

Keynote Teen Arts Festival – May 2024

County College of Morris, Randolph, NJ

-Daryl Lancaster

The eleventh of September 2001 started out as any other day, bright, sunny, I had hot rollers in my hair. I was preparing for my first class of the semester, teaching an introductory class in fibers at Montclair State University. My husband called to tell me to turn on the television. I cannot begin to describe the horror and insanity of that day, or the days to come. Obviously, classes were cancelled. But that Friday, I had to stand up in front of a class of students, many of them in training to become art educators, and say something, anything that might begin to address what happened. In an essay about the experience I wrote later that month, for Handwoven Magazine, I asked, “What is the role of the artist in a society that is grieving the loss of its citizens and basic freedoms?” I kept asking myself, since it is artists who often record events and question, criticize, and document the emotions of a nation, in the form of poetry, music, theatre, or visual works. In the article, I talked about the role of the artist and the important role of the art educator to help students too young to write, who can’t express themselves in any other way but through art.

I came of age in the 1960’s. It was a turbulent time in this country. It was a time of coming together of the youth of the country to protest. The arts played a significant role in bringing youth together, music became the voice of a generation. Many of those protest songs are still listened to today, because they are still very relevant today.

It is the arts that ultimately define a peoples, their culture, their legacy. It is through the arts, all of the arts, whether it is theatre, music, poetry, dance, the visual arts, fine craft, it is the arts that bring us together, start conversations, allow conflicting viewpoints, and lead us to a better place, one with empathy, one with compassion, and one with communication. Because ultimately the arts are a global timeless form of basic communication.

I have another life as a musician, believe it or not, I play recorder with Montclair Early Music. Music reaches into the soul of every human being, and has a way of filling up that soul with joy, with sadness, with energy, with stillness, with complexity, with simplicity.

And any of the performing arts that require a group effort, theatre, dance, music, they teach us how to listen to each other, how to respect each other, and how to work as a team. This is especially important when we are young.

David Brooks, Op-ed writer for the New York Times, wrote an interesting column back in January titled *How to Save a Sad, Lonely, Angry and Mean Society*. He opened his column with the following...

Recently, while browsing in the Museum of Modern Art store in New York, I came across a tote bag with the inscription, “You are no longer the same after experiencing art.” It’s a nice sentiment, I thought, but is it true? Or to be more specific: Does consuming art, music, literature and the rest of what we call culture make you a better person?

It was a powerful article, one I’ve read over and over again. And yes, the answer is absolutely yes. And I quote:

Artistic creation is the elemental human act. When they are making pictures or poems or stories, artists are constructing a complex, coherent representation of the world. That’s what all of us are doing every minute as we’re looking around. We’re all artists of a sort. The universe is a silent, colorless place. It’s just waves and particles out there. But by using our imaginations, we construct colors and sounds, tastes and stories, drama, laughter, joy and sorrow.

Works of culture make us better perceivers.

There is a program every Tuesday afternoon, a visual podcast of sorts, called Textiles and Tea, sponsored by the Handweavers Guild of America. It began during Covid, at the end of 2020. Every Tuesday afternoon, the host interviews someone who has made a career out of the arts, involving textiles of some sort. I was interviewed back in March of 2022. The first question asked, is of course, “What is your favorite tea?”, but the second question is to me the most important. Where were you first exposed to fiber, how did you get started?

Almost invariably, the answer is, “I had someone in my family who was a maker, someone who knitted, crocheted, did crafts, celebrated making things from the hands.” It starts early, that lifetime of commitment to creativity. Many go on to have careers in the sciences, law, education, but almost every one of the couple hundred textile artists interviewed so far, had someone light that spark. A relative, a teacher, a camp counselor, a neighbor, a friend’s parent, the exposure of a child to look inward to find the joy and satisfaction of creating with one’s own hands is probably the greatest gift we can give.

My mom gave me technical skills, and lots and lots of encouragement. My dad, who wasn't available very often for any kind of advice did though, in his own way, make a huge impact on how I conducted myself professionally. He taught me less tangible things. He taught me, actually expected me to show up and be present. He taught me, no, expected me to do the absolute best I could do and accept nothing less. He taught me, no, expected me to be resourceful, to rely on no one but myself. And probably most importantly, he taught me to document everything. I'm not sure if that was his business background, or his amateur hobby of photography, but I learned to do early on, something all of you with a cell phone take for granted, to document everything. That's why I could put together this retrospective you will see later on in the gallery, because I had the records, the samples, the work, the images, carefully stored and catalogued.

A side bar here. Be very very careful. Almost all of my early decades were recorded on 35mm slides. As long as they are archivally stored, they last forever. Digital files, not so much. Back up everything, in as many places as you can back it up in as many formats as are currently available. Hard drives can fail, ask me how I know this. My years of writing for various magazines taught me the importance of being able to access images and documents from 25-30 years ago. And make sure everything is recorded in high resolution to start with. Always keep unedited original files.

I was taught at a very young age, to be curious. To find out what happens if... In a way I feel lucky that I grew up in a time where there wasn't the ability to pull out your phone and Google the answer. We did not have a library in the town, and since I went to parochial school for 8 years, there wasn't even a library in the school. We had World Book Encyclopedia. All the knowledge in the world was there. And the neighbor behind us had the Encyclopedia Britannica just in case. Just reading entries in search of what you were looking for, made you more curious. If you wanted to find out how and why, mostly you tried on your own, and saw what happened. Cause and effect.

I see this in my own field, lurking on social media sites. It is too easy to just Google the answer. We have no curiosity anymore. I wrote a column for Heddlecraft Magazine a couple of years ago, Daryl's Top Ten Tips for Inspiring Good Design and Better Creativity. Tip number 7 is "Be Resourceful, Google makes you Lazy". Other tips include, 'Be fearless', 'Because you can is not always a good reason', 'Plan B is much more creative than Plan A', 'Once in a while, take a step back', and of course my favorite, 'Be curious, what would happen if...'

I've spent a lifetime in the arts. To say this is a privilege, is a huge understatement. I had the support of good mentors, in my High School and college years, supportive parents (though truth be told, my dad wanted me to study business in college, I wanted to study art.) And ultimately, I had a very supportive husband, who kept us afloat financially because the arts are not something you can count on for a steady existence. So when I say I have been privileged to have been able to devote my life to creativity in the arts, I mean that sincerely. I worked incredibly hard to find work, find opportunities, deal with rejection and disappointment, and there was a lot of that I can assure you. I worked tirelessly learning how to promote myself, before the age of Instagram and online opportunities. But I had support. I had people who believed in me, allowed me to give voice to what I needed/wanted to say. And more importantly, the best of my supporters were usually the most critical. Learning how to accept criticism, learning how to grow from it, learning how to use it to make you a better artist, and a better person, are the true gifts of a good arts education and great mentors.

One of the greatest, and hardest-to-swallow gifts of a fine arts degree, is that you learn to justify your vision, and fight for the right to express it. The late Fred Bob created a T-Shirt, which is my most beloved thing in my closet, well worn, thread bare, featuring the wildest sofa you have ever seen on the front, and the words, "Good art won't match your sofa". Art is giving voice to what we see around us, what we interpret in the way we process things. It is the ultimate form of communication. It crosses language barriers, crosses cultural barriers, and starts a dialogue that can bring humanity to a better place. But it won't match your sofa.

We live in a time of divisiveness, of political dysfunction, of disinformation, of a never-ending onslaught of media that is designed to grab us, hold us, and sell us something, whether it is a tangible thing, or an opinion, or a piece of breaking news, that maybe back in my day wasn't so breaking... And of course, now we must contend with AI, not knowing what is real, and what is the product of artificial intelligence.

We also live in a time of increasing climate despair. I live in a town here in Morris County that has a high percentage of homes in the flood plain. Four times in the last year those streets and homes have flooded. And there is more to come. It doesn't just rain anymore. The weather is severe, life endangering, and sadly sometimes life altering. I have had so many fellow artists lose entire studios, and their life's work to wildfires. Entire species are dying, as our ecosystems break down, for many different reasons, but the planet is

struggling to support itself and those species that live on it. That was never a thing we even discussed back when I came of age in the arts. The environment we live in is in trouble. And it is the artists, with vision, and clarity, that see the changes, and can document the changes, and can communicate about those changes. We have a responsibility to be the voice of the planet where it counts.

Interesting to note is how we perceive our raw materials, what we work with to create. In my early days of art training, toxicity of raw materials, hazards in the arts, was just becoming a thing. Who knew that cadmium in paint was toxic. Who knew that the mordants we used in natural dyeing, like copper and tin could be really toxic. Who knew that the chemicals we used in the rinse water in darkroom photography was toxic to the water supply. Studio safety is the responsibility of each one of us, because I can assure you that OSHA doesn't come looking at the safety of your equipment and studio set up, unless you have employees. I have many artist friends who make their art by using recycled materials, trash, and other cast offs, to create their vision of the future and show how we as a peoples contribute in a negative way to the health of the planet.

Sustainability has become an important component in my work. The entire textile industry is a huge contributor to environmental toxicity, and I try hard to work with what already exists. Whether that is cutting up old work, using every little scrap, using mill ends, using dye chemicals in a responsible way, and keeping my environmental footprint as an artist to be as small as I possibly can; each part of my process can be re-evaluated for sustainability and environmental impact, and I take that assignment very seriously.

Louisa Valentin, the artistic director of Montclair Early Music, gave a closing speech at the end of a Jubilee Concert I participated in, celebrating the works of black composers, for Black History Month back in February. I was incredibly touched with her final words, and I reached out to her to ask permission to paraphrase here. I will close with this...

"As we go forth, I want you to reflect on art expression and art as a whole. They, I believe, are the purest forms of freedom. Art transcends language, culture; it speaks to your soul. In times where people are not free to truly express themselves, (because of politics, social unrest)or social environment, art will always let you speak your heart. All of us can be artists. Don't stop creating, don't stop making things. Teach your children the importance of art; it is what defines us, apart from perhaps empathy, as human beings."