

FOR ERIC ODDLEIFSON AT HIS MEMORIAL SERVICE

September 18, 2011
South Shore Conservatory, Hingham, MA

I am the former Head of Walnut Hill School for the Arts – an international boarding high school located in Natick. It is an honor to be asked to speak to you today about my long-time friend and colleague, Eric Oddleifson.

Eric was one of most alive and genuine people I ever had the privilege of knowing. He had not a trace of irony in his being. He had a great soul and was generous, kind, and visionary. And he consistently acted on his beliefs and vision. Lots of people have vision and no action, or take action without vision, both strategies equally useless (sounds like the government these days). Eric always took action. And I think that what he ultimately sought in all he did and in his life was the good, the true, and the beautiful. Nothing less.

He was an artist in the way he lived his life – without fear, undaunted by what might appear impossible – whether to create a new business or to reform all of American education. All possible.

One of the roles of artists in society is to seek, and tell, the truth about the human experience. Eric was a truth seeker and a truth teller.

I have a favorite story about the actress Ruth Gordon that I believe describes Eric perfectly. When she was a young girl hoping to be an actress she was told that she should “face the fact” that she was too plain to aspire to such a career. Of course she had a long and successful career in theater and film. Late in her life when asked to what she owed her success, she replied,

- “*Never give up.*” (Eric never gave up)
- “*Work harder than anyone else.*” (Eric again)
- “*Never face the facts.*”

This is excellent advice for almost any situation. After all, if we “faced the facts” we might not marry, have children or get out of bed in the morning. Eric did not “face the facts” about any number of enterprises, but went right ahead and took on what he thought needed to be done, such as battling bureaucracy in public education, for the greater good.

I first met Eric in the early nineties when he organized a conference of art educators here at the South Shore Conservatory. Later he served as a supportive and probing trustee on the Walnut Hill Board. Over the years, because of our mutual love of the arts and our shared belief in their efficacy in transforming schools and the lives of children, we became friends and colleagues. His ideas, his work ethic and his constancy in working for the good, for change, were always an inspiration to me and to Walnut Hill. Two years ago at its New York Gala at Lincoln Center Walnut Hill presented the *Wendy Allen Wheeler Award*, for his significant contribution to arts education. His extended family, along with eight hundred other

audience members and young artists, was there to see him receive this recognition. We loved awarding it to him, and I think it gave him great pleasure to receive it.

In 1999 Eric and I co-founded an organization called the *National Arts and Learning Foundation*, which had neither a national presence nor any money to give away. The title was strictly aspirational. (This organization is now called *Arts|Learning*). Its mission was – and still is - to seek new levels of excellence in teaching and learning through the arts in the public schools, and to provide access to high quality arts education and training for all students as a basic educational and human right. This was – and is - a big and far-reaching mission but it is what we believed needed to happen.

We were motivated to form this organization by our belief in the power of the arts to transform the lives of all children not just the “talented” and/or the economically advantaged, and by the fact that public education in America had become perhaps the biggest public health issue of our times. Not only were arts programs in schools disappearing but so also were students as the following numbers indicate. Every day 7000 students drop out of school. Nationwide, 70% of all students who enter high school graduate, 30% do not. And, according to recent studies, 48% of African American and Latino boys do not graduate. Where are they? Where do they go? Some will succeed, while many others will remain marginalized. These statistics remain stable in spite of our best efforts and we continue to lose more young people, the majority of them young men, to poor education than to our recent military actions. This is a tragic loss of human capital. Eric and I both believe that the system of education in America is broken and requires radical change across the board.

Here is a last set of numbers for you to contemplate. In Boston, the high school graduation rate is about 70%, with the exception of the exam schools (Boston Latin) which have a graduation rate in the mid-90s, The Boston Arts Academy, a public high school drawing from the same demographic as the other high schools in Boston, the graduation rate is consistently 99%. And almost all of their graduates go on the some form of post-secondary education, some in the arts, many in other fields. These facts bear contemplation.

In recent years Eric became deeply engaged in whole school reform, with the arts as part of the reform, working both with Arts|Learning and other educational reform organizations. Meanwhile, Arts|Learning’s work, which includes teacher training, curriculum development, partnerships, advocacy, and networking, continues apace. This important work goes on thanks in large part to Eric’s original vision and his early and on-going support and encouragement.

Eric was a man of many parts – entrepreneur, family man, scholar, reformer and musician. Because he was so intense in all he did and always had such high goals, I wondered where all that energy, vision, creativity and work ethic came from. It came to me the other day when I was taking a walk and thinking about Eric, “Of course! He is an artist and had been since he was very young.” So he sees and

acts in the world as the artist he is— creatively, persistently, unafraid of risk, and always seeking the deeper meaning and greater good in what he did.

Making art also has a spiritual dimension, a search for experiences where feeling and thought come together and where the artist and the work are as one. As T.S. Eliot wrote, “You are the music while the music lasts,” Eric knows that experience from his experience as a musician.

The arts can also be the ultimate communal experience where the good, true and beautiful come together and are made manifest – as in musical performance for example - and we can glimpse something in that moment that we all long for but cannot see. Think, for example, of what happens when you perform or listen to the *Ode to Joy*. Call it God, Buddha, the Collective Unconscious, Nirvana, we all have what William James called, “The will to faith,” the desire for something greater than the individual self. This aspect of the human experience, universal, ancient, is the realm of the arts.

A Walnut Hill student once wrote, “The arts push us to see ourselves more deeply. You can’t stay the way you are when you discover the deepest part of your soul.” I believe that this is the wellspring, discovered early in his life as a musician, of what drove Eric.

The philosopher Eli Wiesel wrote, “*God is action, not analysis.*” An artist doesn’t *think* about playing a piece, he plays it. Artists are makers and doers and Eric was a man of action.

Or Goethe said, “*Whatever you can do or dream you can begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it.*” Eric understood that to accomplish something you have to begin it, and as soon as you do begin the world begins to change. What will happen is unpredictable, so *beginning* is a risk, but it was a risk Eric was always willing to take.

And, like most artists, Eric was committed to, and a part of, his culture and time. He took responsibility for his community, for the future of our children, just as he did for the sustainability of environment in creating his timber business. All his work was informed by a higher purpose, by a sense of our accountability for our actions and of our responsibility to others.

Eric was, often against great odds, amazingly persistent and resilient. On one day I would get an email: “I’ve had it! These people are idiots! I give up!” or just, “I GIVE UP!” Then in a day or to I would get, “I’ve been talking with some folks in Minneapolis, and am sending you their materials. They really have got a hold of something. I think this might be the answer!” Early in our relationship when I got the first “I give up!” I was alarmed but I learned that Eric had a short recovery time and certainly this work – attempting to change entrenched bureaucratic systems – was often wildly frustrating.

I was always amazed at the level of Eric's apparently inexhaustible energy. He read and researched constantly - "I am enclosing a 500 page article on the Reorganization of School Leadership in Finland" - and traveled far and wide to meet with anyone who might advance the cause. He produced prodigious amounts of writing. The sheer volume of his output was daunting even as you admired the breadth of his intellect and understanding. As a colleague commented, with affection and respect, Eric could be "an inspiring pest," a remark he would have loved.

Many times I encountered Eric with his open and cheerful smile sitting at the end of a conference table at a meeting saying, "I brought along something for you all to read," and then hoisting a 100 page bound document onto the table, or pointing to several large cardboard cartons at his feet. He was the only person I ever met who brought more to the meeting than the people calling the meeting. He was an indefatigable educator. I have a special box for Eric's work alone.

In the end, as an Arts|Learning colleague wrote, "Eric always stretched the envelope of possibilities... on (his) unending quest to shake up public education and make it accountable to those it serves. We lost a bright, shining light."

I am reminded of the last line Mary Oliver's Poem, "When Death Comes.

"When it's over, I don't want to end up having just visited this world."

Erik did not visit this world. He lived in it, he engaged fully in all it had to offer - nature, family, music, community, work, relationships, and ideas. He made a difference with a full heart and high hopes in the face of all that life presents to make us give up or become bitter and resigned. One is tempted to say he was "larger than life" but I think it is truer to say that he WAS life. He worked hard, he never gave up, and he, like all who work for the good, never faced the facts. And I think he often found goodness, truth and beauty in his life. We did when we encountered him.

George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel wrote,

"The spirit is never at rest, but always in continual motion giving itself new form."

Eric, I like to think that you are out there in continual motion, giving yourself yet another new form among the music of the spheres. Thank you, dear friend. We did a lot of good work together and the work - and your enlivening spirit that is part of it - will go on in the lives of all the children, teachers, colleagues, friends, and family who are blessed and inspired by your time with us. We begin again, moving in continual motion to new forms, with you secure in our hearts.

Stephanie Perrin
September 18, 2011
Hingham, MA