

Out of the Disenlightenment
Nancy Hanks Lecture
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By Robert MacNeil

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I did not know Nancy Hanks but a friend, Bob Kotlowitz, who served on the literature panel, said, “All she had to do was walk into the room and we were electrified by her presence.” Considering her lasting impact on the arts in America, she was a national treasure, and I am honored to be asked to speak in the lectures that bear her name.

As with many of you, I’m sure, my life has been profoundly shaped by the arts, from when I was a small boy being read to from Robert Louis Stevenson and Dickens, to today in our apartment in New York where bookshelves overflow onto the floor, to every horizontal surface, so that to eat in the dining room we have to first clear books off the table.

Encounters with certain books, certain pieces of music, certain paintings have been transformative, life-enhancing experiences. Some encounters with the arts have been practical, like putting me through college and, after several serendipitous accidents, providing me with a career. That career, journalism, for decades led me away from art’s metaphorical truths and along the paths of literalism. But in latter years I have been trying — like a hang glider on a hilltop seeking the right puff of wind — hoping for a little metaphorical lift to my writings. That labored metaphor probably tells its own tale.

When I was young, several first encounters with works of art were transformative. On my 16th birthday in Canada, my father — a sailor with deep love of literature and music — gave me Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*. It was a 78 album with Oscar Levant at the piano and the Paul Whiteman Orchestra. My father must have known me better than I suspected because the effect on me was electrifying. I think that music subconsciously implanted the conviction that, despite all the British conditioning of my Nova Scotia upbringing, something deep in me was American — 50 years before I actually became a citizen. Gershwin's music seemed to know who I was better than I knew. From the opening clarinet riff (I know from the Leonard Garment lecture here that it's called a *glissando*), to the lush and orgasmic finale, my mind was opened to possibilities I had not dreamt of but innately recognized. I was moved by the impertinence, the humor, the mockery of convention, the independence, the freedom, the romance, and the irresistible tunefulness of Gershwin, all driven by the intoxicating jazz rhythms. All very American.

In college, I had a similar experience on encountering T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*, the same sense of awakening, of being transported into the modern world. Like the music, Eliot's words had the power to create in me an ache of recognition for emotions I had yet to feel in reality, of nostalgia for losses I had not suffered, a strong emotional undertow pulling me into situations that were entirely fictional yet seemingly quite familiar.

The third such flash of recognition occurred when my senior high school class was taken to see Laurence Olivier's filmed *Hamlet*. Until then Shakespeare had been like the sawdust used to stuff old-fashioned dolls — much of it had leaked out. But this

Hamlet seemed to enter the very pores of my being. I felt as though a giant hand had moved me many squares forward on the board of life. I knew much of what Hamlet was feeling, what late adolescent does not? But who has ever put it so exquisitely to himself? *How weary, flat, stale and unprofitable seem to me all the uses of this life.* I went back to school, grabbed the text, and effortlessly, it seemed, memorized all the soliloquies, including those Olivier left out of the film. I fancied myself something of an actor in school plays and could not wait to strut my stuff in Shakespeare. That chance came at college, and although a critic said my legs in green tights looked like two limp asparagus, a producer from the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation offered me work acting in live radio drama. Acting on the radio led to work as an announcer, then to TV — and put me through the rest of college.

In between, during a dropout year after a summer of stock in Massachusetts, with \$67 I came to New York to save Broadway. After 10 days of eating grapes between chats with condescending producers, I was crossing Times Square on a very hot September day. On a traffic island opposite the Camel billboard that used to blow smoke rings, a voice in my head spoke to me. Very distinctly, it said: “You’d make a lousy actor. You have a voice and some technique but you’re too stiff and constricted. You’re meant to be the cool one behind the scenes — a writer.” I didn’t know whose the voice was, but I believed it and went back to college. Then I decided I was going to save the London stage as a playwright, but I needed to get married in the way that young men in the 1950s needed to get married, and to make a living, and I became a journalist. So, my advice to would-be journalists? Brush up your Shakespeare!

One other event I'll add from my life with the arts. It was again my father, a shy man — at least with me — about matters sexual. But he gave me a copy of *Ulysses*, not an easy book to buy in those puritanical days in Canada, where even garlic was a controlled substance! His advice was that I wouldn't find anything more realistic about life than Mollie Bloom's soliloquy.

My own major contribution to the arts is that three of my four children are artists — Cathy a dancer, Ian a stage designer, Will a film editor. Their sister Alison is social worker and mother.

I have read all the previous Nancy Hanks lectures with profit, but also with something like awe, because they comprise such a body of knowledge and practical experience in the arts and public policy. So much idealism tempered with wisdom earned in the trenches that it made me wonder, what am I doing here? Eventually, I noticed that in none of the 19 remarkable lectures that preceded mine had anyone mentioned artists' colonies. And that explains my presumption in joining so distinguished a list of speakers. I represent an aspect of the arts scene that America pioneered: residential programs for artists. And I believe that in view of the travails in public funding that previous speakers have discussed, because of the old controversies surrounding government appropriations for the National Endowment for the Arts, because of threats to the very existence of the NEA, colonies have come to fill a growing and vital role. I am grateful to Bob Lynch and Americans for the Arts for recognizing that importance, since this is a particularly propitious year: This year the oldest residential program, and longest continuously running, The MacDowell Colony of Peterborough, New Hampshire, is 100 years old. I

have been Chairman of the MacDowell Board for 14 years, and that is how I wangled this invitation.

Our Colony was founded by the great American composer Edward MacDowell and his wife, Marian. Their idea was that emerging artists of all disciplines needed a quiet place in which to live and work, free for a time from the practical burdens of life. A place where their work was taken seriously, where they could be stimulated by the presence of other artists of different disciplines, in Edward MacDowell's firm belief that artists benefited from a cross-pollination of ideas. In time, MacDowell became a prototype for colonies around this country and the world. MacDowell now receives some 250 colonists a year — painters, poets, filmmakers, novelists, playwrights, sculptors, composers, architects, and interdisciplinary artists who come for up to two months. They are evaluated by committees of their peers. It is free. They are housed and fed. They eat breakfast and dinner together. A basket lunch is delivered to their studios. No one disturbs them.

We run 32 studios, all year round, in 450 acres of woodlands outside Peterborough, a town Thornton Wilder used as the inspiration for *Own Town*, written at the Colony and one of the most frequently produced plays of all time. MacDowell was where Leonard Bernstein composed his *Mass*; Aaron Copland had eight Fellowships at the Colony and served six years as its president. More recently, it is where Michael Chabon wrote *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*; Jonathan Franzen worked on *The Corrections*; Wendy Wasserstein several plays; and Ruth Reichl her delicious and

nutritious memoirs. Our Colonists have won dozens of Pulitzers and Prix de Romes. In 1997, the Colony was awarded the National Medal of Arts.

Long after Edward MacDowell died, the writer Upton Sinclair, who as a young man had studied music with the composer, wrote that Edward was “a friend of every freedom, and of every beautiful and generous impulse. He hated pretense and formalism, and all things which repress the free creative spirit.” I’d like to repeat that thought ... all things which repress the free creative spirit.

Now why are such places needed, and apparently needed more today?

Two things in life can take care of themselves and always find ways to communicate: moneymaking and lovemaking.

A few years ago, a security guard at the Whitney Museum of American Art wrote with a felt pen on a Roy Lichtenstein painting, “I love you, Tushee. Love, Buns.” Then he drew a heart and dated it — a true marriage of love and art. Or, perhaps, of art, love, and money. The Whitney was sued by the painting’s owner for \$2.5 million. I hope Tushee expressed her gratitude to Buns ... appropriately.

More and more in this culture it is demanded of creative people to succeed by one criterion: what sells and, inevitably, what sells best.

But for most creative people, the marketplace is the end of the process. If they land there and are commercially successful, it is wonderful. Their paintings sell, their music is played, their novels are published, and so on. But that is the end of the process. If it were the beginning, the creative force might quickly wither or be smothered, as we can see too often in art created only for the market.

Most painting, music, poems, novels are born in an act of private communication with the self and, perhaps, in the imagination, with some abstract but sympathetic viewer, listener, reader. It skirts the line between communications that are largely designed to exploit the consumer, and those that enrich.

The intention is everything. I like the remark years ago by Pauline Kael, the movie critic who wrote that, “When you start thinking of the jerk audience out there, the rot sets in.” It’s hard to imagine a serious artist of any kind thinking the audience a jerk, but we’re engulfed in mass media products that seem to do so.

Any serious work begins as a small seed planted in a soil of lonely confidence. The artist who plants it certainly hungers for recognition and, ultimately perhaps, fame. But the first spur is recognition by those who know the craft: the fellow practitioners, the peers, and, possibly, the critics.

The marketplace cannot always provide that spur. Some artists who can find their way through the labyrinth of personal dialogue and their own vision may ultimately be recognized and rewarded by the marketplace — some in months, most in years, some after lifetimes, some only after they are dead.

Artists’ colonies exist to nurture creative people in that first stage — a stage each creative person has to relive again and again. To borrow a phrase the *New York Times* used about New York City, MacDowell is “an incubator of invention.”

So are the more than 300 other residential colonies that have blossomed since the MacDowells founded theirs in 1907. Together they support some 8,000–9,000 artists a year, and some are helped by grants from the NEA.

Like the NEA, they provide emerging artists with the imprimatur of quality judged by experts in each discipline and found worthy — psychologically a moment of huge value for a tender ego.

But colonies have an advantage more relevant since the attacks on the NEA in the '90s that forced the Endowment to reduce grants to individuals, which, in turn, caused some foundations and corporations to drop individual artist support from their mission statements.

Our colonies provide a heat shield for people who wish to support artists without subjecting them to tests of cultural purity or social acceptability. Artists who receive MacDowell Fellowships do not have to pass through scanners for impiety; there are no urine tests for politically defined obscenity.

The NEA is still recovering from that dark period, still trying to restore its annual appropriation to the highpoint of \$176 million, from which it was cut 40 percent in 1995.

That arose from a surge of political moralism, as fresh skirmishes in the culture wars reminded us that we live in a nation whose moral climate has often swung from the puritanical to the permissive, from the religious to the secular; a nation whose level of religious commitment is higher than in any other developed country.

This swing to Puritanism gained energy when political consultants and lobbying organizations discovered the catnip — and fund-raising power — of pandering to those who could be persuaded that art is decadent, or immoral, or homosexual, and destructive of finer values. Thus, the modern culture wars were launched, with Andres Serrano and

Robert Mapplethorpe as the principal whipping boys. And artists found themselves having, once again, to explain their value to society.

I have called this talk “Out of the Disenlightenment,” so let me explain what I mean.

We in the democratic and developed world are engaged in a novel struggle against a strand of fundamentalist Islam, people who believe that Western ways are corrupting humanity and that our governments of men must be replaced by Islamist states ruled not by man-made laws but by God’s law, Islamic law. And some among them are willing to carry that conviction into a Jihad against us, including terrorist attacks. Failing to overthrow the governments they viewed as corrupt at home, in Egypt and Saudi Arabia — the near enemy as they put it — they turned to the far enemy, the West. And that led to attacks on U.S. embassies, a U.S. warship, and then 9/11.

However we see this struggle — as a war on terror that will last generations or something more narrowly defined — there is no avoiding the fact that our fear of them has changed our lives and our idea of what makes us secure, it has radically changed our foreign policy, and it has taken us into two inconclusive wars.

Curiously, this wave of Islamic fundamentalism coincides with a growth of fundamentalism here, both Jewish and Christian. I am not for a moment suggesting that our fundamentalists harbor any violent intentions. Their approaches are almost always peaceful and legal, and they use the institutions of democracy — politics, the media, and the courts — to have their way. But the initial psychology is similar to that which inspires Islamic reformers.

Millions of Americans see our society in a continual drift towards looser standards, toward a world in which nothing remains sacred — no moral code unbreakable, almost no sexual taboo inviolable. They see mass entertainment and its advertising partners pushing a self-indulgent, material society; feeding a culture of pleasure and self-abandonment in which all restraints are cast aside in the name of personal fulfillment and tolerance for lifestyles hitherto considered acts of the deepest immorality; Sodom and Gomorrah recreated in the country that fervent Christians once thought of as the chosen place because of its purity — the place where the end of time would happen. That idea has returned in force today.

This multifaceted anxiety has fed a surge of fundamentalism — especially among evangelical Christians — not new in American life but made stronger by a phenomenon that *is* new: its emergence as a major political force.

In 1995, summing up the growth of American conservatism, Irving Kristol argued that the emergence of religion-based, morally concerned political conservatism might be the most important development of all. Writing in *The Public Interest*, Kristol said, “It is not at all unimaginable that the U.S. is headed for a bitter and sustained Kulturkampf (culture war) that could overwhelm notions of what is and what is not political.” He added: “We have lived through a century of ever more extreme hedonism ... and no one who has bothered to read a bit of history ought to be surprised if it culminates in some kind of religious awakening.... Just what form this renewed religious impulse will take no one can foresee. We — all of us — could be in for some shocking surprises.”

Well, in the decade since that was written, we have seen some skirmishes in the culture wars, and whether they are destined to grow more virulent or they are fading away is of huge importance to American artists and the institutions that support them, like the National Endowments.

It is inevitable that artists should become the targets of such fundamentalist anxieties, because it is in the nature of artists to push the frontiers of taste and morality, to show society both its pieties and its hypocrisies.

In 2004, the Rand Corporation produced an influential study of how exposure to art served democracy by helping citizens better understand unfamiliar people, attitudes, and cultures. Rand added that art:

... can be unsettling and provocative, and can lead us to question our routine and conventional perceptions of the world, forcing us to look with fresh eyes on private and public questions involving sexuality, love, marriage, family, spirituality, slavery, segregation, gender, ethnicity, colonialism, and war, just to name a few of the more obvious.

Many of those categories can be deeply upsetting to people with fixed ideas on how their God intended us to behave.

But our new fundamentalism comes centuries after two developments within Christianity that have not occurred within Islam. The first was the Protestant Reformation, a long and often violent struggle to end the exclusive authority of Rome. It not only opened Christianity to religious dissent, but it also fed a growing resistance to arbitrary political authority. That meant an end to the divine right of kings and the rise of democracy. In many Muslim countries, kings or authoritarian rulers are still in charge and

democracy is rudimentary. Experience in Iraq shows the difficulty of trying to introduce it suddenly.

There are Muslims who want to see a Reformation within Islam, to allow more open questioning of its restrictive lifestyles, especially for women. One of the most visible is a young Canadian woman named Irshad Manji, who frequently receives death threats for her outspokenness. She appears in a documentary series entitled *America at a Crossroads* that I am hosting on PBS next month.

Incidentally, one of the hours in that series, *Operation Homecoming*, began with an NEA commission for soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan to write about their experiences. A book was published, and now some of those pieces have been made into a documentary.

Two centuries after the Reformation, Christianity endured another intellectual cataclysm, the European Enlightenment, which produced the ideals on which the United States was founded. As digested by the Founding Fathers, those ideals are enshrined in the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights. Indeed at this lectern two years ago, Ken Burns said that Thomas Jefferson “distilled a century of Enlightenment thinking” in one remarkable sentence, beginning with “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal ...”

One of the most radical ideas of Enlightenment thinkers was the separation of church and state, and in America that translated into explicit guarantees of not only the freedom to practice any religion (or none) but also an absolute proscription against imposing any one religion by the state.

Separation of church and state, in Enlightenment thinking, meant that people should be governed by rational thought rather than the religious worldview; that, in the words of one historian, “reason not faith or divine revelation told one the facts about life and the world.” Rational thought meant the rationality of science and the scientific method. Americans have been struggling with that one ever since, especially since the march of modernism and of urban living, as galloping progress in science and technology has seemed, to religious people, to make American society ever more secular, godless, and willing to cast aside any firm attachment to morality based on religion.

An excellent example is the struggle over Evolution — whether it should be taught in public schools, and whether Creationism should be taught instead of or alongside Evolution. Nothing better illustrates the tension between science and religion — born three centuries ago in the Enlightenment — than Darwin’s electrifying idea that humans have evolved from a long line of lower species and were, therefore, not created, as the Bible says, by God.

Not since the Scopes trial of 1925 has this issue aroused such wide controversy. Incidentally, a play about that trial, *Inherit the Wind*, is being revived on Broadway this spring with Christopher Plummer and Brian Dennehy.

It must astonish the world that America — the world’s most powerful nation whose hard power rests on its brilliance in science and technology; the nation that still wins a lion’s share of Nobel Prizes for Science — would consider opening its educational system to challenging notions that have been settled by science for generations. Would insist in some cases on putting into the minds of its children the notion that the Biblical

account of creation is to be preferred. Our children, who are not exactly leading the world in science as it is.

In 1991, The American Academy of Arts and Sciences, of which I am proud to be a fellow, undertook a global survey entitled *The Fundamentalism Project*. In one chapter, “Christian Fundamentalism and Education in the United States,” Susan Rose wrote:

“Until the 1970s, fundamentalist perspectives were largely ignored by mainstream education. But during the last two decades, fundamentalists have mobilized, voicing their grievances and extending the controversy over public education from the classroom to the courtroom. As a consequence, they have had a significant impact on religious and secular schooling in the United States. Across the nation, public schools have been pressured to remove books from classrooms and libraries, to teach scientific creationism as well as evolution, to eliminate sex education, to adopt textbooks that reinforce ‘traditional’ American values, and to avoid ‘controversial’ subjects in the classroom.”

The American Civil Liberties Union, which tracks these issues, notes two trends: recent textbooks seemed to be sliding towards respect for Intelligent Design; and, in the classroom, teachers were adopting an increasingly skeptical approach in teaching Evolution, saying it was only a theory.

But there is evidence that this effort to defeat evolution has faltered. That drive to force the teaching of Scientific Creationism or Intelligent Design has lost some of its impetus, following a court challenge and decisive defeat in Delaware. There may be many others but the National Center for Science Education can name only Blount

County, Tennessee, where it is sure the school board has a policy that Intelligent Design be taught alongside Evolution.

There have been many other manifestations of Christian religious influence on public policy, from the Terri Schiavo case, to support for those who believe that Judea and Sumeria belong to Israel by Biblical writ, to the New Jersey high school teacher who was taped by a student saying “only Christians could go to heaven,” to the ongoing efforts to limit abortion rights, to federal restrictions on research using stem cells beyond a certain approved number to prevent the use of embryonic cells from aborted fetuses. But the pressure to continue research that might prove effective in treating some intractable medical conditions has been so great that a number of states have gone ahead and approved their own research.

What interests me more than individual examples is this different idea of intellectual freedom than is usually celebrated in this country. John Garvey, in the same study of fundamentalism I have cited, writes that fundamentalists are devoted to the ideal of freedom, but that “freedom is ultimately submission, even if it is voluntary submission. . . . true freedom must not be confused with license — with actions that are inconsistent with God’s will.” That would make perfect sense to the Muslim fundamentalists, whom we both fear today and scorn for seeming to be living in the Middle Ages.

Garvey quotes Jerry Falwell as saying, “Freedom of speech does not include perverting and sickening the moral appetites of men and women . . . liberty cannot be represented by sexual license.” Yet that is precisely what freedom of speech does mean, however distasteful a particular subject may be to any one of us. And that is what creative

freedom means, to think beyond the safe, the respectable, and the orthodox. That is what the Reformation meant. That is what the Enlightenment meant. It may even be what the disobedience in the Garden of Eden meant. I always thought it was what the United States of America meant — what the music of Gershwin meant.

Fundamentalism arises from insecurity, from fear that the dynamics of a multi-ethnic, multi-faith society will undermine the certainties of one set of beliefs and the comforts of a known morality. The fear that it will cause defections, will dissolve the group, will weaken the power of its leaders, their sway over their flock, their material power, and their fund-raising.

And that *is* a risk in this society: that assimilation, intermarriage, and freethinking will erode the purity of one sect. But that, too, is the essence of America. It happened from the earliest Colonial days and it happens today. We are constantly a society in evolution.

Religious people of all faiths and sects are perfectly entitled to their views, but it is the effort to impose those views into the world beyond their purview that creates the tensions we have been discussing, and it is that effort that I call “disenlightenment”— pushing to have public policy more driven by religious inspiration; pushing against the basic inheritance from the enlightenment: the separation of church and state.

I see some evidence that the battle may have peaked for now, in part because the national anxiety created by the attacks of 9/11 and the hot wars we are still fighting in response may have weakened the appeal of more spiritual battles.

In his *Alexandria Quartet*, the set of novels about life in that city, Lawrence Durrell writes about the psychological effect of World War II on his collection of exotic expatriates, many of them artists. The narrator feels the need to console a friend from France, which has just fallen to the Germans, thinking: “France itself would never truly die so long as artists were being born into the world. But this world of armies and battles was too intense and too concrete to make the thought seem more than of secondary importance — for art really means freedom, and it was this which was at stake.”

It may seem to many Americans that events in the world today are too intense and too concrete to make concerns like art more than of secondary importance, that the so-called “war on terror” has precedence over everything else. I heard a Washington insider say the other day that Iraq had sucked the oxygen out of every other issue here in the capital.

And it may be that for the moment Iraq has sucked the oxygen out of the religious right, which polls show included a lot of people who supported the war. Their leaders recently held a conference in Florida to complain that there is no presidential candidate whom they can comfortably support.

As William Safire told us last year and Leonard Garment earlier, President Nixon came to the support of the NEA because he thought supporting art would help bring Americans together from the cruel divisions created by the Vietnam War, even though Nixon told Safire, “there are no votes in it for me.” Well, the country is again divided over an unpopular war, and President Bush has been supporting modest increases (four million dollars a year) in NEA funding. As they say in New York: Go figure!

The NEA survived the 90s, and even though its funding has been reduced, if you take the total it has spent over the 41 years of its existence it comes to almost five billion dollars. Since every NEA dollar leverages seven more dollars, that means that approximately 40 billion dollars has been pumped into the arts across America, and into as many local corners of America as Nancy Hanks and her successors could find.

President Kennedy is often quoted in support of the arts. Less often quoted is what President Johnson said when the NEA and NEH were inaugurated:

“Our civilization will largely survive in the works of our creation. There is a quality in art which speaks across the gulf, dividing man from man and nation from nation, and century from century. That quality confirms the faith that our common hopes may be more enduring than our conflicting hostilities. Even now men of affairs are struggling to catch up with the insights of great art. The stakes may well be the survival of civilization.”

I think art can be an important weapon in the struggle against Islamic fundamentalism, which ultimately has to be a struggle in soft power — a struggle of ideas — if we keep our own fundamentalist urges in perspective. In 1943, Winston Churchill warned that “the empires of the future are empires of the mind.”

“Freedom to Create,” the MacDowell slogan for its centennial, carries a powerful message of American freedom. Washington took that to heart during the Cold War when the dissemination of American art overseas got federal funding as a major weapon against the propaganda and disinformation of the Soviet Union—our poets, our playwrights, and always most popular, our jazz.

I am glad that Laura Bush and Secretary of State Rice have launched the Global Cultural Initiative to increase exchanges among artists of many nations, beginning with films. It may take much more, perhaps on the scale of something like a whole new Fulbright program, to make a real impact on current global perceptions of the United States. And such a change in perceptions probably won't happen until we have decided as a nation to rely again primarily on our soft power — our ideals, our intellectual freedom, our creativity in all fields — to demonstrate what being the only superpower really means.

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., who was the first Hanks lecturer, reminded us shortly before his recent death, of something John F. Kennedy said during his first year in the White House, the year of the Bay of Pigs fiasco and the building of the Berlin Wall:

“We must face the fact that the United States is neither omnipotent nor omniscient, that we are only 6 percent of the world's population, that we cannot impose our will on the other 94 percent of mankind, that we cannot right every wrong or reverse each adversity, and that therefore there cannot be an American solution to every world problem.”

