

# These are the times that try our Souls

A PLENARY DELIVERED BY GRACE LEE BOGGS AT THE NATIONAL EXCHANGE ON ART & CIVIC DIALOGUE  
FLINT, MICHIGAN, OCTOBER 9-12, 2003

I want to thank the incredibly efficient and hard-working organizers of this important gathering for inviting me to give the keynote. I've only been here for a few hours but I've already learned a lot. As I am fond of saying, I may be 88 years old, with two hearing aids, three pair of glasses, and very few teeth, but I still have most of my marbles, mainly because I'm good at learning.

I was born during World War I. This means that through no fault of my own, I have lived through most of the catastrophic events of the 20th century—the Great Depression, Fascism and Nazism, the Holocaust, World War II, the A-bomb, and the H-bomb, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Cold War, Korean War, McCarthyism, Vietnam War, and, now, as we enter the 21st century, 9/11 and the “taking the law into our own hands” response of our government.

In the 60 plus years that have elapsed since I left the university in 1940, I have also had the great privilege of participating in most of the great humanizing movements of the second half of the last century—the labor, civil rights, black power, women's, Asian American, environmental justice, antiwar movements. Each of these has been a tremendously transformative experience for me, expanding my understanding of what it means to be an American and a human being and challenging me to keep deepening my thinking about how to bring about radical social change.

However, I cannot recall any previous period when the challenges have been so basic, so interconnected, and so demanding, not just to specific groups but to everyone living in this country, regardless of race, ethnicity, class, gender, age, or national origin. At this point in the continuing evolution of our country and of the human race, we urgently need to stop thinking of ourselves as victims and to recognize that we must each become a part of the solution because we are each a part of the problem.

How are we going to make our livings in an age when high-tech and the export of jobs overseas have brought us to the point where the number of workers needed to produce goods and services is constantly diminishing? Where will we get the imagination, the courage, and the determination to reconceptualize the meaning and purpose of work in a society that is becoming increasingly jobless?

What is going to happen to cities like Flint and Detroit that were once the arsenal of democracy? Are we just going to throw them away now that they have been abandoned by industry—or can we rebuild, redefine, and respirit them as models of 21st century self-reliant, sustainable, multicultural communities? Who is going to begin this new story?

How are we going to redefine education so that 30 to 50percent of inner city children do not drop out of school, thus ensuring that large numbers will **not** end up in prison? Is it enough to call for “Education, not Incarceration?” Or does our topdown educational system that was created a hundred years ago to prepare an immigrant population for work in the factory bear a large part of the responsibility for the escalation in incarceration?

How are we going to build a 21st century America in which people of all races and ethnicities live together in harmony, and Euro-Americans in particular embrace their new role as one among many minorities constituting the new multi-ethnic majority?

Who or what is going to motivate us to start caring for our biosphere instead of using our mastery of technology to increase the volume and speed at which we are making our planet uninhabitable for other species and eventually for ourselves?

And, especially since 9/11, how are we to achieve reconciliation with the two-thirds of the world that is increasingly resentful of our economic, military, and cultural domination? Can we accept their anger as a challenge rather than a threat? Out of our new vulnerability can we recognize that our safety now depends on our loving and caring for the peoples of the world as we love and care for our own families? Or can we conceive of security only in terms of the Patriot Act and exercising our formidable military power?

When the chickens come home to roost for our invasion of Iraq, as they are already doing, where will we get the courage and the imagination to win by losing? What will help us recognize that we have brought on our defeats by our own arrogance, our own irresponsibility, and our own unwillingness, as individuals and as a nation, to engage in seeking radical solutions to the growing inequality between the nations of the North and those of the South? Can we create a new paradigm of our selfhood and our nationhood? Or are we so locked into nationalism, racism, and determinism that we will be driven to seek scapegoats for our frustrations and failures as the Germans did after World War I, thus aiding and abetting the onset of Hitler and the Holocaust?

We live in a very dangerous time because these questions are no longer abstractions. Our lives, the lives of our children and future generations, and even the survival of the planet depend on our willingness to transform ourselves into active planetary and global citizens who, as Martin Luther King Jr. put it, “develop an overriding loyalty to mankind as a whole in order to preserve the best in their individual society.”

The time is already very late and we have a long way to go to meet these challenges. Over the decades of economic expansion that began with the so-called American Century after World War II, as individuals and as a people, Americans have become increasingly self-centered and materialistic, increasingly alienated and isolated from our neighbors, more concerned with our possessions and individual careers than with the state of our neighborhoods, cities, country, and planet, closing our eyes and hearts to the many forms of violence that have been exploding in our inner cities and in powder kegs all over the rest of the world—both because the problems have seemed so mountainous and insurmountable and because just struggling for our own survival has consumed so much of our time and energy.

At the same time the various identity struggles, while remediating to some degree the great wrongs that have been done to workers, African Americans, Native Americans and other people of color, women, gays and lesbians, and while helping to humanize our society overall, have also had a shadow side in the sense that they have encouraged us to think of ourselves more as determined than as self-determining, more as victims of “isms” (racism, sexism, capitalism) than as human beings who have the power of *choice* and who for our own survival must assume individual and collective responsibility for creating a new nation that is loved rather than feared and that does not have to bribe and bully other nations to win support.

These are the times that try our souls. Each of us needs to undergo a tremendous philosophical and spiritual transformation. Each of us needs to be awakened to a personal and compassionate recognition of the inseparable interconnection between our minds, hearts, and bodies, between our physical and psychical well-being, and between our selves and all the other selves in our country and in the world. Each of us needs to stop being a passive observer of the suffering that we know is going on in the world and start identifying with the sufferers. Each of us needs to make a leap that is both practical and philosophical, beyond determinism to self-determination. Each of us has to be true to and enhance our own humanity by embracing and practicing the conviction that as human beings we have free will; that despite the powers and principalities that are bent on objectifying and commodifying us and all our human relationships, the interlocking crises of our time require that we exercise the power within us to make principled choices in our ongoing daily and political lives, choices that will eventually (although not inevitably; there are no guarantees) make a difference. Each of us needs to discover and exercise the power within us that enabled Rosa Parks to choose not to go to the back of the bus without waiting to see if others would join her.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In this connection I recommend *East of Eden*, the 1951 book by John Steinbeck that Oprah Winfrey has selected for her book Club. Through the life story of two generations of Americans living in California in the early part of the 20th century, *East of Eden* explores the age-old question raised in the biblical story of Cain and Abel. Are we genetically determined to be good or evil? Or does each of us have within us the power to overcome external and genetic forces by exercising our innate power of Choice or Free Will? In *East of Eden* this philosophical/political question is explored by Lee, the Chinese house servant, who starts out speaking pidgin English because that was all that Caucasians expected of Asians in that period and ends up as a scholar who, together with other Chinese scholars, concludes that through this story God wants to make clear that instead of ordering people to do his will (Thou Must) or promising them happiness (Thou Shalt), he is telling us “Thou Mayest” (Timshel in Hebrew), in other words, giving us permission to exercise our power of Choice. So *East of Eden* ends with Adam, the father of Cal (Cain) and Aron (Abel), on his deathbed whispering “Timshel.” Over the years I have found Oprah Winfrey amazingly sensitive to the crises in the American psyche. So I hope that her selection of *East of Eden* for reading and discussion will inspire a remake of a movie of *East of Eden* to help the American people recognize how much the future depends on our exercising our power of Choice. Interestingly, the 1955 Elia Kazan production starring James Dean did not even include the character of Lee.

How are we going to bring about these transformations? Politics as usual—debate and argument, even voting—are no longer sufficient. Our system of representative democracy, which was created by a great revolution, no longer engages the hearts and minds of the great majority of Americans. Vast numbers of people no longer bother to go to the polls, either because they don't care what happens to the country or the world, or because they don't believe that voting will make a difference on the profound and inter connected issues that really matter. Or they go to the polls and elect Arnold Schwarzenegger. Even organizing or joining massive protests against disastrous policies and demands for new policies are not enough. They demonstrate that we are on the right side politically but their politics is not personal enough. In themselves they do not encourage the kind of self-examination and self-transformation that unleash the new energies needed to create a new participatory democracy.

That is why this gathering to explore and expand the role of the aesthetic imagination in creating civic dialogue is so important. The special virtue of art is that it engages not only the minds but the feelings and the will of the individual. Drama especially is truer than history because it makes it so clear that life itself is a process of unending choices, to be or not to be, to do or not to do.

This gathering provides us with the opportunity to share what each of us has been doing to reach the hearts and souls of Americans so that together we can begin building the movement that is now required to develop our compassion, i.e., our capacity to feel the pain, suffering, fears, and hopes of others, and our recognition that each one of us is continually making a difference, by what we choose to do or choose not to do.

Let me conclude by sharing some examples of how we are building this movement as an organic part of our ongoing struggle to rebuild, redefine, and re-spirit Detroit.

Fifteen years ago, in 1988, Coleman Young, Detroit's first black mayor, confronted by mushrooming crime—in 1986, 47 young Detroiters were killed and 365 wounded—decided that what the city needed to replace the jobs lost by de-industrialization was a casino industry. To defeat the proposal, we joined a wide-ranging coalition of ministers, community activists, and cultural workers. During the struggle, Young called us “naysayers.” and challenged us to come up with an alternative.

In response we projected a vision of Detroit as a collection of communities. “Our concern,” we said in this brochure, “is with how our city has been disintegrating socially, economically, politically, morally, and ethically.” “We are convinced,” we said, “that we cannot depend upon one industry or any large corporation to provide us with jobs. It is now up to us—the citizens of Detroit—to put our hearts, our imaginations, our minds, and our hands together to create a vision and project concrete programs for developing the kinds of local enterprises that will provide meaningful jobs and income for all citizens.”

Towards this goal, thinking back to Mississippi Freedom Summer and Martin Luther King's advocacy of direct action structure-transforming and self-transforming projects for young people in our dying cities, in 1992 we founded Detroit Summer, a multicultural/intergenerational program involving young people in projects to rebuild, redefine, and respirit our city from the ground up by putting the “Neighbor” back into the “hood.” These projects include Community Gardening, to reconnect young people to the earth and to the community; Murals, to create public space for dialogue with the community<sup>2</sup> and rehabbing abandoned houses. For the last 12 years, Shea Howell, who had planned to be here today, has been the co-coordinator of Detroit Summer. From the very beginning she has enlisted dedicated community-conscious artists in our work.

For example, to celebrate our work in community gardening, Nobuko Miyamoto of Great Leap (one of this year's Leadership for a Changing America awardees), wrote a song, I Dream a Garden, and choreographed a dance that

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<sup>2</sup>As a form of artistic expression murals are loaded with social/political significance. More than just large paintings they are publicly accessible. Painted on walls with clear intentions to educate, reaffirm, and represent the experiences of those in local communities, they act as voices for those without access to media, museums, and other cultural institutions. Murals can be participatory, actively engaging the audiences they represent in the mural's creation. Dialogue between artist and audience is essential. Finally murals' public and collective nature challenges society's concept of private ownership and “cult of individualism.” They exemplify that art and culture belong to everyone.” Tony Osumi

combines African American, Native American, and Asian American movements to accompany it. Jenni Kuida has brought with her a video of I Dream a Garden.

Another example. In a desolate neighborhood on the near west side of the city there is a public high school for teenage mothers called the Catherine Ferguson Academy, where students are learning respect for life and for the earth by raising farm animals, planting a community garden, and building a barn.

To provide emergency housing for these teenage mothers, Detroit Summer is rehabbing two abandoned houses across the street from the school. On the corner between the two houses, landscape architect Ashley Kyber has created a story-telling circle and Deborah Grotfeldt from the Project Rowhouse in Houston, Texas and Trisha Ward of Art Corps/LA—both of whom are here today—have created an Art Park which is becoming a meeting place for neighborhood residents. As a result, this neighborhood is coming back to life. A teacher has bought and renovated the abandoned house next to one of the Detroit Summer houses. A family down the street has fixed up their own house and bought one next door and another across the street and is rehabbing them for other family members.

Another example. One of the major roadblocks in redefining and respiriting Detroit is the binary black/white consciousness which reflects both the city's history and its current reality. To help Detroiters acquire a more multi-ethnic consciousness in line with the demographic changes taking place all across the country, Detroit Summer volunteers have begun revitalizing the mostly abandoned historic Chinatown which is on the margins of the city's cultural center. This summer they began this revitalization by painting a mural, designed by Jenni Kuida and her husband, Tony Osumi, which depicts the struggle for justice uniting blacks, whites, and Asian Americans, the three ethnic groups who live in the neighborhood. Three weeks ago at the unveiling ceremony the new synergy created by the mural was almost palpable and I am confident it will continue to grow as day after day blacks, Asian Americans, and whites walk, bike, or drive past the mural. There are pictures of the mural and the ceremony on the table in the lobby.

Another Boggs Center project is Artists and Children Creating Community Together. AC3T involves elementary school students, mentored by career artists from the College of Creative Studies, in creating murals that are then blown up and hung on the exterior walls of the school to inspire everyone in the community. AC3T murals now hang on four schools in Detroit. In each case they have helped to put the "Neighbor" back into the "Hood."

My final example relates to the escalating crisis in public education all over the nation.

For more than 30 years, since I was involved in the community control of schools movement in the 1960s, I have been insisting that the time has come to leave behind the top down factory model of education which was created at the beginning of the century to supply industry with a disciplined work force and make a paradigm shift to a form of democratic education in which children are engaged in solving real questions of their lives and communities.

The Freedom Schools created during Mississippi Freedom Summer in 1964 gave us a preview of this new kind of schooling. Since the rebellions of the late 1960s our inner cities especially have needed Freedom Schooling to transform our children from angry rebels into positive change agents and at the same time make our communities safer, healthier, and livelier almost overnight.

In the last two years, as a result of Bush's No Child Left Behind Act, there is a growing interest in Freedom Schooling. Teachers are beginning to resist the "teaching to the test" that the act requires. Administrators are threatened by the punitive measures, including closing down their school, that the act provides. Students are beginning to resent the "zero tolerance" (like hall sweeps, suspensions) that administrators resort to in order to rid their schools of troublesome students who bring down test scores.

So in the last year a growing number of teachers, administrators, university educators, parents, community activists, and young people have been meeting regularly at the Boggs Center, seeking an art form that will inspire all those involved in the educational process to think imaginatively about how to transform our schools into democratic centers of learning.

As a result, we are planning to produce Freedom Schooling Monologues or Dialogues, along the lines of the Vagina Monologues that Eve Ensler created from intimate conversations with women. Millions of people have now seen these Monologues which were first shown in a basement but have since been presented at Madison Square Garden and reproduced by small groups of women in universities and communities all across the country with their own scripts.

To help us stay on track we are using the Points of Opportunity for Dialogue chart in the publication, *Animating Democracy*.<sup>3</sup>

Two weeks ago 4,000 Detroit teachers took the day off and went to Lansing to protest the charter schools which are draining children and money from the public schools. Last week Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick held a two-hour televised town meeting to discuss redefining school reform. The town meeting, which is being repeatedly telecast, ended with this appeal from the Mayor:

*"We have to talk about how we educate our children. Our entire city needs to be engaged. We are losing the battle. I think we can do it under the umbrella of the Detroit Public Schools, but we are not radical enough. We are still trying to protect this system. We cannot protect it. We have to break it up. What do we need to do? What is the answer? People all over urban America are crying out for change and we are still talking about the same system. What are we talking about that we are going to do that is different?"*

These are the questions we need to grapple with in order to reclaim our children and revitalize our cities. There are no simple answers but we can no longer evade the questions.

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<sup>3</sup> The Points of Opportunity for Dialogue chart includes the following information:

Design and planning by organization

- *Research and Outreach*—getting statements, views by teachers, parents, students et al
- *Artistic Creation and Development*
- *Pre-Presentation*—engaging the public in dialogue, making suggestions
- *Presentation*
- *Post-Presentation*—engaging the audience in dialogue
- *Distribution/Promotion*—i.e., videos, touring, publication, to encourage other groups to present or create their own productions.

Schaffer Bacon, Barbara, Cheryl Yuen and Pam Korza. *Animating Democracy: The Artistic Imagination as a Force in Civic Dialogue*, Washington, DC, Americans for the Arts, 1999, p. 18 (condensed version).