

Joining Heaven and Earth

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Joining Heaven and Earth! What a title for keynote talk at an art education convention. What business do the arts have in this seemingly overly Romantic exercise? Indeed, what business does art education, required as we are to teach to national standards, beholden to state frameworks, required district priorities, as well as they might be designed, that make no mention of heaven nor earth for that that matter, no less "Joining Heaven and Earth?" And yet...

And yet, if we allow ourselves the pleasure of reminiscing for a moment, did we not decide to teach art and to make art to do this very crazy thing? When we were still young and new to our glorious profession, Did we dedicate our gifts and hone our talents only to comply with national standards and teach curricula that are designed by others who never met *your* students, visited *your* school, or ever met *you*? Or did we secretly say to ourselves and only to our very best and trusted friends; "I want to change the world! I want to make this a better world." Did you perhaps put it still in other terms? Something about saving children? Creating community? Bringing beauty into children's lives? No matter. However you phrased it, didn't we not also want to Join Heaven and Earth?

Of course art and its teaching serve many purposes; just now social justice is our prime agenda, visual culture, discipline based arts education are still others. All are worthy and all contribute to social welfare and to the invigoration of the arts and art curricula. But a case, *my* case, is that the arts also serve another function for the human condition, one I believe is the most ancient, universal and most consequential: Joining Heaven and Earth.

By this absurd ambition, perhaps you might not have been aware of at the time, you were a member of an ancient, universal confederacy of artists who from Lascaux, to Virgil, Aeschylus to Giotto, Rembrandt, Vermeer, William Blake, Van Gogh, Mondrian, Monet, Cezanne, Brancusi, Rodin, Rodchenko, Rothko, Judy Chicago, Maya Angelou, Balanchine, John Lennon, and a million others who thought that lending their gifts and time to this pie in the sky ambition of Joining Heaven and Earth would be a good way to spend a life.

But whatever exactly does this lofty and overly ambitious term imply; Joining Heaven and Earth? What special contributions have the arts to offer? And, to bring this grand agenda to bear upon *our* particular profession as art teachers; What are some distinct contributions we can make? *And* can make in the schools we have, with the students and the parents and the administrators and the laws and the society we have in these United States- or at least in New Jersey?

Obviously, I believe the arts and their teachers, you and I, have much to offer, even in the schools just as they now are. And I am willing to bet there are many of you who have not entirely abandoned your earlier ambitions to heal the world, to join Heaven and Earth through your

teaching; and indeed, most probably do so in your own fashion right now.

Our upcoming national convention is dedicated to employing art for social justice, asking us to be of worth in the actual world we serve. And what a world we have made for ourselves:

*A world in which we seem almost incapable of not wounding our selves and each other by our penchants for solving problems through violence, for the allure of short term gains, for the unseemly wealth of the few at the cost of the impoverishment of the many, for being urged to leave no child behind without sufficiently funding even the children we do promote. A world in which we seem to delight in categorizing people and demonizing them for such banal reasons as their skin color, their gender, religious convictions, or political beliefs. A world in which our species is devouring and befouling the very resources of the entire planet so that we might live in relative comfort now at the price of our grand children living at all.

No, I am all too well aware that the project of Joining Heaven and Earth is a daunting one, perhaps an impossible one given our often fatal shenanigans. And yet we must press on. We simply must evolve past our present state of sordid affairs. We must rededicate ourselves to creating a life right here and now that conforms ever more closely with what we have imagined it should be like "there and then."

But, just what is meant by, Heaven? Earth? and to JOIN Heaven and Earth?

For some of us- **Heaven** -consists of: a single god in command of everything and everyone, for others Heaven is full of lots of gods each in charge of one thing or another, for others still, no gods at all, but spirits dwelling in all things. For some others, no gods or spirits, just divine Nature as it arises each day. For others it is still more abstract and rarified; Heaven are the heavenly regularities and patterns that make up all the particularities of the world. Western traditions posit that Heaven resides above; African and Australian traditions mostly have Heaven embedded in the earth. Asians have it above, Native Americans everywhere. Whatever Heaven consists of and wherever it is to be found, the concept and pull of Heaven has exerted a tremendous, if not the most important influence on humans in shaping their behaviors, institutions, policies and of course; all their arts.

Well, I too have given thought to these terms over my years, and I'll offer the meanings that steer my thinking, and when I get around to it, my behaviors.

Heaven: A domain wherein there is no leader nor followers, no sinners nor saints; just an infinite ecology of all beings, much like an improvisational jazz ensemble; each member enriching the other, and together creating unreachable alone.
Or more simply; How I wish to live "There and Then" for myself and all beings; tadpoles, broccoli, hippos and butterflies too.

When it comes to EARTH, the meanings I associate with it are more prosaic:

Earth: How I and all the rest of the world ARE LIVING RIGHT NOW.

Joining Heaven and Earth: means this for me: Conducting my affairs in such a manner so as to live here and now as I desire to live there and then.

Simple to say, not so simple to do.

How *does one* conduct one's affairs in such a way as to Join Heaven and Earth?; live in the here and the now in such a way as to conform to the way one wishes to live in the there and then? The following might initially seem a weak response to an overly ambitious agenda; but hear me out, please, consider the following;

First; **DESIRE TO**; make joining heaven and earth a prominent agenda in the ways you actually conduct your affairs - at least *some* of your affairs, *some* of your art curricula, *some* of your teaching methods.

DESIRE is quite real and compelling. Desire shapes the inclination of your thinking, the myriad choices you make moment to moment, your choice of friends, your topics of conversation, the objectives of your art lessons, the criteria of your evaluations, the tone of your voice in conversation, what you bring to lunch. Desire functions in a similar way as a keel on a boat does; it emphasizes certain efforts in the direction of what is sought, it dampens disturbances towards your goal. So, the first serious work of Joining Heaven and Earth is the awakening of the desire to do so.

Now, if you really want to speed things up, really want to get going on the project of joining heaven and earth; you can heat the commitment up a bit by not merely desiring, but YEARNING, YEARNING TO JOIN HEAVEN AND EARTH.

YEARNING, is also real, and it is even more powerful than desire, creating an even stronger magnetic field that creates appetite, determines what pleases you and displeases you, what you are willing to pay a high price for, what lays at the center of your convictions, passions and abiding truths. **Yearning** also indicates a state of incompleteness, thus it imparts a dynamic searching quality to ones life. **Yearning** imparts an active appetite, one that goes out and seeks what it is one desires, more strongly enables one to shrug off adversities and maintain a bead on ones goals.

You might notice a resemblance between the general states of desire and yearning and that of an artistic frame of mind; And you would not be wrong- and actually, importantly correct; more of that later.

The absence of desire and yearning lead to quite different qualities of life, and art and teaching. If you are disinterested in Joining heaven and Earth, if you do not think it possible, and pay it no mind; then the project will be proportionately weakened and delayed by the absence of your singular gifts and talents and energies. And you and your students will not experience the exhilaration and the rewards of participating in the wild and maybe impossible but glorious adventure of trying, groping, stumbling, skinning their shins on this ancient and perennial task.

OK, OK, you might be saying just now, OK! I'll entertain the ideas, it even sounds noble, But what special qualities *do* the arts contain that contributes to Joining Heaven and Earth? And more precisely, what does a teacher of art have to contribute? Does artistic activity in truth offer particular states of mind and skills that permit their practitioners to plunge so deeply into the world that we have so as to perceive the patterns and the harmonies that are at the bases of all the world? To see the patterns and hear the music that coheres every single thing and places it within an infinite ecology of all things? Which for some- as it is for me, the same thing as getting a glimpse of Heaven?

Do we have any examples of artists and art work whose qualities empowered this joinery? **Yes, yes, yes, indeed the evidence is Art's history.**

Allow me to list a wide ranging selection of artists from around the world and across time whose project it was to achieve such a heightened states of mind-body-spirit so as to glimpse these patterns and harmonies, then bring the news to the rest of us:

Have you heard a Bach Cantata? What do you think that was about? Or Verdi's Requiem? Puccini's Madama Butterfly, Mozart's "Cosi fan Tutti?" Brahms's Deutsche Requiem, or our own John Lennon, Nat King Cole, Marion Anderson, Kiri Dekanawa.

How about Duccio, Botticelli, Klee, Rothko, Brancusi, Noguchi, Michaelangelo,

Or Virgil, Dante, Tolstoy, Cervantes, Proust, Pablo Neruda, Mary Oliver, Walt Whitman, Shakespeare, Kushner, Martha Graham, Morris, Balanchine, Nuryev, Bill T Jones,

The pyramids of Ghiza, Angkor Wat, Macho Picher, the Parthenon, Chartres, the Dome of the Rock, Tinglet totems, Tibetan Mandala, Navaho sand paintings, Mixtec pottery, Bengali temple dancers, Aboriginal Didgeridoo players, Basho's Haiku, Shakespeare's sonnets, Pagsal's pensees, Almadovar, Mayan, Aztec and Mixtec and Zapotec Temples of the sun and of the moon, the stars and the flowers.

In the creation of all these what do you think, in the main, their projects were? What *work were they engaged in?* Some handsome objects to entertain us while we remain attached to how we now live the way we do? A bit of rouge? Distractions from our routine affairs?

A bit of this, of course, but it is simply not credible that these people used up their lives, poured their gifts, honed their talents over the course of their life times merely to entertain us, distract us from our more serious engagements with life, like shopping, paying bills, driving our kids here and there.

Is it not more credible that their project, Homer's project, Lennon's project, Euripides, Da Vinci, Rembrandt, Doctorow, Byron, Keats, Shelly, was to see so deeply, so broadly, so finely, so courageously, To listen so care fully, Feel so empathically, Move so courageously, Say so completely, that the "news" they brought back from their seeing, their expeditions beyond the horizon of where others had gone, their scrupulous craftsmanship were all unveilings of how *we might live*,

rather than acquiesce to how we were given to live and now believe that we are *consigned* to live.

And what are the hallmarks of all these artistic enterprises? What states of mind created these works, and that the work exudes? What are the reasons these works attract us, hold our attention, bring pleasure and satisfy us in some deep ways that raw life, as we ordinarily live it, rarely if ever provides? What is the kind of mindfulness that permits one to grasp these intimations of a world beyond, or perhaps just beneath the veil of our ordinary seeing?

*Here is where I believe the arts may serve its practitioners and their societies the best, because it seems to me the most fundamental state of mind **that elevates consciousness from mere synaptic responses to stimuli to the imaginative leaps enabling humans to forge new agendas for living and new expectations of excellence.***

Shall we call it the **art full mind**?

I have already alluded to several of these qualities of mind moments ago; following is a fuller account:

Radiant Intelligence, Devoted seeing, Exquisite workmanship, Integrated themes, Astonishing variations, Passionate forthcoming; Unhurried wonder, Reverent attention, Leaping imagination, Openness to the crushing beauty of our universe, Searching after Patterns that connect, Perceiving subtle and complex harmonies. A state of Awe, Transparency, Fearlessness. And of course, a sense of Gratitude.

Could we not equally ascribe these qualities of mind as "glimpses of Heaven?" the way we always wanted to perceive and be in the world?

Put in other terms, this time using the phrasing of Martin Buber, might we say that Art filled consciousness engages every thing, every "it" in the world as if it was a "Thou". And by the intensity and sincerity of that reaching towards the "other," unveils the Thou that is indeed embedded in very thing, elevating every "it," to "Thou." In other words; the frame of mind wherein we realize that everything is more complex, more exquisite, more necessary, more related to us and everything else in the universe than we will ever comprehend, ever fully savor, and thus every thing is sumptuously mysterious. And just what does THAT supposed to mean?

You know;

The way Georgia O'Keefe viewed a bone, and an iris,

The way Cezanne viewed peaches and pears.

The way Monet saw lily pads and mud

The way Van Gogh looked at stars and his red bed

The way Martha Graham flicked her wrist,

The way Mary Oliver caught, in a word, the last leaf of autumn

The way Otis Redding composed each breath.

The way Merel Streep delivers each line.

Now here's the trick to cultivating devoted seeing, exquisite workmanship, passionate forthcoming; reverence, wonder, and slow, care filled seeing that allows us to weave from the myriad confusing

sensations and things of our daily lives, a quilt of grand and complex harmonies.

I give you, once again, what I initially offered as seemingly "weak" responses, that I hope you might now understand to be the fundamental and necessary precursor states of mind of any adventure towards the new:

First: **Desire** to. Desire sets the agenda, points us in the direction we choose to evolve towards.

Then: when desire matures; **Yearn** to. Yearning as we said, heats things up. And then, supported by these fundamental orientations; grit your teeth, bare down and **Try. And Try. And Try. And Try.**

Trying extends your reach, invigorates your appetite for more. Emboldens your next attempt, gathers others to you, creates empowering communities of like intentions. **Trying**, despite adverse local and immediate results, teaches much, refines effort, deepens character. Unremitting **Trying**, breeds invention, encourages imagination, and steels resolve.

Still feel a bit inadequate? Unpracticed, too pooped to do any more than you are already doing just coping with the standards and the frameworks, and the bubbly mass of students who hourly wash in and out of your classroom? Then try, quite simply, a few things that are well within your current state of practice of teaching art, tasks you do every day: Designing lesson plans, presenting them, evaluating the results, and speaking with students.

You might for instance; In the **title of your lesson plan**, include some reference to Joining Heaven and Earth.

1. To what family do you feel you really belong?
2. If I had two wishes, this would be the first.
3. Under what conditions do you flourish best?
4. And what is the look of the bloom that you bring to the world?

When you list the **objectives** of the lesson, describe some exact outcome relative to Joining Heaven and Earth. Such objectives may be these: the cultivation of **devoted seeing** , or **"slow-subtle seeing," exact craftsmanship, Astonishing variations on a given theme.**

In developing the **criteria to evaluate** the degree and kind of success you expect for the project, insure at least one of the criteria reference Joining Heaven and Earth. Perhaps you might raise such questions to the students as these;

1. Where and in what ways did you permit your imagination to LEAP rather than to simply plod along predictable ways?
2. What bravery was required of you in this piece?
3. Did anything unexpected happen to you as a result of working on this piece, and did you allow it to remain, perhaps even take it further?

Making explicit references to Joining heaven and Earth in the title of your Unit Plan, in the objectives of your lesson plan, and your criteria of evaluation, shifts desire and yearning into actual trying.

However, now, as I near the end of this essay, I have an even more modest proposal in the hopes of extending the invitation to join the age old human project of Joining Heaven and Earth, and do so through your good offices as artists and art teachers: I am afraid you might find this -at first- even weaker than my first offering.

Embracing the project of Joining Heaven and Earth is as much a matter of "**Tone**," the quality of your presence in the classroom, as it is of curriculum, lesson plans and grading. Just as I earlier described **Desire** and **Yearning** and **Trying** devoted to the cause of Joining Heaven and Earth are at the very root of the project, it seems to me we can continue along that same path and say that it also is really a matter of how you relate to people; your students, their parents, your colleagues.

If you relate to them reverentially, care fully, devotedly, empathically, you will, *over time*, nurture the reciprocal tendencies for them to address you likewise.

If you treat everyone and everything reverentially, care fully, the brushes, the paints, the clay, the child who comes to class late, the janitor, the smart aleck, the scissors, that someone dropped on the floor. you model in your classroom these same qualities and all the work becomes - in time- reverential, serious, care full, elevated. **Art Full.**

Combining your presence in the classroom with your explicit objectives of joining Heaven and Earth, you inch forward this ancient and necessary theme of becoming ever more human.

- * Do the same when you **critique the student work**,
- When you **exhibit** the student work,
- When you have them **write essays**,
- * When you **speak to the principal** about your program,
- * When you **offer inservice workshops** for your peers,
- When you **speak to your closest friends** and colleagues.
- You- again, know; the same way that you walk into your own studio, address your own brushes and marks.

In other words, Joining Heaven and Earth is no far fetched ambition at all, and well within even the everyday responsibilities of every teacher.

The only reason I believe we are **not participating** of the grand community of artists throughout time and place who are also engaged in the fabulous adventure is simply, and tragically this:

No one invited us to.

Ever have this brought up in your teacher preparation courses? Ever asked about this by your supervisor of student teaching, by your principal, or the parents, or the kids? If you were like me: probably not If no one speaks about something, and no one invites you to join in something, and no one else is doing it, and no one is rewarded for it, how indeed can anything be done- about "**it?**"

But now I *have* tended you the invitation. And you have been reminded.

At heart, originally, and deeply still; you are artists. You desired to employ your gifts and enthusiasms as an artist and as a teacher to make this a better world. Why not bring that same exact ambition more to the center, the explicit center of your professional life? [Not incidentally and quite importantly, doing so, will also migrate the same ambition to the center of your personal life.]

And, please remember, just desiring something and trying something brings that something closer. And with each try we increase our skills at achieving what we desire. So, want to live in a world here and now that more closely resembles the world that you desire there and then. Of Course you do! That's why you are here at this convention.

You can invigorate this illusive but necessary dream by uncovering your original ambitions and wild hopes for making this a better world for every single one of the children who troop into your classroom.

Step two: Fan the small, but still present flame of desiring, to the level of yearning, then jump all the way in by simply trying, and trying, and TRYING to do so,

In other words, be teachers of what you wish to become. As Maxine Greene famously said, "Make of your classroom the arena of your own becoming and it will surely follow that the children will do like wise, for only as you become so will they.

You see, you are already so close to being on the same path as Virgil, Duccio, Whitman, Beethoven, Tolstoy, and Aretha Franklin, Paul Klee, and John Lennon.

Well, you may say we are dreamers, but we're not the only ones, we hope some day you will join us, and the world be....

how about where Heaven and Earth are truly one?

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