

A black and white portrait of David McCullough, an elderly man with white hair, smiling slightly. He is wearing a patterned suit jacket, a white shirt, and a dark tie with a paisley pattern. The background is dark and out of focus.

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— David McCullough, 1994

THIS IS A GREAT HONOR to be the Nancy Hanks Lecturer on Arts and Public Policy, to have the opportunity to speak to you.

Art and history, culture and history, must not be seen as separate, any more than science and history. Dividers are imposed too often. We have the history of art over here, the history of science over there, the history of medicine, the history of music made separate, with walls between, as if music isn't medicine. Plain history, too often, winds up with only politics and wars.

But it is all part of human experience. To leave painting and song out of the story, theater, architecture, poetry, is to leave out too much of life, too much that matters above all.

Creativity, innovation, invention are impossible without imagination and without risk. This was true in times past, it is true today. Yet we do too little in educating our children to encourage and reward imagination and the willingness to take risks.

"How many things can you think of to do with a brick?"

It's a question I like to ask students in writing courses. "Take out a piece of paper, make a list. There's no right or wrong answer. Use your imagination." It's wonderful to see how liberating many find that.

History is about who we were. In the arts we show who we are. History is about time. Art transcends time. "Whose statue is that, there in the park, with the pigeon on his hat?" How many politicians have strutted their stuff down the years — hundreds, thousands — confident they were taking their place in history? How few are remembered at all.

But Gershwin lives. Every time, everywhere his music is played, Gershwin lives. Whitman and Willa Cather, Thomas Eakins, Louis Sullivan, Martha Graham, Langston Hughes, speak to us still, touch our lives. Take away our art, our music, the best of our buildings, take away Mark Twain and Julia Ward Howe and Woodie Guthrie and Scott Joplin and who are we? Take from this our capital city Daniel Chester French's Lincoln or that greatest of the city's works of abstract art, the Washington Monument by Robert Mills, take away the great collections of the Library of Congress, and how then would we feel?

Culture might be defined as what matters to a society. And certainly a good measure of what matters is how we spend our money.

Nearly everywhere in the country libraries are shortening their hours, laying off staff, putting a freeze on book purchases, or closing their doors. The explanation always is that there's not enough money.

Yet in all the years of the Great Depression, not one library is known to have closed its doors anywhere in all the country. Not one, and in the worst of times when our material abundance individually and as a nation was nothing like what it is today.

In Massachusetts, where I live, 20 libraries have closed in the last three years alone. In California, since 1980 more than half the public school libraries have closed. Libraries in Los Angeles are open now only a few days a week. This in California, golden California.

The Library of Congress, too, has lately cut back its services, closing the main reading room, plus six other reading rooms, on Sundays, a severe blow to anyone wishing to use the Library on weekends.

As a personal note I might add that it was on a weekend at the Library of Congress in the early 60s that I happened to see a collection of newly acquired, rare old photographs taken in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, soon after the calamitous flood of 1889, photographs that led me to write my first book, that led me to writing history as I had never anticipated I would. So I am particularly sympathetic to those with full-time jobs who can only make use of the library on weekends.

How do we spend our money? For public libraries nationwide: \$4.3 billion a year, which is considerably less than we spend on potato chips or sneakers. Less than we spend on our lawns or for cellular phones.

Last year, we spent \$6.5 billion on our lawns, \$9 billion on cellular phones.

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Eisenhower Theater
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David McCullough

Have we changed so much in our regard for libraries since the Great Depression? Not to judge by the demand for library services. Library use, even with all the cutbacks, is up substantially. What is not up is our willingness to pay the price, or more specifically to vote the taxes to pay the price — for a measure of

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civilization that has long been standard to our way of life and that so many benefit from in ways beyond anything determinable by cost-accounting.

Still more serious, even more shameful, is what is happening to programs in the arts in our schools, and it is this especially that I want to

talk about. All across the country arts programs in the schools are being cut or eliminated altogether, and it's a disgrace. We are cheating our children.

"We hold these truths to be self-evident," we teach them from history books, "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." But how will they have any idea of happiness — of all that Thomas Jefferson had in mind when he used that word — if they are shut off from art and architecture and music and theater and dance and literature, if they are denied that part of life, that vital center, if they have only a limited chance at the experience of self-expression? Or no chance at all?

There are new figures for what's to be spent by the federal government on the arts. And for the first time there is a specific allotment for art and music in the schools. For fiscal 1995 it's to be \$75 million. Federally funded cultural programs — including money for the National Endowment for the Humanities, the

National Endowment for the Arts and education in the arts — comes to approximately \$600 million, while the overall figure, the grand total — which includes money for the Smithsonian, museums, art galleries, and the like — is \$882 million. And what's that? It's a pittance is what it is. \$882 million is one six-hundredth of one percent of the federal budget.

WE NEED TO RECOVER a Jeffersonian sense of proportion. Jefferson, whose passion for education exceeded that of any of our political leaders, worked out his own guide "to the faculties of the mind," as he called it, in his classification system for his library. This was the private collection of 6,500 books assembled over 50 years that Jefferson sold to the Government at half its value to create a new congressional library after the British burned the Capitol during the War of 1812. It took 11 wagons to haul the books here and what a picture that must have made, as they left Monticello and started through the countryside.

There were three main categories and he gave them equal importance. First was "Memory," by which he meant history — history civil, history ecclesiastical, natural history, history ancient and modern. Second was "Reason," which included philosophy, the law, and mathematics. The third category, titled "Imagination," was the fine arts, and on this lovely spring evening in the city he helped design, I would like to mention that within fine arts, along with painting, sculpture, architecture, music, poetry, drama, oratory, and criticism, he included gardening.

Three parts equally weighted, and history and the arts are two of the three — history, philosophy and the fine arts.

I grew up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. I was number three in a family of four sons. My father worked with his father in a family-owned electrical supply business, McCullough Electric, now run by my brother George.

I began public school, in kindergarten, in 1938, about the time when the National Gallery was being built here. The building, along with a surpassing collection of Old Masters, were a gift from the late Andrew Mellon of Pittsburgh, about whom I knew nothing, of course, but whose generosity to his country I've come to appreciate more and more. The paintings alone were the largest gift of any individual to any government.

Like McCullough Electric, the Linden Avenue School is still in business, a fine two-story, yellow brick building about midway between Point Breeze and Squirrel Hill, if you know Pittsburgh. To me then its marble halls and great sweeping double stairway to the second floor were grand in the extreme. When I returned last year, for the school's 90th anniversary celebration, I was delighted to find that those marble halls and sweeping stairs are in fact just as grand as I remembered.

We had music at Linden School, lots of music, and Miss Polichio, our music teacher, was perfectly beautiful. For quite a while I was in love with Miss Polichio. We had music several times a week in a room reserved for music. We played tambourines, wood blocks, and the triangle. (I thought myself something of a wood-block virtuoso.) We sang, learning by heart most of Stephen Foster, who came from Pittsburgh. There was a school orchestra. My oldest brother played the violin in the school orchestra.

There was an auditorium with a stage and real pull curtains, and we were all in plays, the whole way along. There was an art room and an art teacher, Miss Bridgewater, and the day she took her chalk and with a few fast strokes demonstrated two-point perspective on the blackboard, is one I've never forgotten. She had performed pure magic right before our eyes. I had to be able to do that. I had to learn how. I began drawing and painting and I'm still at it at every possible chance. One of the particular pleasures of painting is you don't have to work with words.

By now these were the World War II years, when the steel mills were going at capacity, and at night the sky pulsed red from the flames of the blast furnaces.

There was a library at school, with books on every wall except for where the windows faced the street. It is still that way. The first morning we were declared sufficiently advanced to go to the library — a very great step in the upward march at Linden — we were told we could each go to the shelves and choose any book we wished. What a moment! I remember especially one called *Ben and Me*, written and illustrated by Robert Lawson. It was about a mouse who lived in Ben Franklin's hat and who consequently had much to report.

When my oldest brother, Hax, went to Peabody High School, he both played the violin in the Peabody

Symphony orchestra and also stole the show in a Peabody production of "Arsenic and Old Lace." He was Teddy Brewster, the one who thought he was Teddy Roosevelt and was kept busy down in the cellar — down in "Panama" — digging the canal and burying the supposed yellow fever victims. It was the most marvelous stage production I had ever seen and my first realization of there ever having been anyone like Theodore Roosevelt or a place like Panama.

"How do you pick the subjects for your books?" I'm asked. "Whatever made you decide on Theodore Roosevelt? The Panama Canal?"

There's no telling, I suppose, when the seed of an idea takes hold. But on the first day I went to the Carnegie Library — in Pittsburgh this means the Carnegie Library, the mother church as it were — and with my new, first library card took out a book, I was perhaps 11 years old. It was *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. About that same time, as I remember, our wonderful science teacher at Linden School, Miss Schmeltz, had arranged an exhibit of bridges of all kinds. They were made of matchsticks and I can see them still, lined up along the windowsills, flooded with sunlight.

At a party, long afterward, when I told her what I was working on, a Washington socialite boomed loud enough for everyone to hear, "Who in the world would ever want to read a book about the Brooklyn Bridge?"

August Wilson, whose best-known plays are set in Pittsburgh, has described how, in boyhood, the Carnegie Library became his preferred classroom, where he read Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright and Langston Hughes. "Just the idea black people would write books," he has said. "I wanted my book up there, too."

ART, MUSIC, SCIENCE, HISTORY, putting on plays, it was all part of school and childhood, and I loved school, almost every day. Nor was there ever a thought that the arts were frills. Or that everyone had to stay stuck in the same interests, at school or at home.

Brother Hax had his music; George, engineering; I had my painting; brother Jim, astronomy. We were not rich, certainly not by Pittsburgh standards. I suppose we could be described as comfortable. Except for engineering, my father had no interest in any of these other pursuits. Neither my father nor my mother played a musical instrument, or, as far as I know, ever

painted a picture or had a part in a play. When Hax tuned the radio to the Metropolitan Opera on winter Saturday afternoons, the volume cranked up full throttle, it about drove my father crazy. “Who’s getting murdered now,” he’d call out. And while my father and mother willingly paid for paints and music lessons, concert tickets and the like, and mother welcomed such activity, it was really at school that we got the bug, got the chance and I say this because I think it so important to understand that it is not just children who are economically deprived who benefit from school libraries, from arts programs, from community commitment to the arts for children, and to argue for support of the arts on that basis primarily is to miss the point. All boats rise with the incoming tide.

What I didn’t know then was how exceptional the arts program was throughout the Pittsburgh school system, indeed how exceptional it had been for years. And many of the results were exceptional, too, as we now know.

A who’s who of those in the arts who attended the public schools of Pittsburgh is strong testimony to just how the whole country benefits from that kind of education: Andy Warhol, Earl Hines, Erroll Garner, Mary Lou Williams, August Wilson, Rachel Carson, composer Henry Mancini. From Peabody High School alone came Malcolm Cowley, Gene Kelly, Billy Eckstine, Fritz Weaver, novelist John Edgar Wideman.

Gene Kelly, the son of a sales executive, was a football and baseball star at Peabody. He excelled in gymnastics, played the violin and banjo, edited the school paper, wrote poetry and was praised on his report card for his “vivid imagination.”

Erroll Garner, a mill worker’s son, played the tuba in the Westinghouse High School band. Henry Mancini, whose father was a steelworker, started on the piccolo at age 8, by 12 turned to the piano. The 1942 Aliquippa High School yearbook says of him: “A true music lover, collects records, plays in the band, and has even composed several beautiful selections. He wishes to continue his study of music and to have an orchestra of his own some day.”

(I thought I could also include Martha Graham, who was born in Pittsburgh, but damn, she moved away at age three.)

Willa Cather once taught high school English in Pittsburgh. “So vivid was her personality,” remem-

bered a student, “so unforgettable her method of making us see the picture (as she read aloud), that even yet I hear her voice”

Selma Burke lived, worked and taught in Pittsburgh through the 1960s and 1970s, founding her own Art Center for Children. She is a sculptor and one of the country’s most respected black artists and teachers. If you have a dime with you, you own one of her works. She did the sculpted profile of Franklin Roosevelt.

And then there was Caroline D. Patterson, a name you didn’t know. She was the principal of Linden School and a force, unforgettable, tall, severe looking, a woman who brooked no nonsense whatsoever. My friend Richard Ketchum, the historian, who also went to Linden, remembers her looking at least six foot eight. Just the sound of her approaching steps could freeze you cold in your chair. She wore stout black, lace-up shoes with thick high heels hard enough to drive a ten-penny nail. And down those marble halls she would come, making her rounds.

“Boys and girls,” she would say, “Remember always you are a reflection of your parents.” I’m not sure any of us knew what that meant exactly, except that we’d better toe the line. Yet, I think deep down inside we knew she was right, and that we had potential beyond anything we might imagine.

Miss Patterson, I now appreciate, ran an outstanding school. She was dedicated, far-seeing. A pioneer. She helped found the country’s first educational television station — Pittsburgh’s WQED, the beginning of public television, and the station that would introduce to Pittsburgh and ultimately to the entire country, Fred Rogers, “Mister Rogers,” who in his years on the air has touched and influenced the lives of more children than any teacher who ever lived. The longest running national program in the history of public television, “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood,” broadcast still from WQED, reaches more than 8 million households on some 318 public stations.

I FEEL I HAD A HUGE ADVANTAGE growing up in Pittsburgh — because I grew up in Pittsburgh. For along with the schools, besides all the programs in art and music, went the Carnegie Library, the Carnegie-Mellon University and the University of Pittsburgh, and, in those days, Forbes Field. I can hardly overstress the importance of this — that art, science, music,

literature, history, the world of books, were joined, all together, to be taken as parts of the same whole, all under one roof. There were school trips to the Carnegie Museum of Natural History, free Saturday morning art classes at the Carnegie Museum of Art.

Or you could go on your own in perfect safety, “down” to the library or museums by bus or streetcar, though the streetcars were preferable. They were more fun. Annie Dillard, who grew up in my neighborhood, has described them as “orange, clangy, beloved things — loud, jerky, and old.” That they were.

The looming stone exterior of the Carnegie then was black as coal from the smoke in the air, and a lot inside seemed gloomy and boring. But not the dinosaurs, or the big scale model of the Parthenon, presented as it looked in its prime. There were some paintings in the permanent collection that I fed on, Edward Hopper’s *Cape Cod Afternoon*, for example, and year after year, the great Associated American Artists exhibition came to the Carnegie Museum of Art, with paintings by Andrew Wyeth, Burchfield, Benton, Raphael Soyer, Grant Wood, Horace Pippin, Georgia O’Keefe, Joe Jones, Walt Kuhn, Reginald Marsh. There was something about those Reginald Marsh girls that was beginning to interest me.

I remember also coming into one of the galleries and seeing at the far end, bigger than life, John Stuart Curry’s painting of John Brown, his arms flung out, great beard flying in the wind, a cyclone roaring out of the background. How could any not want to know about that man, the story there?

The Kaufmann family, owners of Kaufmann’s Department Store and staunch supporters of the arts, brought a string of eminent artists to Pittsburgh to paint the city, then staged an exhibition of their work, something that ought to be done again and not only in Pittsburgh. The Kaufmann family also sponsored exhibitions of the work of school children, and believe me, to go downtown with your family to see one of your own paintings hanging in Kaufmann’s window, that was something!

Private benefactors like the Kaufmann’s should get all the credit they deserve. And so should the many corporations that support the arts.

What is so important to understand about education in the arts, is that there especially you learn by doing. Think of the lesson in that.

You learn to play the piano by playing the piano. You learn to paint by painting. It’s not just a way to learn, it’s the only way. “She knew that the only way to learn to write was to write, and she set us to writing,” remembered a student of Willa Cather.

ESPECIALLY IN THE ARTS you learn how very much can be learned from a teacher, and that a great teacher is a true Godsend, an opener of doors, giver of gifts, a star to steer by. Especially in the arts, you learn to bring out what is unique in you, to express yourself, your feelings, and to experience the incomparable high-octane lift of that. But you learn about working with others, too, of being part of something larger than yourself, as anyone knows who has ever played in an orchestra, ever taken part in a theatrical production.

And — and — maybe it’s in the arts above all that we learn most directly, discover for ourselves most immediately in the doing, that the reward is the doing, that the payoff for the effort is the effort.

“I want to show the children that art is not money,” Selma Burke has said. “It’s a life.”

Selma Burke is in her 94th year.

You can see beauty and creation without ever drawing a line — if you just look . . . You can see the beauty of creation in an apple. To many people it’s just an ordinary red object. But if you take a bite into it, you transform it. Now you see the white solid juicy inside. If you bite deeper you get to the core and you see the black seeds from which the apple came. Then, if you take that seed and lay it down on paper — it’s almost magic! That such a big red apple could come from that seed. It’s the fascinating process of creation. The art teacher has to find a simple way to teach that.

I’m hard on my students — to get them to see how important that apple is. To see that — right in your hand — you have the beauty of creation.

“Do all you can — and then some,” she would tell

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her students. "Do all you can — and then some."

Coaching his young son Andrew, talking of the world around them, N.C. Wyeth would say, "You must be like a sponge. Sponge it up. Soak it up."

Andrew Wyeth describes how, at 15, he learned anatomy:

He got me a skeleton. Had it there and had me draw it from every angle. Every bone. And I did that for about a winter and towards spring he said, "Now you've drawn this enough. Now . . . I want to see how much you can remember." So he took the skeleton away. "Now I want you to draw that figure at all angles — what you remember."

Learning to appreciate the miracle of creation .

. . . learning to observe and remember . . . learning to see beneath surface appearances to the essential. . . and yet some deride education in the arts as frivolous, irrelevant.

But listen please to one more teacher. Ann Marshall has been teaching the visual arts at Peabody High School for 20 years and is herself a graduate of Peabody:

You can teach all of life with art. You learn the lessons of life. You learn that you are unique and that what you make is unique. You learn self-worth. You learn to make decisions, to make mistakes. You learn to take risks. You learn that sometimes what you think are big mistakes can turn into big successes.

Yes, but we must be practical, argue the nay-sayers. Alright, let's be practical.

Consider that in Pittsburgh the new Andy Warhol Museum, scheduled to open next month, will bring an estimated 200,000 people to the city this year. With more than 3,500 pieces in its collection, it will be the largest art gallery in the world devoted to one person.

Andy Warhol, the son of a coal miner, excelled in the free Saturday art classes at the Carnegie Museum.

Or on a national level, consider the astonishing transformation of Chrysler Corporation. In less than three years Chrysler went from being the "basket case" of the American automobile industry to "leading the resurgence" of the American automobile industry. Chrysler is suddenly the most profitable car maker in the country. And the reason? Above all? Design. Inspired design. The "alchemy of design," as the *New York Times* reported. If there are heroes to the story they are Chrysler's Vice President in charge of design, Tom Gale, and his extraordinary young staff. And yes, Gale remembers being inspired first by a fourth grade art teacher. Designer Michael Santoro remembers looking down from a seventh floor window at New York City's High School of Art and Design and studying the cars waiting at the red light. "You look out the window and all the cars look the same," he told a reporter for the *Times*. "I said, 'If I ever get the chance, my car's going to look different . . .'"

How do you appraise the "practical" value of a program like the Saturday art classes at Carnegie Museum or a school like New York's High School of Art and Design? How do you calculate the return on such public dollars as it takes to educate an Andy Warhol or a Tom Gale or Michael Santoro?

THE NATION NEEDS ARTISTS and designers to work in the automobile industry, in advertising, publishing, fashion, interior design, television, the movies. And musicians and singers and dancers and actors for all the so-called entertainment industry. And teachers. And teachers to teach teachers. Teachers, teachers, teachers — for all the arts and not just for those who will perform but for all who will learn to care and enjoy the arts all their lives. Surely that is obvious.

Talent doesn't just happen. Training, craft, experience can't be summoned willy-nilly out of nowhere as needed. It has to be developed, brought out, brought along with education. And the process has to begin early. The earlier the better.

"Would the gentleman be opposed to federal funding to assist in educating school children in the arts and music?" asked Representative Sidney Yates of Illinois of Representative Philip Crane also of Illinois, in an exchange on the floor of the House last summer.

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“To educating school children, making art a part of the curriculum?” asked Crane.

“As the arts endowment does,” affirmed Yates.

“It should not be doing that,” said Crane.

“Is the gentleman opposed to federal funding of such institutions as the Lincoln Memorial?” asked Yates.

“National statues, basically, I would not have a problem with that,” replied Crane.

In Pittsburgh now the prospect is shadowed. The number of teachers in the visual arts has been cut. Music programs have been cut. Two high schools have no music program at all. Saturday art classes at the Carnegie Museum continue, but where in years past thousands enrolled, the number now is about a hundred.

Instead of a separate budget for the arts in the schools, there is a large overall allotment for “support services” which includes the arts but a lot else besides, general equipment for example, and how the money is spent is left to the principal of each school. Instead of \$800 being spent, say for musical instruments, it buys a new office typewriter.

Pittsburgh, according to a former director of art education in the public schools is “slowly, but surely, decimating its art programs.”

The arts, as Fred Rogers says, give children ways to say who they are, how they feel, to say whether they are happy or sad or angry, and without hurting anyone.

The late Margaret McFarlan, professor of child development at the University of Pittsburgh and an inspiration for three generations of specialists in child studies, including Fred Rogers, liked to say:

We don't teach children. We just give them who we are. And they catch that. Attitudes are caught, not taught. If you love something in front of a child, the child will catch that.

So what is our attitude to be here in America? What do we love? What do we want our children to see that we love?

AND WHO WILL BE THE LEADERS with both the spirit and courage of a Theodore Roosevelt, who loved the poetry of Edward Arlington Robinson and on hearing that Robinson was in financial straits, found him a job in the Treasury, then sent him a note saying, “Think poetry first, Treasury second.”

I am an optimist, by nature and from reading history. I am also of that generation raised on the belief

that we Americans can do anything we set our hearts and minds to. I still believe that.

A new set of national standards for education in the arts has been drawn up and approved by Secretary of Education Richard Riley. The standards are voluntary and national in name only, but a step in the right direction.

We should be grateful for what's being done for the arts here in Washington by people like Jim Wolfensohn, like Sidney Yates in the House, Claiborne Pell, Jim Jeffords and Alan Simpson in the Senate. Jane Alexander is magnificent. But we mustn't count on government only. Congress is always slow catching up with what the country wants. The energy, the commitment, the determination must come from us. That's how the system works. Any money, too, that has to come from us.

We must be “the public policy” on the arts.

If we want libraries open again, if we want a generous, exiting, creative education for our children, if we want a culture that counts for something, it's up to us. We must get busy and make it happen — “Do all we can — and then some.” ■

David McCullough

Biographer, historian, lecturer, teacher, David McCullough is the author of six widely acclaimed books, including Truman, for which he won the Pulitzer Prize. His first book, *The Johnstown Flood*, published in 1968, was followed by *The Great Bridge* (1972), an epic chronicle of the creation of the Panama Canal, which won the National Book Award for history; *Mornings on Horseback* (1981), the young life of Theodore Roosevelt, which won the National Book Award for biography; and *Brave Companions* (1992), essays on heroic figures past and present. To millions of television viewers, Mr. McCullough is known as the host of the PBS series “American Experience” and as the narrator of such distinguished documentaries as “LBJ,” “The Donner Party” and “The Civil War.” He is the winner of the Charles Frankel Prize for his contributions to the humanities, the National Book Foundation Award for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters, and twice winner of the Francis Parkman Prize, given by the Society of American Historians. He lives in West Tisbury, Mass., and is an avid Sunday painter.