

Talk to the Mrs. Giles Whiting Foundation Award Recipients
New York City October 29, 2008
By Barry Lopez

I hope you will indulge me this evening and allow me to direct most of what I have to say to the recipients of these remarkable and generous awards. These are pats on the back from a discerning group of people.

It is the conceit of nearly every modern generation that their times are fraught as no other times before them have been. Within the fetch of our own times we have the Depression, the war that followed the war we said would end all wars, acid rain, and the current financial firestorm, to select nearly at random. As a culture in America, we've become so accepting of the pivotal importance of our own time that we have, many of us, lost the calming perspective that comes from looking back over the whole show, back past Bach composing his B Minor mass, past Copernicus's reimaginings, past Julius Caesar at the Rubicon and Hammurabi writing out his code of law. If you will, let me go all the way back to Altamira, and the Magdalenian phase, Cro-Magnon women and men who offered their small communities the guiding patterns of life that we have come to call stories. These, are the compressions of history and emotion, the miniature landscapes of psychology and insight, the seamless evocations of angst and awe we claim we can live by.

If we look back over the whole of history, at the horror of enduring war, from Alexander moving east out of Macedonia, up through Tamerlane to the so-called Indian wars that cleared North America of most of its peoples, we find both that which makes us

profoundly ashamed and with, say, Bach or Monet or Nadine Gordimer, that which makes us feel better—a capable, imaginative, and just species.

The to-and-fro of mendacity and grace in our history is so well known to us that a high school student—well, perhaps not any longer—could trace it. We are used to the pattern. We believe, many of us, that even as the stakes are raised and the scale of horror reaches the size of Birkenau, we will endure and triumph. Reprobates in government, thieves in business, those with perverse appetites of every sort, will be brought to bay, isolated, punished. It rarely happens, of course, and this gives literature one of its oldest and most compelling themes, in the form of two questions: Who are we? and Where are we going?

If you will indulge me again, and I know I am not alone, now, in thinking this, I believe this pattern of endurance against darkness is about to change. And with that change may come some other order of business for writers and artists.

We are, all of us in this room I think, so familiar with the specter of what is looming on our horizon, and so overwhelmed by the complex specificity of it, that to bring it up at all is to risk trying everyone's patience, like having someone drop a lit match on your skin. But out there on the horizon are threats to our physical and mental well-being the like of which humanity has known in only a very limited way. Global climate change and, to pick a lesser known menace, the inadvertent disturbance of viral ecologies all over the world that has recently brought the Lassa, Marburg, Ebola, Hanta, and AIDS viruses to our attention, are, both of them, completely indifferent to our fate. They are unanticipated and scary developments, part of the esoterica of physical reality we keep stumbling over in our quest for control and meaning.

What I want to suggest here is that it will take something altogether different in us, something beyond contemporary certitudes, beyond our faith in types of exceptionalism, beyond the election of a worthy president, if we are to successfully hold ourselves out to historians as a just and courageous and reverent people.

It may be gratuitous to say that we have hard work ahead, but that does not make the observation untrue or less imperative. Whatever our callings, as mothers, as teachers, as writers, as women and men in business, as philanthropists and explorers and caretakers of culture, we can shape a response. We can measure our beliefs and measure our energy, measure our immediate and pressing responsibilities, and respond. Though, of course, no one has to.

It is a peculiar trait of our species, I believe, to worry to the extent we seem to have, historically, over what will happen to future generations. We worry about our children's fate and about opportunities for our grandchildren these days, but the tyranny of the present, the attenuation of history that comes with privileging the present, has made us shortsighted. If we could see further back and further forward, we would be less prone to grief, less anxious, less lonely.

So, with this urging of a broader perspective, I wish respectfully to present a few thoughts to the recipients of these prestigious awards. Your names will now be noted, and there will be expectations. I would urge you to forget, from this moment, everyone's expectations. I would ask you not to fall into the trap of believing your work has to speak to the kind of plight I have alluded to here. The practical urgency I have suggested is upon us is of a different order than the urgency that compels you to write. To ask your imagination to do the work of your reasoning mind is, frequently, a recipe for disaster.

You are here this evening because each of you sees something in the spectrum of visible light that the rest of us do not see. And if we read you, and can attune ourselves to your language and imagery, we will know more of the world, having read you, or, just as important, we will have been reminded of something essential to life that we have forgotten.

When I was a boy, I lived around the corner from this library, on 35th Street between Park and Lexington. You will now be asked, if you have not been already, what led you to become a writer, and if it goes for you as it has for me, you will offer an answer that is meant only to put an end to the question. Some passion, some ineluctable longing, some species of love pulls us unto this. It is inscrutable, why we do this, though at various times in our lives we seem to have an answer. In the years after I first walked in here as a boy, standing there in the foyer, intimidated by the glory and the history that is here, I wondered what it meant to be a story teller—the saying of what one imagines, which includes poetry. What does that kind of person do? I made direct inquiries in my travels, among Inuit people in Canada, among Warlpiri people in the Northern Territory of Australia, among Kamba people in Kenya. I spoke with story tellers in Japan and China, in Europe and South America. Without making too fine a point of it, because writers of one frame of mind about this can bristle in the presence of writers of another frame of mind, it seems to me that writers are in the tradition of story teller and that story tellers are, primarily, pattern makers and pattern keepers. They are, in the phrase of the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano, the servants of memory. Our Achilles heel as a species has been that we forget—and I believe story arose early in our history as a response to that, to the danger of forgetting, the fear that comes over us when we realize

that it is because we have forgotten something that our plans to improve the present have gone awry.

It is not necessary, in fact I think it is rare, that a story teller or a writer be a wise person. What is essential is that the writer be able to create a trustworthy pattern, a pattern in the modern idiom that serves the reader in her effort to remember who she is, and where she is going.

One striking thing that emerged for me in many diverse and informal discussions with writers and with story tellers from those traditions we refer to as indigenous—which would include, for myself and for many others in this room, those Madgalenian story tellers and their progeny—is that the distinction in prose between fiction and nonfiction, though logical and even useful, is not as important as the distinction between an authentic and an inauthentic story. An authentic story is about us. An inauthentic story is about the story teller, only the story teller.

I come here this evening primarily as a colleague, as someone who shares with you a very old kind of work, as someone who sees how essential it is in a complex society like ours that we not be in agreement. I do not ask you to see the world the way I do but only to see the world, to engage it according to your gifts and predilections. Our road is treacherous now, as Cormac McCarthy delineated it recently. We have little to guide us but love and our ability to remember. Every day we imagine reconciliation, within ourselves, within our families, within Sudan and Iraq and between the ethnic neighborhoods. We need stories that help. We need stories that revive in our psyches a sense of wonder, a sense not so much of what is possible but a sense, simply, of possibility.

Insofar as you are able, I would ask you, then, to be wary of the distractions of fame and the blandishments of commerce. I would ask you to be tireless and devoted in the courtship of your own imagination. I would ask you to nurture your friendships, your alligence with other human beings. If you feel grief or rage or love, give it a shape so that we as readers will know what you mean, and be able to better understand, better cope with the landscapes of our own grief and rage and love.

Once, some years ago, I was walking across an immensity of space called the arctic tundra, in Alaska, with my close friend, the composer John Luther Adams. We had been talking, off and on, about the ways in which music and language can place a person, can ground a listener or a reader in a particular place, and to give them a point of reference, a stable floor within a complex, creative work. It's difficult to try to explain how this happens in musical composition because in that medium the effort is so figurative. With writing it's more direct. So John and I were talking about what kind of music and language we might join together to convey the great compelling intricacy of this apparently empty landscape we were hiking across. I said to John that the stumbling block, often, for writers here is that, of all the arts, ours is the most literal. I speculated that whatever language he and I might use, it would have to have phonemes and music, and be recognizable but not necessarily intelligible. We walked on, and I said to John, "We could try it in Latin. We could begin with the euphony of some of the scientific binomials—Ursus horribilis for the grizzly bear; Corvus corax, the raven; a sedge, Carex misandra; Vulpes fulva, the red fox; Rangifer tarandus, the barren ground caribou; Salix planifolia pulchra, diamondleaf willow.

We walked on, and something about the repetitive nature of our steps among the many nearly identical tussocks of vegetation suggested a Latin phrase, *peccata mundi*, the sins of the world. We walked on, ruminating on the cadence in language and music, and wondering if a presentation in one of the languages that had grown up out of this landscape before us might work—Kutchin or Inupiaq. John said both these languages, although they are from different families, call the long-tailed duck by the same onomatopoeic sound—ah-HAA-lic. Indigenous sound might be a way through our dilemma. But I kept coming back to *peccata mundi*, which sometimes seems to be an *idée fixe* with me, and then a door opened.

“We are talking about driving light into the darkness,” I said to John. “We’re trying to make light where there is not comprehension. If we start with a cadence of darkness, *peccata mundi*, then where will we go?”

John and I are still talking about how to deal unflinchingly with what threatens humanity, about how to combine our talents to that end, to write music and tell a story that helps, and we have now a principle to organize our thoughts: *Guadearmus igitur*. Therefore let us rejoice. Knowing how threatening it all is, let us rejoice. Or as the poet Adam Zagajewski has put it, let us learn to praise the mutilated world, to give into a shared fate.

It goes without saying this evening that you are talented and determined men and women, and that you have something to say. I would ask you to put aside for now the urgencies of the moment we are all grappling with and to concentrate instead on the different urgency you feel as an artist. We need that. We need, more than we can properly

say, stories and poems that will stick. Write until your mind goes blank. Write until your heart is nothing but ashes. Please.