

Keynote Address

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Everything is about people a colleague of mine says.

I think most things are about how we take hands and hold them.

Dick Gregory, on being interviewed about comedy in general and Richard Pryor in particular, changed the focus of the interview to the importance of the real subject at hand, not Richard Pryor, but access to genius, access to legacies, and how geniuses and those of us responsible for legacies and therefore futures need to work to keep those legacies and access to those futures within reach of all of us.

Because those histories deliver as much wisdom and understanding as any text, whether shared by a satirist, or a comedian, or dance teacher, but since they only hint at futures, those legacies can sometimes be taken for granted.

And so, Gregory went on in some detail in the interview about his conversation with Pryor and the need for future generations to have access to any and all examples of genius. (Gregory had been asked by someone to talk to Pryor because the younger comic had been pulling his junk out at the end of his performance set to some effect.) Pryor heard that his antics would stop his being known by a wider and deeper audience. He heard from the older more experienced artist that what he had to say was important and that what Pryor had to say needed to be cared for, that his voice was unique and could be heard through the cultural clutter. He told the young artist to put it away so that he could be heard, to put it away so that future generations could know his genius.

Gregory understood the power of action and connection and knowledge and leadership outside of performance.

The power of words, the images built of words and their lasting effect is critical to putting cultural junk away.

Pryor was charismatic, charming, and troubled, and once the idea of his genius had broadly taken hold, aspects of his use of language and behavior did as well. As Gregory warned, a generation of young artists lost their way on the road, to the brass allure of a crass bravado; even some of those with the talent to manage Pryor's cultural insights were only an echo. Pryor on stage, held up a mirror to himself that showed not just anger but genuine fear of self-destruction laced with sardonic indignation and a sense that one artist was more dangerous than a dozen radicals.

Pryor was not only radical in his approach, but in artistry, and in my mind that made him a teacher.

But I believe our goals, in administrative, academic, creative, and artistic settings are in this case closer to Gregory's. I know I would like to provide students and colleagues opportunities to engage their crafts, to fully function with processes, to improve techniques, shift theories, and broaden the values of an involved life, in an effort to move toward greater insights and knowledge and the art form. To make it possible for anyone to discover themselves in others and pass those discoveries along. Our experiences in the various arts practices we share provide the perspectives from which we value concepts like inclusiveness and expansion and engagement.

And so, we work together with constituents to marry intention to knowledge, to involve effective contributors in any environment, and to re-form and recast better versions of service.

As an educator this has been my purpose. This is the approach I bring to my work. As administrator, faculty and a working artist on campuses and in a variety of environments I aim my efforts towards students acquisition of the unsettled. The instructors charge is to ensure that students understand the scope of their authority in education, in relation to their own artistic and intellectual and service oriented impulses. That is how we begin to recognize leaders and how they make themselves known.

Our responsibility to ourselves is to continue to shift the ground under our feet and theirs, to unsettle, while challenging the tactics and approaches of inquiry and modes of response.

The educational process is one of contemplation and experimentation, theory and action, satisfaction and expression; teaching art practice and community practice and theory involves all this and more. It is a process that does not always fit naturally into orthodox constructs but those constructs are the ground on which the foundations of awareness rest. Action is the key.

And we are citizens of the territory of action.

Now

My mother was my first teacher of course, and my first dance teacher and in the best way we imagine dance instruction. In the living room of our two-story brick face Philadelphia home my mother taught me a two step (now mind you this was happening in the 70s about the time the bump was popular). In the territory of the living room, from the cloister of my childhood, Mom coached me on not dropping my head to look at my feet, and eye contact, and proper distance, and how to hold a young lady. I loved these dance lessons, and they were nowhere near as uncomfortable as they may sound. But with them my mother communicated more than I was aware of at the time. I think part of the lesson was that in this life it's always better to know how to work with your partner (even in the heyday of the bump). She also showed that whatever legacy you have should be shared in whatever way possible. There were other teachers.

But the period of what I would call my first official dance training started in archery class. I had moved from north Philadelphia to Orange County to live with my eldest sister after my mother's death and so at that time had my first real experience with cultural exchange. This happened during the second half of senior year in high school. I was put into an archery class, but as might happen with high school students, one of us had the bright idea of shooting arrows into the backyards of the people that lived behind the school, so the powers that be thought it might be a good idea if that class was cancelled. Our options at that point were football / volleyball / and dance. Well I think I was about 135 pounds and living in Orange County in the early 80s, and I thought I am not going to give you an excuse to hit me so football was out and I did not know anything about volleyball and so dance it was. Again.

That's how this started again for me. That's how one landscape became another.

Penny Walton was my new teacher, she led me and taught me different things about dance than my mother. She showed different things than I learned from my niece and her friends and presented different things than I picked up on my own.

She gave me my first lessons in class etiquette, asked if I knew what a dance belt was and if I knew where to get one, and once I had if I were sure I knew how to wear it. I remember most vividly sitting in class and not being able to stretch and feeling inadequate to the task and I remember her quietly treating me like everyone else; and there was a teacher after her who said to me where I was wasn't where I should be because I could get more elsewhere; and an administrator that told me to demand more from myself as a student; and then in the next school where they were all super supportive and how they didn't play, and so I had to stop playing around and get serious; and the next influential teacher that I met in a master class and how I thought I going to study with that guy and how when I got to the school where he taught I was placed in a beginning level and how much I resented him and how he became the first antagonist in my mind and then right about what he had been trying to teach me and then ... none of my efforts in these lands were perfect but they taught me as I've heard "Don't be afraid to get caught trying."

And so, my mind jumps back to my mother's lessons in the living room and I try to remember what she taught me, and I remember her catch phrase "was nothing beats a hit but a miss" and I think again "Don't be afraid to get caught trying."

And with that it is possible to move on to the next territory, to join another community

And by that I mean I realize that I am still at it, still looking for someone to take my hand in the living room, but now it's me on the other side of the dance, now it's me fitting what I want to share into a limited amount of time in small rooms with the music soaring, or ideas soaring or opportunity. But of course, since I am here speaking as a teacher, administrator and artist not a son, feeling the squeeze of time makes sense in a different way.

The teaching life can be like that, squeezed. No time, territories that seem separate and difficult land to cross alone, and something new to learn and share every day.

Well we are here because you don't have to cross those lands alone.

You never have.

Ideas like connecting the field, building knowledge, and cultivating leadership already imply partnerships even as the landscape shifts.

And like with those early lessons, we need to learn more than we understand in the moment because what we wanted to share is tough to give with our eyes aimed at our feet.

We need to meet each other's gaze whether over a period of years or a few days.

And yes, I know that we teach one thing at a time or maybe two, or maybe three, but since everything is connected, in the way dropped glances and misplaced steps are, all of this takes time.

And that's all we are here to do.

Take time.

Understand each other

and our field

to try again.

To create a better future and just as importantly a better present. We inform our respective perspectives from vistas not yet discovered.

We are here to go at it again, with efforts that move us into a more interconnected service, to help to clarify for our heirs their vision,

to provide for them the better world they want

and the one we are still working toward,

to reveal the world in a way that will make it possible for them to change it when it doesn't work

and support it when it does.

We are here explaining that it is not just about the studios – the floors, the mirrors, the curtains, the clothes, the socks, bare feet, size of the space, books, or the dissertations and that not all studios are created equal in the same way not all living rooms are.

That each room has subtleties, differences in the quality, histories that constantly comment on potential futures.

We want to make clear to them that what we do is about the people that have been in the room, the people that will be, and those that may never find the studio.

We want them to take what we give, stretch what we teach over the years in such a way that it keeps giving long after we are gone. We understand what we give should pull over the course of years as if an idea were temporal taffy, something that can adapt or morph but still keep its integrity.

So, it may be that our on-point attenuations are the way to go. Because what we want them to know when they're forty is that what they learned at 20 applies to life at 60 or 80 or 8.

In order to do that we need to understand ourselves well.

In order to do that we need to know each other; we need to do with the people in this room what we hope to do for our students and colleagues and constituencies that aren't in the room.

We build here, reliable themes that quantify, themes that connect the field, build knowledge, cultivate leadership. This suggests we need to do more, not because we aren't trying but because the line of service moves like a country two step every time a step is taken and so it is time to start again, again, to try again and not be afraid to be caught trying.

I have worked with and created works with Youth Speaks, San Francisco Boys Chorus, Hunter Point Opera House among others, and we are now developing a program with foster care organizations based in San Francisco to

help young adults capture the entrepreneurial spirit of the Bay Area and use it to improve their lives. We haven't found the answer to make all of these efforts completely fruitful, but leaders don't wait to collaborate and there should be mechanisms for them to do it with others; the skills to build are sitting next you.

Right now.

Maybe we should consider this gathering a collaboration bank where ideas go to find the right partner.

James Baldwin often wrote of the difficulty of doing the work of being responsible for each other in trying times.

Well

We are the citizens of all of those territories of living rooms and the studios / study halls and boardrooms / the selection panels / and community programs and more

as Artists, administrators and teachers and

as creatives, we pay attention to the smallest things,

as citizens we gather responsibility and make it effective.

All of this is the beginning of training of a citizen artist.

Now these are just notes from the territories I've known. There are other lands and what I've spoken of now may put you in mind of the territories you've inhabited, and ones that you may travel over the next few days and it may be that I'll be there as well and it may be that since we are here together we may have already been there together.

I know that today I am a citizen of this territory.

So, what we do here is and is not only about those dances or training, in those living rooms, it is also about an affirmation of the way in which Gregory tried to pass on a world to Pryor, or my mother to me, or your mentors to you.

They hoped we would create and live in a world in which someone who knows something will take the time to share what is known.

And they knew that any time is a good time to start. Start again. Start now.

Thank you