

Interlocking

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I'd really like to thank all of you for having me here. I'd like to thank Tim Wade for inviting me. I've just been here for a little less than a day now, but it's clear that this is an absolutely extraordinary, wonderful community, and I'm very happy to be here with you, and look forward to the rest of our week together.

On our menu today is the issue of *soul food*: we all need nourishment and we all give nourishment. There are many kinds of giving and taking of nourishment. There's something called an economy, which gets talked about a great deal in our country, certainly a great deal more than the arts are talked about. *Economy* comes from the Greek word *ecos*, which means housekeeping, house. It's the same as the word *ecology*; both economy and ecology are about giving and taking of nourishment, and about the cycles of nourishment, and how nourishment travels around the circle of life.

In our country, as you know, the arts are not really valued very much. They tend to be the first things that are cut in school budgets and national budgets. There are all kinds of excuses that are made for cutting them, where people pick up some little piece of offensive artwork, or something that bothers them, and use it as an excuse to cut a lot of other things. So all of you who have taken up the calling of art, the calling of music, the calling of writing, the calling of theater, the calling of new art forms, all of you are very brave. Every one of you has taken on something that is very important, that really gives life to our world and is not properly recognized. One of the challenges that each of you is going to have to face in your career is how to get that recognition. I'm not talking about fame or money, though both of those are okay; what I'm really talking about is people recognizing their true needs. What do we really need in our life beyond food and shelter? One of the things we really need is soul food. One of the things we really need is the expansion of mind, the expansion of heart, the expansion of imagination that is made possible through doing art, through receiving art from other people, through exchanging the imaginative processes that all of you are so adept at. So what all of you have to give is something that is extraordinarily needed, something

* Transcript of a talk on March 7 2002, to the assembled students and faculty at the Interlochen Arts Academy, Interlochen, Michigan. Recording transcribed by Jena Leake. © 2002 by Stephen Nachmanovitch.

that is extraordinarily important for other human beings to be fully human, to be fully civilized, and to grow.

A few days ago I was at home in Virginia and was telling a friend of mine that I was coming to Interlochen. This friend had never heard of Interlochen, so he said, "What is that? Is that like interlockin' your fingers?" I decided that that's actually something worth talking about – interlocking. We all have the sense of what I just described, that the arts provide nourishment, provide something necessary to life, but what is that thing that they provide, and how do they provide it? I would say that one way to look at it is that they provide interlockin'. There are all kinds of ways in which we are interlocking at many levels. All of you who are performers know about the ways that you interlock with audiences, the ways of making connections with people, of giving something to them and receiving something from them. All of you who are performers also know about performing with other people and how there is a kind of lock that develops between you, the synchronicity that develops between you as you work with each other and play with each other and find what each has to give to each other.

There's a phenomenon called *entrainment*. You see a group of construction workers framing the beams of a house. At first they're each hammering at their own speed, and their hammer-blows are random with respect to the other people. You've all heard this happen. After a while their hammering starts to sync up; they hear each other, and their bodies all start to produce a sympathetic vibration with each other so that – unintentionally – they're hammering in rhythm, they're hammering in syncopation with each other. And after only a few minutes of hammering nothing is random. Those of you who are string players are at home with the phenomenon of sympathetic vibration. If you put a violin on a table and you take another violin in your hand and play a tone, the violin on the table is going to vibrate sympathetically with that tone. When you play a tone related to one of the open strings of the violin on the table it will sing out more strongly. That is another form of entrainment. There is the wave of hammering on the construction site: boomp ... boomp ... boomp ... boomp ... boomp, synchronizing into a beat, maybe once a second. And that is the wave of sympathetic vibration on a violin, which might be 196, 440, 660 times a second, but these are both waves that entrain. Rhythm and musical pitch are really the same thing at different speeds, and all of them tend to want to sync with their surroundings. Two people who are not musically trained can face each other at a close distance and start to sing a tone; they're very quickly going to come into a pitch relationship with each other. It's a natural thing. And so what you who are skilled artists are doing, at a more advanced level, is developing a sympathetic vibration with the audience and with each other, so that something gets exchanged at a level that is more complex – and at the same time more basic – than what you could say in words.

It's great to talk about peace and understanding between people; these are words we know and love and we wish there was a lot more of them in our world. It's something very hard to attain, if we try to do it consciously. The problem in a sense *is* consciousness. As soon as you and I start talking, I have some words that mean something to me but mean something different to you; and because of your resonance with those words I might say something

that will make you angry and then we get into a fight over words. We get into a fight over meanings. But when people are operating on a level of sympathetic vibrations, whether it be through music, visual art or any of our forms of art or craftsmanship, when people are addressing the unconscious parts of each other, where we're able to go underneath those levels of meanings, we're able to go underneath those levels that might be misunderstood or threatening or difficult in some way come, to a deeper interlock.

Another part of this is what might call *inter-unlocking*. What is the role of the artist in unlocking the stuck systems of humanity? I've been to a number of schools in the six months since September 11th and talked to a lot of young people. In 1957, when I was seven years old, the Sputnik went up, the first satellite, launched by the Russians. I remember being a little kid in school and our entire country took the launch of the Sputnik as a challenge and as a warning to our country that we were somehow deficient in science and technology. Our educational systems really took note, and I was one of millions of seven-year-olds who started studying science and math; I was going to be a physicist when I grew up and somehow we were going to have this more interesting world through science. We understood that to move into the future we needed to be more adept in these fields. September 11th, I think, is a wake-up call of a different kind: that we have progressed technically but are deficient in cultural understanding. We're deficient in figuring out the antidotes to hate. Many people I have talked with feel that they don't know nearly enough about other cultures and how to approach understanding them: fields of study that, like the arts, were previously denigrated as marginal or irrelevant to "real" or everyday life, but have now taken on a new urgency. These young people want to know how culture influences reality, what makes people feel and act, create and destroy, what makes people different, what makes them the same, why they hate each other, why they love each other. We can now recognize and honor our hunger for cultural understanding. The need has always been there, but especially now as we try to move toward a *modus vivendi* in a diverse but interconnected planet. We need to know more about what moves people, what inspires them, what scares them. The more we understand about other people's cultures, the better our own culture will be. Here, art and imagination are the coinage of the realm. People have different epistemologies. How do you tell what is knowledge and what is not knowledge? What is real and not real? What is valuable and what is not valuable? We need to learn a lot more – not just about other cultures – but about what culture is. What is our own culture? What is Culture (with a capital C), meaning the role of culture within our culture? In a sense with all our emphasis in the past half century on science and technology, and more recently in the last decades with our whole culture veered towards business as the most important thing in life, we realize that there's something essential missing that we don't understand. And you are the ones who have the skills to reveal some of those understandings.

As we talk across cultures, people communicate at an unconscious level and it's so easy for them to misunderstand each other and so easy for them to feel threatened by each other and then to take the next step of hating each other, and then to become addicted to the hate. What *you* do here – music, dance, poetry, art, film, theater – can pass through those barriers of conscious resistance and pass through those barriers of fear, to reach people's hearts directly. To reach people's unconscious directly. And who knows which of you, or perhaps all

of you, through your art, will find keys to unlock some of those places in the heart where people are unable to understand each other, unable to speak to each other, but might come to a deeper understanding, through knowing how you feel, through your understanding of how they feel.

When we talk about interlocking in the arts, we're not just talking about interlocking between performer and audience and between performers, we're also talking about interlocking between conscious and unconscious mind. You all know this in some way: that is where your creativity comes from ... the interlocking between unconscious and conscious mind. I'm personally in the business of improvisation, so I get up with a violin and play something that has never been played before and will never be played again and I have absolutely no idea where it comes from. But I've learned through practice to have faith that something is going to come out. So in a very direct way through improvisation, something arises from the unconscious, something you never knew before but now you know you know it. And now it can go out into the world and address somebody else's unconscious. But this is even true in the more rehearsed and practiced art forms. Every one of you who has played a Beethoven score knows that playing scored music means finding something new in that music that has never been found before. Giving that music your own personal interpretation, your own particular rhythmic twist and your own particular tone quality which says something about what you yourself derive from that music and what you have to give people through the medium of that music. So creativity comes from this kind of dialog, this half-hidden dialogue between conscious and unconscious, and through the arts we open that hiding place a little bit more so we can really see what is there: what is unconscious within us that wants to come out.

Another thing that interlocks is the relationship between subject and object. That there's a way in which, for example, the visual artist teaches us through the art to merge with something that is out there in the world so that we see ourselves in that object in the world and we see the whole world in that object and that reflection comes back to us.

So we have a very interesting and beautiful challenge here. How can each of you use the tools that you have acquired? Every one of you is here because you have some passionate need to express yourself through some medium or perhaps through more than one medium. And that passionate desire arises from something. Some need to connect with other people. Some need to give to other people. So when I talked before about economy and ecology, this flow of nourishment, this soul food that travels around as we create culture. What you're primarily here about is creating nourishment for other people. And where does that nourishment come in from, the nourishment that you have received from other people, through the nourishment you have received either from your teachers or from your long-dead teachers. Every time you play that Beethoven score, you're in a sense eating some of that dish that Beethoven served up long ago, and finding some strength in it, some power in it that's of value today. And that's what we're doing here.

I'd like to leave a few minutes open for some questions and discussion and thoughts and feelings that come up in your minds as we talk about these issues.

Q: When we're creating works of art that are supposed to be culturally significant, reflecting political and cultural events in the world, where as artists and as people do we need to draw the line between expression and being offensive? And do you think there is a line we can draw between expression and being offensive?

A: That's very important question; and as you know there are a lot of big social issues around that. I would say that you need to draw a line, but I don't think the line is between being self-expression and offensiveness. Every one of you is going to offend somebody by your work one of these days, if you haven't already done so many times. Offensiveness is part of the nature of communication. Sometimes you have to have a lot of courage to deal with the consequences of having offended somebody, but I wouldn't advise you to shrink from being offensive.

But there is a different line that I would have you think about drawing. And that's the line between self-expression and self-indulgence. There are a lot of artists who have done work that may or may not be offensive to people out there but which they do really for one of two reasons. 1) Because some artists confuse originality with newness. So they say, okay, I'm an artist, I'm a composer, I'm a poet, I'm going to do something that's never been done before and if someone's done anything like this before, it's not really art. And then you're really going out on a limb and usually it's an offensive limb because it doesn't necessarily relate to anything else. And they think that's originality. But originality doesn't necessarily mean doing something that's never been done before, though it may be that. For those of you that have studied mathematics, you know what an origin is on a graph, right? The origin is the zero point from which everything arises. And to be original as an artist means *this* (the center of the person) is the origin; that the work arises, really, from who you are. Now *who you are* also includes everything you've ever learned, everything you've ever absorbed from your culture, everything you've absorbed from living and dead **masters**. So if you're playing a score by Mozart, if you play it in mechanical way so that you're just skillfully playing the notes and just doing a job, that's not original. That's something that comes from outside of you that you may be doing to please someone else. To do something entirely to please someone else is in a way just as fruitless, just as lacking in fruit or outcome, as doing something just for the purpose of offending someone. It really goes nowhere. Where is if you completely internalize Mozart and make Mozart your own, then that really comes from you. At the same time, if you're doing really original art, if you're a composer or writer or artist who's doing brand new stuff, and the brand new stuff comes from you, comes from your heart and mind, represents the amalgam of all the things you've learned from all the classics and all the new things and all the contemporary things you've absorbed, and you've allow those things percolate with in yourself so that what comes out comes from *you*, whether it's like something that's been done before or not, then it will be original. And then if you do something that's really original that comes from you and if it does offend somebody, then you will know how to defend it. Somebody comes at you and says, "this is outrageous, this destroys our community sense of values, this destroys this and that," you'll be able to answer them. You won't have to stand up and say, "well I'm an artist and artistic license allows me

to do whatever I want.” You’ll be able to explain because the work comes from you, even if you can’t be able to convince them – and there will be some inevitable battles there – you’ll be able to defend yourself by knowing why you do what you do and what the purpose is and what it really has to communicate to people.

Q: What do you think is the key is to unlocking barriers between people?

A: The key to unlocking barriers between people is emptiness. In Buddhism they talk about this: the Sanskrit word is *shunyata*. That doesn’t mean being devoid of ideas or having nothing to say or being quiescent. It means realizing that every one of us, everything in the universe, is empty of *inherent* existence. In our culture, we’re taught that a noun is a person, place or thing, that this floor exists as a separate entity ... but when you look at what this floor is made of, when you realize that the trees that gave the wood for this floor have their own past, present and future, that the people who built the floor have their own past, present and future, that the minerals that generated the nails and the paint have their own past, present and future ... as soon as you look at something as simple as this floor, let alone something as complex as you or me, you realize that this floor is linked to the entire universe and is part of that economy and ecology, that flow of materials and energy that is our world. So the floor is empty of inherent existence; it’s real and it’s hard, but it’s not something separate that’s there by itself. It’s part of a process of interaction with many other aspects of the world. And much more so human beings, with all of our family and cultural influences and everything we’ve read and our religions and our art forms and our fears and our economic realities and all of that. So, the more we can realize emptiness – that is our own lack of being an objective noun that’s bounded by skin – the more we then realize our connection to other people, and other kinds of people. Then we have the key to unlocking the barriers you are asking about.

Q: I’m in theater and one thing I’ve really struggled with is connecting with people so that I’m not preaching to the choir but I’m sharing why people really need the arts. And in theater, people who come to the theater are often people who love the theater and not necessarily people who need to be touched the most. So how do I share it with the world that doesn’t necessarily have access to the theater, who don’t necessarily know that they need or want it?

A: That’s a huge question. I wish I could answer it for you. That in a way is one of the creative problems that each of you have to solve. Let’s put it this way: you have your audience and in a way you’re preaching to the choir because the people who come to the theater already love theater. But I want you to start thinking about the edges of that audience. By that I mean those people who have come to your show, but who by their disposition or culture are the farthest from your core audience? What can you learn about them? The problem that you brought to us, which is really the huge problem of the arts in our time, is how to find those people who are still close enough to what you do who are willing to come, but who are on the edge and a little bit uncomfortable but came anyway. And what can you learn about them? Certainly in the art of theater you have the tools for connecting with people in that way, for finding what you can learn about them and from them. This is something that all

of you who are your age have the huge advantage over people like me, because you in a sense can recreate the forms of the arts in some new way that reaches people differently.

In the classical music world, all of you know that the orchestra audiences in our country are shrinking, there's a lot of budget deficits, there are some orchestras that are having to shut down their seasons early. And it's very clear that it's an issue of the core audience versus the peripheral audience. There's a core audience that just wants to hear the same well-known classics over and over again – and of course all those classics are wonderful and I love them too – but then the same people who often are the people who give the most money are offended by what they call modern music which is now more than 100 years old. I used to say that these people believe that the only good composer is a dead composer. Some people still talk about Stravinsky as modern music, which is hilarious. At the same time there are huge amalgamating forms of new music that are arising. There's all kinds of composers who still hail from the classical tradition but who are incorporating new music forms from other cultures – Indian music, African music, East Asian music – and are starting to find new pathways through music that will interest new kinds of people. And then you have the issue of boring or offending the people who are the mainline audience for the classics, and similarly if you play the classics in the traditional way you will bore some of the people who want the new music. You have this juggling of populations. One of the things that happens under this context...the recording companies are shrinking, all of this kind of thing as we go for the big, pop forms with the big companies who are putting out music in this society.

While the context for presenting new music, theater, art dwindles because of the big corporate, economic forces, the number of people who have a hunger for the arts is not dwindling. And those of you who play the classics are going to have the challenge and opportunity of creating new contexts in which to present those classics. Fifty years from now, some of you may be 65 or 75-year-old musicians who are still playing Beethoven but not in concert halls as we know them.

Some of you will still be playing Shakespeare. Theater has evolved in so many ways so that there's constantly new forms and contexts for presenting Shakespeare. And we see that the power of that art is still valid even as the form in which it's presented change. I think that is going to have to happen in all of the arts, and you guys have to be not only fearless about creating your art but fearless about creating the context of your art. Every one of you is going to have to learn more and more about the art of business than you could possibly dream of now as you figure out new ways to present your work. None of you is going to go into a world as mature artists where things will be handed to you on a silver platter or where there will be big institutions and museums and symphonies that will be welcoming you with open arms and saying, "Hey, come do your thing. We'll pay for it." That is not going to happen. Every one of you is going to have to use the same determination and passion that got you here to Interlochen to keep getting you from place to place as you invent and create the art of the future and the ways of bringing art to people in the future.

Thank you!