel Tillis crooning "Coca Cola Cowboy" at the Grand Old Opry. Think of Anthony Appiah confronting and dissecting the politics of race, Charles Rosen breathing new life into the music of Franz Liszt, Will Barnet defying age by creating beautiful images late into his 90s, Amartya Sen wielding economics—*economics!* the dismal science!—as a weapon in the global war on poverty and famine. And think of film star Al Pacino returning yet again to Broadway last year in *The Merchant of Venice*, and performing the best Shylock that I, for one, have ever seen. What do these vastly different Americans and all their cohorts have in common? They are men and women who give us hope, who broaden our thinking, who enlarge our hearts, who stimulate and delight us, who heighten our sense of ourselves and illuminate us about the lives of others, who challenge us, who educate us, and who give us the rare gift of joy. Think of all of them, the recipients of the 2011 National Medals of Arts and of Humanities, and rejoice.

Thank you.