

Keynote Speech, Humanitas Luncheon

When John Furia, Arthur Hiller, Jim Moser, Charles Champlin and I launched the Humanitas Prize twenty-five years ago, we did not know what to expect.

We began with three prizes and \$50,000 in prize money. Today we will award seven prizes and \$120,000. And as John told you, this time next year, an additional prize will be added and we will award eight prizes and \$130,000 in prize money.

For the first seven or eight years of Humanitas' life, we received grants from the Lilly Endowment. Since then, the Prize has been sustained by an endowment being put together by a coalition of generous individuals, broadcasters, production companies, studios, and networks, many of whom are represented today.

After we launched the Prize in 1974, we were asked repeatedly: "What are these human values you talk about? The ones that enrich people and help them grow?" So we set up a series of workshops—three that first year. These workshops have now evolved into the Master Writers Workshops, nine of them annually, which, under the able moderatorship of Terry Sweeney, feature many of the brightest lights in the writing community and explore the challenges and pitfalls of incorporating human values into entertainment writing. In the last ten months, more than 1800 writers have attended these workshops.

You are the people who have made all this happen. Present today are many of the winners of the last twenty-five years. And many of the writers who have been the Master Writers of our workshops. In addition, to the creative teams that made this year's nominated shows. Together, you comprise the cream of the country's writing community.

Humanitas is now more than a Prize. It is a movement, a sizeable group of committed men and women working in our industry to enrich as well as to entertain their viewers.

John, Arthur, Jim, Chuck, and I may have raised the standard and said, "Let us march." But you have joined hands with us and locked arms with us, and you have said, "Yes. Let us march. Let us stretch our talents. Let us go deep. Let us strive for excellence. Let us enrich as well as entertain. Let us give something special to our viewers."

You are the Humanitas movement. You have enriched the viewing public. In their name, I say "thank you." And along the way, you have become such good friends. It is so good to see all of you again.

Where does Humanitas go from here? Where does our industry go from here? What does the viewing public need from us?

As you are well aware, the tragedy at Columbine High has provoked a great deal of soul searching in the country and it has created a crisis of conscience in our industry. I think it is pretty clear that violence must top our agenda in the months and perhaps years ahead.

No informed person would maintain that Television and motion pictures are the sole, or even the primary source of violence in our society. Parents, teachers, the gun lobby, the police, and politicians on both the local and national levels, must all own up to their share of the responsibility. (I would feel a little better about all this if there was any indication the NRA was also having a crisis of conscience.) But neither do I think any informed person would deny that the entertainment industry has, on occasion, contributed to the problem. Let's be honest. Programs and pictures have been made that should not have been made. They have been written and shot in such a way that the most basic standards of taste and morality have been violated.

The problem is not with media violence as such. In our flawed state, violence is an unfortunate part of contemporary life. No, the problem is with the superficial, distorted and exploitative way that violence is so often presented. These pictures desensitize their viewers to the horrors of real-life violence, arouse the aggressive and violent impulses that lie dormant in every human heart and convey the impression that violence is an acceptable way to resolve conflict. Worse, they imply that human life is arbitrary, hostile and cruel, that other people are the enemy, that life is warfare and only the violent survive.

So, what is the solution? There are people in Washington who think censorship is the solution to the problem. Let me just say I disagree. What do politicians and bureaucrats know about making a movie?

I'll go further. I think our freedom to speak and write the truth as we see it is non-negotiable. There are three reasons for this:

First, freedom of speech is one of those inalienable rights of which Jefferson speaks in the Declaration of Independence. That right comes from God. It is not a gift of government. It cannot be taken away by government. This is not to say that freedom of speech is the same as freedom to market anything we create to anybody we want. It is not. The first is inalienable. The second is not. But that's a complex issue and beyond the scope of my remarks today.

Secondly, our freedom of speech is protected by the first amendment of the U.S. Constitution.

Thirdly, we need creative freedom if we are to do our job and make our unique contribution to the well being of this society.

As writers, our job is to explore the human situation, distill human experience and compress human life, so as to reveal its meaning. There is no way we can do this without creative freedom.

Yet, as we have told our children a thousand times, freedom does not exist in a moral vacuum. It always involves responsibility. So what does responsibility mean for us writers? I think it means being faithful to the truth, not the part of the truth our audiences may want to hear but the whole truth they need to hear. And it means being concerned about the well being of our viewers, especially the most vulnerable ones.

The politicians seem to think responsibility is too much to ask of our industry? The general public also has its doubts. But you and I who live and work in this industry know that the vast majority of our colleagues are responsible human beings. As a group we do care about the truthfulness of what we write. We do care about our viewers. And we do care about the kind of world we are bequeathing to our children. We are committed to human values, to human growth, to human solidarity. Humanitas is proof of this. And we are not the only ones in our industry with a conscience.

For years, films and TV shows reinforced racial and gender stereotypes. But then the industry became aware of what it was doing and responded responsibly, with the result that Hollywood is now a significant force in demolishing stereotypes and promoting racial and gender equality.

For decades, movies and TV promoted cigarette smoking. But then came the Surgeon General's report, and the industry again responded responsibly. As a result, anyone who now smokes in public feels like a pariah.

If, as the studies contend and a subsequent Surgeon General's report states, American media is a contributing cause of violence in our society, I think, in the future, Television and motion pictures could become just the opposite: a significant contributor to the decline of violence in our homes and on our streets.

How? As writers and producers committed to human values, what can we do to create shows that would diminish the level of violence in our society?

First, we can probe the psyches of those who initiate violence.

Why do they decide to hurt, maim, and kill? What is going on in their minds, hearts, and souls?

Are these people so filled with self-hatred that they feel they must pick up a gun and threaten other people in order to feel good about themselves?

Do they feel so rejected, so cut off that they feel they must be violent to get other people to pay attention to them?

Do they hurt so badly that they inflict violence on other people, so as not to be alone in their pain?

Are they so choked with anger that they explode in violence in order to get free of it?

Good questions. No easy answers. But the sickness which afflicts them is apparent.

We need to look at this sickness and we need to help our audiences look at it too. Despite the death and mayhem characters played by Bruce Willis and Steven Segal, there is nothing strong, admirable or macho about the perpetrators of violence. They are weak. And they are sick. Who would want to be like them?

Secondly, we can look at the lethal effects of violence, not only on the victim, but on the victim's family, and on the perpetrator.

I loved Robert Rodat's Saving Private Ryan. Not only does it give us an unvarnished look at the sheer insanity, radical inhumanity and utter savagery of war, but it propels us to say, "This is evil. We've gotta find another way to settle our disputes." It also shows us so powerfully the horrendous effects of violence on the Ryan family.

Bob, that scene where Mrs. Ryan sinks to the floor of her porch, devastated, after realizing what the approaching officers and priest are going to tell her is classic. And so is the scene where Tom Hanks tells Private Ryan that all his brothers have been killed.

I also think we need to look at what violence does to the perpetrator. Of those who initiate violence, only the most dehumanized feel no revulsion at what they have done. And even those who engage in socially sanctioned violence suffer great emotional havoc. Both NYPD Blue and Homicide are good at showing us this. No wonder police departments need resident psychologists.

Third, we can explore the necessity—and the rigors—of non-violent conflict resolution. What does this mean? It means loving our adversary. Doing good to those who hate us. Following Mahatma Gandhi's program for non-violent conflict resolution.

Confronting our adversaries. Being honest about our complaints. Listening. Trying to see the problem through their eyes. Affirming them—their intelligence and good will—despite the pain they may have caused. Appealing to the best in them. Seeking the truth through honest dialogue, even if that should demand we change our position. Seeking justice for them as well as for ourselves, even if that should require we cut back on our demands. Isolating the areas of disagreement. Inviting our adversaries to discuss the truth in our position they seem to be ignoring. Resisting the temptation to manipulate, deceive or punish them.

Does nonviolence work? Of course. Look at the civil rights movement, Solidarity in Poland, the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia, People's Power in the Philippines. But we need not do that. We have seen nonviolence work again and again in our own lives. The kind word, the caring gesture, transforms the potentially hostile person into a friendly one.

Is nonviolence easy? No way. It requires trust in the truth and in the basic goodness of even the most debased human being. It requires great moral stamina to forgive, to let go of the hatred which clogs the arteries of the soul. And it requires a rare kind of courage to love one's enemy, endure suffering rather than inflict it and meet physical force with soul force.

Does nonviolence give the writers and producers of the entertainment community the raw materials they need to create entertaining stories? Absolutely.

All the elements of compelling drama are present: intense emotional conflict, sympathetic characters with whom the audience can identify and for whom they can root, high stakes jeopardy, suspense.

If nonviolence is so theatrical, why have we in the creative community been so loathe to present it? I think it is because, rightly or wrongly, we have convinced ourselves that nonviolent conflict resolution demands too much of our viewers, that it contains more truth than they are able or willing to handle.

That is the perennial temptation for us in the creative community—to give the audience the partial truth it wants to hear rather than the whole truth it needs to hear.

We have succumbed to this temptation in the past. We cannot afford to do so in the future. With our stories we have shattered racial and gender stereotypes. We have given smoking a bad name. I do not see why we cannot do the same with violence. Instead of contributing to the problem, we can contribute to its solution.

This can happen if we begin to trust our viewers and tell them the whole truth about violence and if our viewers, in huge numbers, support us in this effort.

The struggle to get rid of violence in American society will be a long and arduous one. Equally arduous is the challenge to depict the sickness from which it arises, its lethal consequences on all those involved and the practice of non-violence. Along the way we may get discouraged and be tempted to give up. When I feel that way, I take solace in the words of that old black spiritual:

*“We are not alone.
We shall walk hand in hand.
We shall live in peace.
We shall all be free.
The truth will make us free.
The Lord will see us through.
Oh deep in my heart
I do believe
We shall overcome.
We shall overcome someday.”*