Growing Up Expressive

Love, death, the cruelty of power, and time's curve past the stars are what children want to look at. For convenience's sake, let's say these are the four most vitally touching things in life. Little children ask questions about them with relish. Children, provided they are still little enough, have no eye to doing any problem solving about love or death or injustice or the universe; they are simply interested. I've noticed that as we read aloud literature to them, about Baba Yaga, and Dr. Doolittle, and Ivan and the Firebird, and Rat and Mole, children are not only interested, they are prepared to be vitally touched by the great things of life. If you like the phrase, they are what some people call "being as a little child." Another way of looking at it is to say that in our minds we have two kinds of receptivity to life going on all the time: first, being vitally touched and enthusiastic (grateful, enraged, puzzled—but, at all events, moved) and, second, having a will to solve problems.

Our gritty society wants and therefore deliberately trains problem solvers, however, not mystics. We teach human beings to keep themselves conscious only of problems that can conceivably be solved. There must be no hopeless causes. Now this means that some subjects, of which death and sexual love come to mind straight off, should be kept at as low a level of consciousness as possible. Both resist problem solving. A single-minded problem solver focuses his consciousness, of course, on problems to be solved, but even he realizes there is a concentric, peripheral band of other material around the problems. This band appears to him as "issues." He is not interested in these issues for themselves; he sees them simply as impacting on the problems. He will allow us to talk of love, death, injustice, and eternity—he may even encourage us to do so because his group-dynamics training advises him to let us have our say, thus dissipating our willfulness—but his heart is circling, circling, looking for an opening to wrap up these "issues" so he can return attention to discrete, solvable problems. For example, a physician who has that mentality does not wish to be near dying patients very much. They are definitely not a solvable problem. If he is wicked, he will regard them as a present issue with impact on a future problem: then he will order experimentation done on them during their last weeks with us. It means his ethic is toward the healing process only, but not toward the dying person. His ethic is toward problem solving, not toward wonder. He will feel quite conscientious while doing the experiments on the dying patient, because he feels he is saving lives of future patients.

To return to little children for a second: they simply like to contemplate life and death. So our difficulty, in trying to educate adults so they will be balanced but enthusiastic, is to keep both streams going—the problem solving, which seems to be the mental genius of our species, and the fearless contemplation of gigantic things, the spiritual genius of our species.
The problem-solving mentality is inculcated no less in art and English classes than in mathematics and science. Its snake oil is hope of success: by setting very small topics in front of people, for which it is easy for them to see the goals, the problems, the solutions, their egos are not threatened. They feel hopeful of being effective. Therefore, to raise a generation of problem solvers, you encourage them to visit the county offices (as our sixth-grade teachers do) and you lead them to understand that this is citizenship. You carefully do not suggest that citizenship also means comparatively complex and hopeless activities like Amnesty International’s pressure to get prisoners in far places released or at least no longer tortured. Small egos are threatened by huge, perhaps insoluble problems. Therefore, one feeds the small ego confidence by setting before it dozens and dozens of very simple situations. The ego is nourished by feeling it understands the relationship between the county recorder’s office and the county treasurer’s office; in later life, when young people find a couple of sticky places in county government, they will confidently work at smoothing them.

How very different an experience such problem solving is from having put before one the spectacle of the United States’ various stances and activities with respect to germ warfare. Educators regularly steer off all interest in national and international government to one side, constantly feeding our rural young people on questions to which one can hope for answers on a short timeline. We do not ask them to exercise that muscle which bears the weight of vast considerations—such as cruelty in large governments. By the time the average rural Minnesotan is eighteen, he or she expects to stay in cheerful places, devote some time to local government and civic work, and “win the little ones.” Rural young people have a repertoire of pejorative language for hard causes: “opening that keg of worms,” “no end to that once you get into it,” “don’t worry—you can’t do anything about that from where you are,” “we could go on about that forever!” They are right, of course: we could, and our species, at its most cultivated, does go on forever about love, death, power, time, the universe. But some of us, alas, have been conditioned by eighteen fashionably to despise those subjects because there are no immediate answers to all the questions they ask us.

The other way we negatively reinforce any philosophical bent in children is to pretend we don’t see the content in their artwork. We comment only on the technique, in somewhat the same way you can scarcely get a comment on rural preachers’ sermon content: the response is always, He does a good (or bad) job of speaking. “Well, but what did he say?” “Oh, he talked really well. The man can preach!”

The way to devalue the content of a child’s painting is to say, “Wow, you sure can paint!” The average art teacher in Minnesota is at pains to find something to say to the third grader’s painting of a space machine with complicated, presumably electronic equipment in it. Here is the drawing in words: A man is sitting at some controls. Outside his capsule, fire is flying from emission points on his ship toward another spaceship at right, hitting it. Explosions are coming out of its side and tail. What is an art teacher to do with this? Goodness knows. So he or she says, “My goodness, I can see there’s a lot of action there!” It is said in
a deliberately encouraging way but anyone can hear under the carefully supportive comment: “A lot of work going into nothing but more TV-inspired violence.” One might as well have told the child, “Thank you for sharing.”

I once attended a regional writers’ group at which a young poet wrote about his feelings of being a single parent and trying to keep his sanity as he cared for his children. In his poem, he raced up the staircase, grabbed a gun, and shot the clock. When he finished reading it aloud to us, someone told him, “I certainly am glad you shared with us. I’d like to really thank you for sharing.”

If we are truly serious about life we are going to have to stop thanking people for sharing. It isn’t enough response to whatever has been offered. It is half ingenuous, and sometimes it is insincere, and often it is patronizing. It is the dictum excrementi of our decade.

I would like to keep in mind for a moment the art works described above: the child’s painting of a spaceship assaulting another spaceship, and the harrowed father’s racing up the staircase and shooting the clock. Here is a third. It is a twelve-year-old’s theme for English class.

They were their four days and nights before anyone found them. It was wet and cold down there. As little kids at the orphanage, they had been beaten every night until they could scarcely make it to bed. Now they were older. Duane and Ellen leaned together. “I love you forever,” she told him. He asked her, “Even though my face is marked from getting scarlet fever and polio and small pox and newmonya and they wouldn’t take decent care of me, not call the doctor or anything, so the marks will always be on me?”

“You know I love you,” Ellen told him. “You know that time they tortured me for information and I was there but I didn’t talk and later I found out it was your uncle who did it. I didn’t talk because I remembered the American flag.” Just then they heard someone shout, “Anyone alive down there in this mess?” You see a bomb had gone off destroying a entire U.S.A. city where they lived. Duane had lived with his cruel uncle who took him out of the orphanage to get cheap labor and Ellen lived at a boardinghouse where there were rats that ate pages of her diary all the time. Now they both looked up and shouted “We’re here!” A head appeared at the top of the well into which they had fallen or they would of been in 6,500 pieces like all the other men and ladies even pregnant ones and little kids in that town. Now this head called down, “Oh—a boy and a girl” then the head explained it was going for a ladder and ropes and it ducked away and where it had been they saw the beginnings of stars for that night, the stars still milky in front of the bright blue because the sky wasn’t dark enough yet to show them up good.

The English teacher will typically comment on this story by observing that the spelling is uneven, and adjectives get used as adverbs. In rural Minnesota (if not elsewhere) an English teacher can spend every class hour on adjectives used as adverbs: it is meat and potatoes to a nag. But when we discuss spelling, syntax, and adverbs, we are talking method, not content. The child notices that
nothing is said of the story's plot. No one remarks on the feelings in it. Now if this happens every time a child hands in fiction or a poem, the child will realize by the time he reaches twelfth grade that meaning or feelings are not worth anything, that "mechanics" (note the term) are all that matter.

It is rare for a public school English teacher to comment on a child's content unless the material is factual. Minnesota teachers encourage writing booklets about the state, themes on ecology and county government, on how Dad strikes the field each autumn, on how Mom avoids open-kettle canning because the USDA advises against it. In this way, our children are conditioned to regard writing as problem solving instead of contemplation, as routine thinking instead of imaginative inquiry.

How can we manage it otherwise?

I would like to suggest some questions we can ask children about their artwork which will encourage them to grow up into lovers, lobby supporters, and Amnesty International members, instead of only township officers and annual protestors against daylight saving time. Let us gather all the elements of the three artworks presented in this Letter: the little boy's spaceship-war painting, the young divorced father's narrative poem, and the twelve-year-old girl's story of love in a well. We have a set of images before us, then:

Man directing spaceship fire
Another aircraft being obliterated
Staircase, man shooting a clock; children
Cruel orphanage
Torture
Last survivors of a decimated city

Let us, instead of lending the great sneer to these images, be respectful of them. It may help to pretend the painting is by Picasso, that Flaubert wrote the father/clock scene, and that Tolstoy wrote the well story. It helps to remember that Picasso felt the assault of historical events on us—like Guernica; Flaubert, as skillfully as Dostoyevsky and with less self-pity, was an observer of violent detail; and the Tolstoy who wrote Resurrection or the scene of Pierre's imprisonment in War and Peace would turn to the well/love story without qualm.

We know we would never say to Picasso, Flaubert, or Tolstoy, "Why don't you draw something you know about from everyday life? Why don't you write about something you know about? You say Anna was smashed beneath a train? Thank you for sharing!"

The fact is that a child's feelings about orphanages and torture and love are things that he does know about. They are psychic realities inside him, and when he draws them, he is drawing something from everyday life. Sometimes they are from his night life of dreaming, but in any event they are images of passion and he is drawing from his genuine if garbled experience. A few years ago there was a stupid movement to discourage children's reading of Grimms' fairy tales. Later, with a more sophisticated psychology, we learned that the stepmother
who is hostile and overweening is a reality to all children; the cutting-off of
the hero’s right hand and replacing of it with a hand of silver is a reality to all chil-
dren. Spaceships, witches’ gingerbread houses, orphanages, being the last two
people to survive on earth—all these are part of the inner landscape, something
children know about. Therefore, in examining their artwork, we need better
sets of questions to ask them. Young people who are not repressed are going to
lay their wild stuff in front of adults (hoping for comment of some kind, praise
if possible) until the sands of life are run, so we had better try to be good at re-
sponding to them. And unless we want to raise drones suitable only for con-
veyor-belt shifts, we had better be at least half as enthusiastic as when they tell
us, Mama, I got the mowing finished.

Here are some questions to ask our young artist. How much of that elec-
tronic equipment is used for firepower and how much just to run the ship? Af-
ther the other spaceship is blown up and the people in it are dead, what will this
man do? Will he go home somewhere? Were the stars out that night? You said
he’ll go home to his parents. Did the other man have parents? How soon will
that man’s parents find out that his spaceship was destroyed? Could you draw
in the stars? You said they were out—could you draw them into the picture
some way? but don’t ruin anything you’ve got in there now. Also, that wire you
said ran to the solar plates, will you darken it so it shows better? Don’t change
it—just make it clearer. Yes—terrific! Can you see the planet where the other
man would have returned to if he had lived till morning?

The young father’s story: There is an obvious psychic complication to this
story: the violence in his shooting out the clock face is gratuitous, and the plea
for attention on the part of the author directed at the reader is glaring: clock
faces as psychological symbols are in the public domain. Anyone who tells a
friend (or a group of strangers) I am going to shoot up a clock face at 11 P.M. is
asking for psychological attention. In a civil world, to ask is to receive, so if we
are civilized we have to pay attention and ask the young author: Why does the
father in the story blast the clock? And, when he replies, we have to ask some
more. If there was ever an instance in which it was O.K. to say, “Thanks for
sharing,” this is not it.

I should like to add that this will be especially difficult for rural teachers be-
cause the traditional country way to treat any kind of mental problem is to stare it
down. It didn’t happen. I didn’t hear that insane thing you just said, and you
know you don’t really hate your mother. What nice parent would shoot a clock?
We uniformly do what Dr. Vaillant in Adaptations to Life would call a denial adap-
tation. It takes a brave questioner when the young person brings in a crazy story.

The well/love story: Did you know there really are such orphanages? There
are orphanages where the children have to get up at four-thirty to work in the
dairy, and the girls work hours and hours in the kitchens, and the children’s
growth is stunted. Did you make the girl so brave on purpose? Were they a
lucky couple or an unlucky couple, or is that the sort of a question you can’t
ask? You made a point of telling us they’d been through a lot of hardship. What
would it have been like for them if they hadn’t? Do you want to talk about what blew up the city? Did you imagine yourself in the well?

Those are not brilliant questions; they are simply respectful, because the art works described are concerned with death by violence; cruelty by institutions; treachery by relations; bravery (or cowardice—either one is important); sexual love, either despite or encouraged by dreadful circumstances.

They are some of the subjects in War and Peace, in Dürer’s etchings, paintings, and woodcuts, and in Madame Bovary.

It is a moot question in my mind which of two disciplines will be the more useful in helping people stay vitally touched by the Great Things: psychology might do it—and English literature in high school might do it (instruction on the college level is generally so dutiful to methodology that it seems a lost cause to me. “How did D. H. Lawrence foreshadow this event?” and “What metaphors does Harold Rosenberg use in his discussion of Action Painting?” are the questions of technocrats, not preservers of spirit. It is as if we got home from church and the others said, “How was church?” “We had Eucharist, ” we tell them. “Well, how was it?” they ask. “Pretty good, ” we reply. “Bishop Anderson was there. He held the chalice eight inches above the rail so no one spilled, then he turned and wiped the chalice after each use so no germs were passed along. People who had already communed returned to their benches using the north aisle so there was no bottlenecking at the chancel.”

I don’t think churches will be helpful in preserving the mystical outlook as long as they see life and death as a problem—a problem of salvation—with a solution to be worked at. Churches have an axe to grind. They might take the father running up the staircase to be an impact subject: they would wish to use their program to solve his problem. Churchmen often appear to be compassionate counselors, but the appearance is largely manner and habit. Under the manner, the clergymen’s mindset is nearly always to see a disturbed or grieving person’s imagery as the issues. From there, he swings into psychological problem solving.

I would like to commend this responsibility to our English teachers: that they help our children preserve pity, happiness, and grief inside themselves. They can enhance those feelings by having young children both write and draw pictures. They can be very enthusiastic about the children’s first drawings of death in the sky. Adults, particularly mature ones who have not got children in school at the moment, should make it clear that we expect this of English teachers and that we don’t give a damn if LeRoy and Merv never in their lives get the sentence balance of past conditional and perfect subjunctive clauses right. We need to protect some of the Things Invisible inside LeRoy and Merv and the rest of us.

This is my last Letter from the Country. That is why it is so shrill. Gadflies are always looking out a chance to be shrill anyway, so I jumped to this one and have shouted my favorite hope: that we can educate children not to be problem solvers but to be madly expressive all their lives.
1. Working in a group, jot down what you think Bly means by the terms “problem solvers” (or “the problem-solving mentality”) and “expressive.” Then draw upon Bly’s essay and your own experience to give some examples of each. Do you find the terms meaningful for thinking about learning and education? Why or why not?

2. Throughout her essay, Bly reviles the expression “Thank you for sharing.” Identify some situations in which people use this expression, and explain the reasons Bly dislikes it. Do you share her dislike? Why or why not? Additional activity: Compose a text (story, dialogue, public speech, poem) in which this expression either recurs or serves as the focal subject.

3. In paragraph 18 Bly says that “the traditional country way to treat any kind of mental problem is to stare it down. It didn’t happen.” Bly is a rural Minnesotan. Is the phenomenon of “staring it down” confined to rural America? Write a dialogue between two people or characters in which one tries to “stare down” the other’s “mental problem.”

4. Bly criticizes the ways that some teachers teach. For instance, in paragraph 10 she says that English teachers focus their comments on students’ “spelling, syntax, and adverbs” in order to avoid responding to the content and ideas in students’ papers. “Now if this happens every time a child hands in fiction or a poem, the child will realize by the time he reaches twelfth grade that meaning or feelings are not worth anything, that ‘mechanics’ . . . are all that matter.”

   a. Does this jibe—or conflict—with your own experience in English classes? Explain, and illustrate with some specific stories of your experiences.

   b. Imagine a situation in which a student is “madly expressive” in his or her writing, drawing, or other creative work. Create the student’s madly expressive work and invent the comments that a “problem-solving” teacher might put on it.

5. In the last paragraph Bly states that her “favorite hope” is “that we can educate children not to be problem solvers but to be madly expressive all their lives.” Take a point of view that is opposed to Bly’s and argue for the importance and value of teaching children to be problem solvers. Alternative: Write a dialogue between someone who shares Bly’s view (expressed in the above quotation) and someone who opposes it. Emphasize the conflict between the two speakers and avoid an easy resolution of the conflict.