

THIEL

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“Encouraging Creativity”
Fred McFeely Rogers
Thiel College Honors Convocation
1969 November 13

President Bly, members of the faculty, friends, honored guests ... I am almost overwhelmed. I am overwhelmed by the way you feel about the importance of our kind of work. And by the kinds of support I’ve had for a long time from so many people. And I thank you.

Last week, I received a large envelope from Dallas, Texas. It was from the manager of the television station there, which shows our programs in that part of the country. His letter was attached to 11 pages of music paper. And his note started out by saying, enclosed please find an opera. An opera written by a 6-year-

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old viewer, who was inspired by your programs. And there it was, a little boy's opera about an owl and a tiger and a king and an archeologist who discover that what others thought was a monster was really just a blinking flashlight caught in a tunnel. Can you imagine how I felt when I read through those pages of simple chants and age-appropriate themes? An opera by a 6-year-old. Of course, his mother had written the words and the notes on the music paper for him. And the characters were ones with which he had visited via our program many times, but the opera was his. He wanted to make one and someone encouraged him to do it. Most people don't write operas. Nevertheless, every person is born with a unique endowment, which gives him an opportunity to make something entirely different from everybody else in the world. You see it when you watch children at play. There are no two mud pies the same.

Block buildings have infinite variety. Paintings and dances take on their creator's touches. And later, hairstyles, jewelry and language and when you see it all happening. You know that something from inside is being shared with the rest of the world. What happens if children hear that their mud pies are no good and their block buildings have no importance? That their paintings and dances and made up games and songs are of very little value. What do you think happens to that something from inside? That self which was trying itself on the world for size. What do you think?

Of course, you'd be right in assuming that a person who was consistently degraded would feel unaccepted and would carry that feeling with them for the rest of his life. Little people look up to big people for confirmation, for cues about life. But you say, only the most miserable, unenlightened people would ever tell a child that his creations are worthless. Maybe in those words, but what about the people who have developed the machines for teaching human children, which when a child presses the button for the wrong

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answer the machine gives off a mild electric shock. Children, like laboratory rats, can learn quickly not to experiment with wrong answers.

What if Edison or Einstein, Michelangelo or Beethoven or George Washington Carver had been brought up on a machine like that? What about the people who say, if you don't make a better grade in chemistry, you can't be in the school play? Or stop jiggling in your seat, that music is to listen to. Isn't that like forcing creativity underground? Have you ever heard of a child being suspended from trigonometry class because he failed nature study or swimming or wood shop?

Who should say that trigonometry is more important than wood shop? Only the person who feels that importance inside. Except in the most understanding corners of the world, a person's very own unique endowment counts far, far less than how that person fits the mold for IQs, exams, computerized industry potential.

What hopefully we encourage in the block building, homemaking and dramatic corners of the nursery school we somehow label extra-curricular in the schools beyond. It's as if we the educators were saying to the developing person, "From now on young people, the way we tell you to do something is the way you must do it or you won't pass." And by the time those children hear 11 or 12 years of that, is it any wonder that they have trouble knowing who they are?

Erik Erikson has written that "In youth, strength emerges from the sense that society recognizes the young individual as a bearer of fresh energy and that the individual so confirmed recognizes society as a living process which inspires loyalty as it receives it; honors confidence as it demands it."

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My thesis is that one of the major goals of education must be to help students discover a greater awareness of their own unique selves. In order to increase their feelings of personal worth, responsibility and freedom. Barbara Ann is a 13-year-old with some visual handicaps. She has worked hard to discover who she is. One day this past year in school, Barbara Ann's art teacher said, "Now today, you may paint anything you want." Well, Barbara Ann loved trees. For her trees had become a symbol of a deep-rooted self as well as a beautiful self, so she began to fashion a beautiful tree with her paints. When the teacher noticed what she was doing, she said, "Don't draw a tree. Everybody draws trees." So Barbara Ann put away her lively tree and proceeded to paint a brown, wooden chair—wooden chair with a yellow coat and a black hat hanging on the chair. Reminiscent of her tree in texture and color, nevertheless a still life. Do we want to force people into painting still lifes when they could be expressing their deepest selves. Many teenagers in Barbara Ann's situation don't have the determination to translate their symbols of deep-rooted self into another comprehensible symbol. Many abdicate to abstraction. Our young people are weary of being programmed and pigeon-holed. And those whose creativity has not been encouraged are rebelling. Ever since our nation was first scared by Sputnik, our overriding concern has been to fill our children with math and science so we can outdo the Russians.

Programs which have promised to develop machines and machine-like people to do that job have found heavy-government funding, while others which propose to help develop their own potential have barely survived.

In 1962, I talked with Van Cliburn just before he went to Russia for that famous Tchaikovsky Competition. At that point, he was trying to decide what to do with his career. He had only three concerts

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scheduled for the following year and he knew he couldn't survive on the income from those, so he was thinking about going back to Shreveport to teach piano. Later, after his dazzling return, he told us that all during the competition week in Moscow, the entire proceedings were broadcast throughout the country. After each session, people would be waiting for their favorites outside in the street. Van said that they would come up to him and hug him to express how they felt about his playing. Even commercial airline pilots announced the final scores on their flights that day. All that had nothing to do with Sputnik and yet what better ambassador have we had between that country and ours, than that peace loving, tall, American pianist. Isn't it possible that we in America have underestimated the role of the creative artist in international affairs? Isn't it possible that we might do well to encourage people to develop from within, and help them to feel confident of the worth of communicating their inner selves to the world? Rather than insisting that a person's worth be measured only in how many right answers he can recite. There are no absolute right answers at a place like the Paris Peace table. All that can count there are new solutions to old problems. In fact, isn't that what we need to encourage everywhere? In constant reference to the traditional, new solutions to old problems—how do we do that? By making available our historical heritage with all of the skills, the scientific knowledge, the patterns of social interaction, everything which men have developed from the depths of their humanity. To make available, apprentice programs in every field and give a new kind of importance to them all. Designing bridges, sculpting, decorating cakes, developing cleaner transport, conducting choruses, making peace, and also by helping people discover the true meaning of love.

Love is generally confused with dependence. Those of us who have grown in true love know that we can love only in proportion to our capacity for independence. We must be able to be ourselves in the face of

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love for our love to have meaning. Only by understanding our own uniqueness, can we fully appreciate how special our neighbor really is. Only by being aware of our own endowments, can we begin to marvel at the variety which our creator has provided in men, and as we do marvel, we will find ourselves being concerned about the conditions that make life on earth possible. We will recognize the need to make people more important than things, and we will join hands with young and old alike, by putting our dominant energies in developing a sane design for living.

You know it well may be—and were getting hints of this now from the moon discoveries—it well may be that our planet earth is the only spot in the entire universe which can sustain human life. Of all the worlds, we may be the only one where there has ever been, or ever will be, people. That's sort of like someone saying to you that there is only one square-inch of soil on this earth that can grow anything, and that square-inch happens to be in your own backyard. You look at that soil of yours with infinitely greater appreciation, when you become aware how rare and valuable it really is. Our job in life is to help people realize how rare and valuable each one of us really is. That each of us has something which no one else has, or ever will have, something inside which is unique to all time. It's our job to encourage each other to discover that uniqueness and to provide ways of developing its expression. My 6-year-old opera composer in Dallas, may grow up to find that medicine is his calling, or law, or architecture, or finance. Whatever his road, if his reasons for following it come from within, and he understands those reasons, he will grow in wisdom, and find his music in the joy and the dignity of being truly human.