

Judith Davidson Moyers
Acceptance Remarks, The Frank E. Taplin, Jr. Public Intellectual Award
The Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation • February 7, 2007

Thank you for this award. It's very nice to be among the first unless it's the

"First to receive a ticket at the new stop sign on Main Street," or the

"First to spill spaghetti sauce on the new dining room rug."

I had both of those distinctions.

But this is a lovely "first." I am honored to be the first to receive the Taplin Award.

I will place this award up there with being the first woman to walk the catwalk over the blast furnaces in a Pennsylvania steel mill or the first female to challenge the ancient tradition of climbing down into the hull of a ship under construction and to speak to that quite hostile crew of ironworkers who believed that my presence would put a hex on the ship forever.

I am delighted to be associated with the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation and its goals of improving the quality of teaching and increasing access to educational opportunity.

I salute you for recognizing the value of the teacher in our culture. I have rarely had a prouder moment than when our daughter, Suzanne, chose teaching as her profession and committed herself to it for seven years.

I simply cannot resist sharing with you a few words about some of my teachers. I went to inferior public schools right up through twelfth grade. My high school did not offer Biology II or Geometry II or Calculus or Physics or any language other than Spanish I. There was no Chemistry at all. We had only the most primitive lab. The Math teachers were usually the coaches.

But we had some great teachers. Isabelle Cummings was a demanding history teacher who held my feet to the fire to write first-class papers on the assigned subjects and who drove me to read way beyond the class syllabus and then to write reports which required me to think about what I had written. I could easily have fallen into the role of "class pet." But Mrs. Cummings would not accept abject compliance and warmed-over regurgitating of her lectures. And lecture she did in a fast-clipped Yankee accent that we Texans had to translate as we struggled to keep up. It was a terrific preparation for college. But most kids dreaded Mrs. Cummings every day.

Quite a contrast to Mrs. Hampton who taught us English literature and grammar in a barely audible and very musical Southern elocution style. She often read aloud to us, especially poetry. And she required us to memorize poetry—thank goodness! She convinced us of the power of poetry—the power of the word. We called our first poetry series "The Power of the Word" and I thought of Mrs.



Hampton when we named the second series “The Language of Life” and the third “Sounds of Poetry.” (I don’t think she would have approved of the fourth: “Fooling with Words.”)

When I went to college I was able to compete with the kids who had graduated from top-ranked high schools from all over Texas. I even qualified as one of 30 freshmen selected for a special section of English Literature. (And that is where I met Bill Moyers, by the way.)

At college Dr. Oma Stanley commanded such awe in a three-hour-a-day, five-days-a-week summer school course on Chaucer that we didn’t notice that it was over a hundred degrees in our un-air-conditioned classroom. He was not lovable or handsome or witty. He was a man who loved to set intellectual fires.

Dean Florence Isabell Scoular was a noted scientist, the first woman ever named to the National Board of Nutrition. But she insisted on teaching a freshman class in Nutrition. I think one of her goals was to convert us to science. She expected a great deal of us and she brought our expectations of ourselves up several notches. Her standards for our class preparation were mind-blowing. But the best thing was the way she loved science and she was a wizard at connecting it to our everyday lives. It was as if she was a woman obsessed and she communicated that excitement and urgency to us.

There were so many of these great teachers in my life—and way beyond my formal schooling and into my career. I have been blessed to have great mentors all my fortunate life! (One of the sad things about growing old is that you no longer have mentors.)

I would wager almost anything that every one of you could easily make a list of the great teachers you have had. This is a bond between us, isn’t it? What else do we have in common? We could spend some lovely time just counting the ways.

Here’s one:

We love the world of ideas. We are all so lucky to work in the vineyard of ideas. We share the knowledge that ideas empower and enrich and we all believe that ideas can shape and sustain humankind

But we also know that we are charged with the mission of communicating ideas by sharing and exploring them. All of us are challenged to help our students, our audiences, our fellow human beings test and refine ideas. To accomplish that we must connect.

We are living in the information age and we spend an enormous part of every day “communicating.” As technology supposedly makes this easier, we must not only connect, we must engage. Instead, engaging is perhaps made more difficult by technology. I have watched our 14-year-old grandson sit with an iPod in his ear, text messaging on his cell phone, a laptop computer on his lap, watching television and I question “connection.”

My venue is television. Unlike those who produce for the theater or movies or who teach, we in television are never sure who is watching. Fifteen years ago, Dr. George Gerbner at the University of Pennsylvania noted that television is the only campfire around which all Americans sit. And, at that time, it was true. In those days Americans gathered around the water cooler or the dinner table or in classrooms to discuss what they had all seen on one of the three television networks the night before. That era has passed. Today, network television’s audience has dropped off and Americans have hundreds of channels from which to choose. And then there’s the Internet and all that we label “the new media.” People can customize and self-select the way they receive information.

If we want to communicate ideas, television is not enough! We producers must engage our audience in such a way that people go on beyond our television program to find out more for themselves.

We have learned to use Web sites as great tools for inquiry and as an exciting channel of communication. Now, at long last, we in television can listen to our audience as people respond to us through the Internet. And, of course, listening is the other half of communicating.

I believe you in education are struggling with the same challenge. How do you share the information, the new interpretations, the thrilling questions and the rattling discoveries of today with your “audience”? How do you hear what they are thinking? How can opportunities be opened up for students to think—as public television’s beloved Mr. Rogers said: “Simpler. Deeper.” Now that’s an idea: to stay simple but go deeper to understand. For though we live in the period of the knowledge explosion and the information society it is hardly an age of understanding. It is not the age of wisdom.

How much does a teacher know about students in the classroom? Who is the audience? I expect teachers may know more than we know about our television audience. In the world of television, the big networks and their commercial sponsors do a great deal of market research into who is out there, tuned in and watching. In our world of public broadcasting we cannot do much of that expensive market research but, occasionally when we can raise the money, we do it. A few years ago when we did our series about the end of life—about death and dying—we asked a research team to help us come up with a title. We thought our audience would all be senior citizens. But the research showed that 35-55 year-olds were potentially a big market.

That marketing information also told us that the American public would not tune in to a five-hour series if it mentioned “death” or “dying” in its title. So we called it “On Our Own Terms.” The baby boomers became a large segment of our very large audience because the implication in the title was that they might be able to exert some control over the conditions of terminal illness. (You know how the baby boomers love to control things.) We did not alter the program content to fit market forces. We simply changed what we called it. It matters what you name something. How do you label what you are trying to communicate?

In the world of education how can you get the attention of your audience? It’s true that Americans’ attention span grows shorter and shorter. That’s quite a problem in the typical school schedule of 40-minute class periods. And it’s a tremendous problem for us. We learned some years ago that we had approximately 7 seconds to “hook” an audience, 7 seconds before the remote control zapped us and moved on to FOX or “C.S.I.” It was essential that we learn to engage our viewers with the first few words and visual images of any program. And this revolutionized our traditional approach to serious television. Old dogs can learn new tricks!

Here’s the challenge in the classroom where teachers can be “zapped” in many ways. How do they tune in to the ebb and flow of minds and hearts? Sam Intrator has written an interesting book: *Tuned In and Fired Up: How Teaching Can Inspire Real Learning*. This is what we are after. That is our common goal.

Bill and I have long been dedicated to doing public affairs programming, exploring issues important to the survival of our democracy. And please let me say right here that tonight we have in this room Paula Kerger, the President of PBS, and Pat Mitchell, who preceded Paula in that difficult job. Both of these courageous leaders have supported the mission of public television with great dedication and determination. Without that kind of leadership Bill and I would have been up the creek without a paddle—or set adrift on an ice floe.

But in our determination to explore the tough issues facing our beloved country we had to learn that our audience could cope with only so much information and so many signs and symptoms of the threats to our democracy. We had to recognize our viewers' question: "What does this have to do with me?" and to respond to the toughest of all questions: "So what?" These are the questions frequently raised in classrooms all over America. In our case while continuing to document issues of public policy we began to give more time to analyzing what was happening in the lives of Americans every day. Bill likes to call it "connecting the dots." It's one answer to "What does this have to do with me?" and this is a question that must be addressed in classrooms.

We must all become innovators, to discover new ways of exploring ideas. Many of you here are in a prime position to find these new avenues of teaching and learning. After many years of experience in television Bill and I were sometimes praised as having "perfected" the art of television documentaries. But the old and "perfected" way we had done it was no longer good enough—not sufficient for the world in which we were operating.

It's a little bit like a long and successful marriage: you cannot rest on your laurels. You must constantly reinvent it. We had to develop different strategies of production to enhance the quality television that we had produced in the past, albeit "prize-winning." There are legions of great teachers out there and they need your help. There are also exciting new strategies for teaching to be discovered and supported. The work of your organization is so important to the future of education.

For all of us who are committed to the sharing of ideas, our pressing challenge is to discover new avenues of communication. We have scores of modern tools. Innovative models have been suggested and tested.

We can move from the old linear model which is largely a one-way street where the sender encodes a message and sends it through a channel to the receiver who decodes it.

Or we can try the interactive model where both senders and receivers encode and decode the messages and have the opportunity for feedback. Our television Web sites are amazing laboratories for how hungry Americans are for dialogue.

Or we can learn the effective model of communication that is transactional. It makes the communicators both the senders and the receivers at the same time. It recognizes the effect communication has on its speakers or senders as well as on the listeners or receivers. And it recognizes that messages have two dimensions: content and relationship. The content is what is actually said while the relationship dimension explains how the content of the message changes those who are communicating.

But are we willing to be changed?

It's a fascinating subject which urges us to learn something new. No matter in what field we work, we must learn original vocabularies and practice fresh models of communing with others. How do we learn to do "active listening"? How do we share ideas? And can we do it globally? These are fascinating questions.

I know that the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation is exploring these issues with a determination to invest in those on the front lines of education: teachers.

I salute your goals of recruiting and preparing and supporting teachers. You inspire me with hope for the future.

Thank you for this award.