

## Conferences and Communitas: Making Magic Happen . . . Sometimes

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### 1

*The field of art education hardly qualifies as a tribal society. Nevertheless, there are some "tribal" analogies that might be made as we study our customs and conventions, our mores and mutations, and the sources of our symbols and sillinesses. Indeed, our annual conferences are fitting subjects for anthropological analyses. And although I haven't filled my sketchbooks with notes and drawings of our National Art Education Association Conventions with ethnographic studies in mind, in retrospect they just might serve that purpose. What do my notes and my memories tell us about these yearly meetings of the tribe? What planned purposes do these conferences serve and what are their unplanned and unpredictable outcomes?*

### 2

The anthropologist Victor Turner (1967 and 1969) spent many years studying the Ndembu people of Central Africa. In his studies he sought to characterize the changes that occurred in that society. He set about his work in the expected manner by attending to slices of everyday life. Through his observations he was able to observe that there were changes in symbols that the Ndembu people created to define themselves. But try as he might, he was unable to determine the sources of these new symbols. Changes occurred and he couldn't discover why, where, or even when they began.

Finally, Turner realized that, like almost everyone else, he had wrongly assumed that the discovery of change involves careful attention to the structure of a society. To discover the dynamics of social symbolic behavior, he learned that it was necessary to attend to structure beyond the structure, or as Turner would have it, to the "anti-structure." He came to see the ritual processes - the performances of ritual - as distinct phases in the social process wherein groups became adjusted to internal tensions and changes.

Terms such as "liminal," "liminoid," "betwixt-and-between," and "communitas" are central to Turner's analysis of what occurs during the ritual process when normal events, relationships, and patterns of behavior

are suspended - times when the everyday is shaken-up, fractured, and suspended (1974). Turner observed times of tension during which the families within the same village broke into separate groups, separated, and then later rejoined. During the separation phase the individual groups developed new symbols and new patterns of behavior that were ultimately incorporated into the larger society. Turner described events that preceded the installation of a tribal leader where the leader-to-be was mocked, spat upon, beaten, derided and otherwise made the lowest-of-the-low for a brief period just before he was elevated to his new high position. And Turner pointed to the puberty rites described by Van Gennep in which young boys were stripped of their clothing, their names taken from them, and their ranks and social statuses dissolved - there was a *leveling*, a making-all-the-same. When separated from the tribe, the young boys in their leveled and reduced state were forced to survive by fending for themselves. Their time of *separation* was a state of betwixt-and-between, of liminality, of uncertainty, of threat where they developed new social relationships, established new social structures, new patterns of behavior, and created new symbols. It is particularly to the crazy combinations and re-combinations of signs and symbols, and to rule-breaking that Turner pays attention. When the young initiates finally end their *transitional state* and are *re-incorporated* within their society they bring with them their newly created symbols and patterns of behavior. These are the sources of social and symbolic dynamism.

### 3

When Turner attempted to apply his insights about the sources of social dynamics to non-tribal industrialized Western societies they didn't seem to fit - at first (1974). And then he began to see evidence of "communitas," the special feelings and bonds that develop among individuals when they are thrown into non-structural or anti-structural situations to be the source of new symbolic behaviors in industrialized societies just as much as tribal societies. (He has also observed that some individuals such as artists in industrialized societies are permanently "assigned" or assume the anti-structural role.) On "pilgrimages" and at (some) parties, at conventions and in other situations where individuals are separated from everyday matters, a special atmosphere emerges that permits a feeling of magic to embrace all that happens. There is a liberatum of human cognitive capacities. The past is momentarily suspended and the future has not yet begun. There is created an institutional capsule or pocket which contains the germ of future development. It is a time when people can be subverted from their serious duties in order to create an atmosphere of shared ideas, new visions, a new order, a revolution in thinking, a feeling that all is possible, as Blake would have defined it, catching the "winged moment as it flies."

## 4

Our art educational conferences seem to have characteristics of both the structural and the anti-structural. A glance at our conference programs tells us that in our separation from the everyday we have merely surrendered one kind of structure for another. But our conferences would also appear to be an ideal ground for the creation of *communitas*. In these yearly gatherings of the tribe, we purposefully leave the everyday behind as we seek enlightenment and perhaps romance and adventure as well. We don't give up our names but we do have them written on tags of the same size - tags that provide the States assembly members the opportunity to distinguish themselves through the ludic pinning-on of symbols from as many states as possible. In our conferences there is a degree of leveling inasmuch as "world-famous" art educators and "lowly" unknown art teachers sometimes sit down next to one another. There are members who know that the "real purpose" of the conferences is not to attend sessions but to strengthen networks and to invest ideological capital in the hope of a good return. But, then again, these power-based maneuverings seem as much structural as anti-structural. There are the parties that may be the sources of new symbols, new ideas, new relationships - if they could only be remembered the next morning. An there are the recurring romances - the "same time next year" phenomenon - and the new romances that some come seeking. But do the fresh ideas that we seek at our annual meetings come from the structural or the anti-structural realms of our conferences? Perhaps from both; let me illustrate.

## 5

There is rule-breaking, or the scheming for it. Back in 1963 when Laura Chapman and I were new graduate students at Ohio State, we drove to the NAEA conference together in one car with our three professors - Manny Barkan, Jerry Hausman, and David Ecker - from Columbus to Kansas City. During such a long drive one gets to know his or her professors in very different ways from the ways one knows them in their classrooms. We got to know them when their guard was down; we saw into their lives, learned their eccentricities, their sleeping and eating habits. But the thing I remember most vividly about that conference - the only thing I remember about the conference aside from the drive there and back - was a planned burglary. David Mandellas's little book *Education and the Evisceration of the Artist* had just been published. One night at the conference Manny Barkan gleefully recounted some of its juicy bits and its nasty bits. Either Ecker or Hausman asked, "how can we get copies?" And a plan was hatched to steal into the closed commercial exhibits to "borrow" copies. A guard put a stop to the plan, but that's not the point. The very idea of rule-breaking was enough to surround that book with memories that have created an aura that transcends any importance the book might have held.

There is irreverence. There was the keynote address given by Rhoda Kellogg in a large and nearly empty hall in San Francisco (probably in 1967). Through her dotted line diagrams traced over the most improbable patterns in the children's configurations Kellogg tried to illustrate the gestalt patterns present in children's scribbles and pictorials. Catching the spirit of the occasion, Jim Kern and I sat in the semi-darkness and with our arms, hands and fingers in the air we traced circles around the most improbable gestalt patterns everywhere in the auditorium - patterns, however, that were just as probable as Kellogg's. And as we laughed and traced, I resolved once again to undertake studies of children's drawings that would counter conventional art educational notions of natural artistic unfolding. After the lecture Jim Kern and I laid plans for a secret International Society for Aesthetic Education. The Society exists to this day but it is so secret that only Kern and I know the members - and sometimes we forget; their names are not recorded. Kern and I still hold brief ISAE business meetings whenever we meet.

There is magic - sometimes even in a general session. The Miami meeting of 1961 was my first NAEA national conference. I knew hardly anyone and hardly anyone knew me but there was a need for a representative from the Pacific Art Association to sit on the speakers platform. No "regular" representative could be found. I was drafted. As Sol Steinberg said about himself when he finally arrived in New Guinea, "I am important in my own eyes for being here," I was important in my own eyes for being there. The presentation was made by John Ciardi, poetry editor of the *Saturday Review of Literature*. I sat directly behind Ciardi looking at his baggy brown trousers and his waving arms as I tried to imagine what facial expressions accompanied his eloquent words. To illustrate what he meant by good aesthetic form from the organistic perspective, Ciardi presented the struggles Keats encountered as he wrote the *Eve of St. Agnes*. Ciardi told of how Keats had Porfiro steal into the castle, ignoring the dangers of Madeline's heinous kinsmen, and faint as he begins to watch Madeline undress. The faint neutralized the possibility of impropriety. And then:

Anon his heart revives: Her vespers done,  
Of all its wreathed pearls she frees her hair,  
Unclasps her warmed jewels one by one -

And Ciardi spoke about how "warmed jewels" has been praised - often, justly - how they got warmed, Keats' kind of sensory detail - rich, full of suggestion, and yet delicate. Then Ciardi referred to the difficulty that Keats had with the next lines (Ciardi had access to the Keats' notes that revealed his struggles), how there was a tonality that Keats must preserve. "Wreathed pearls" and "warmed jewels" have a happy relationship. That relationship must be echoed in the next lines. Ciardi told how Keats made a mistake in the next version. Madeline "Loosens her bursting Bodice."

Ciardi told us that,

There is no scientific fact anyone could adduce that Madeline could not be as buxom as you please and yet be as delicate as you please. It is not scientific fact that counts here, but the tonality. "Bursting" seemed wrong - run for your life, the dam is bursting. It is the flavor of the word that is wrong.

Ciardi then went on to tell how Keats first was tempted to cheat, and then how he finally got it right. Those words of Ciardi (and Keats) have been passed on to generations of my students. I had used them so often that by 1971 when I was teaching in Britain for a year and was without my notes, I was able to reconstruct Ciardi's lecture from memory, and I am one who has difficulty memorizing my own name. Sometimes the magic of a session is felt by only one or two participants. Perhaps I manufactured the magic myself from the marvelous ingredients provided by Ciardi and Keats.

There is revolution. In the 1986 NAEA conference in New Orleans I listened to Ralph Smith give his lecture in which he introduced his monograph on *Excellence in Art Education*. My response to the lecture recorded in my journal was "scholarly," "well done," "the monograph should be useful." At a reception at the conclusion of the lecture I told Nancy MacGregor that we ought to use the monograph as the basis for discussion in the field. Later, as I read the full monograph I came to see just how little Smith's ideas of excellence corresponded with my own. I was troubled by his use of modernist theories of aesthetics that seemed so ill-suited a base on which to build a postmodern art education. And I saw as especially problematic Smith's dismissal of the political and social approaches to the study and interpretation of art. It seemed to me that we had a substantial issue that merited debate at one of our conferences. My colleague Patricia Amburgy and I set about organizing a session in which *Excellence in Art Education* would be debated. And then we fought off what appeared to be attempts to have the session scratched from the conference program. Patricia's and my agreement to include a "balanced" set of respondents secured a place for three connected sets of presentations relating to "excellence" in the 1987 Boston conference schedule.

All of the papers presented at the three sessions were notable - filled with thoughtful and well-reasoned ideas both for and against Smith's version of "excellence." But drama and states of high emotion weld memories to one's very being; the second session has become a part of me. Ralph Smith was in the audience and so was tension as Jan Jagodzinski made his performance-piece-presentation with the assistance of Elleda Katan. The authority of the Trinity was evoked, the executive was in his tasteful suit in his tasteful suite, what nice clothes - how nicely they go together, *Mona Lisa* was had for lunch (how nicely her parts go together, how nicely they taste, how tasteful they are). The atmosphere of the room made undeniable the fact that politics and art, ideology and aesthetics, contrary to Smith's assertions, can be fused inextricably. Criticism's vehicle

was art - not tasteful art, but art all the same. From the front row my back felt the tension of the room and then felt it relax. I learned later that Ralph Smith had left. (Afterwards he told me and anyone else who would listen that he always walks out on bad theater.) That room contained communitas. That communitas still contains some of us.

## 6

But why is it that in 28 years of conference-attending I can remember so few things that were truly remarkable, truly vivid, that truly reoriented my thinking. Why are there so few sessions and situations in which new symbols are created. Am I just not to be found in the right places? Do I avoid them? I am, after all, a social klutz who doesn't drink and doesn't relax. My deaf ear doesn't unscramble sounds in the noise of parties. But if parties are the primary places for conference communitas, then are our conferences functioning as they should?

I know that it is impossible to program communitas into our conference sessions - or anywhere else for that matter. But it is not impossible to set the conditions wherein it might happen. Perhaps we could broaden our conceptions of what conference presentations might be. In recent years my proposal to include my grandson - one with whom I have carried on a series of graphic dialogues since he was two years of age - in a conference session, and the proposal of one of my students to present a play were refused. (The play was about a young girl who, when locked in a room by her insane mother, creates symbolic worlds in order to survive.) Why are we so suspicious of art?

In our conferences why don't we play more often with the possibilities of including art and drama? Why in our conference sessions do we not allow for the discussions and interactions that take us if not to liminal and ludic states at least to the realm of the scholarly. The strategies and the symbols for the new art education are the most active and reformative when they collide in irregular fashion among irregular thinkers. But then, perhaps we are truly afraid of the anti-structure.

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