

LIBERTY MEDAL SPEECH

10.8.09

I'm very moved to be here, in Philadelphia, in the Constitution Center, receiving the Liberty Medal from one of our greatest Presidents and a dear friend of mine and my family – thank you, President Clinton for your service to our nation and the world today. This is the second best thing you've given me—the first was your eight years in office. I'm moved and I'm honored. I've always been a patriotic man. The house I spent five years in, not far from here in Haddon Heights, New Jersey, had a porch that was draped with red-white-and-blue bunting for the 4th of July; I wove red-white-and-blue crepe paper through the spokes of my bike wheels and scotch-taped American flags to the handlebars. If you'd seen me then and had been told that this kid would eventually wind up in the entertainment industry, you otherwise might have guessed I was headed for my own segment on Fox News.

But there wasn't anger in the patriotism I learned from my parents. There was simply an enormous love. They instilled in me a vast sense of awe about America, its history and its promise, and, especially because of my father's service in World War II, a profound sense of indebtedness, of owing something back.

When I was little, my mother would bring me on weekends here to go shopping at Wanamaker's. She'd park me under the statue of the great American eagle and leave me for what seemed to me like hours. I'm sure it wasn't that long, and anyway it was back when you could leave kids confident that they'd be where you left them and that no one

would call you a terrible parent. I wouldn't have been scared, except for the live organ music, terrifying to a Jewish kid, or at least to *this* Jewish kid; but I handled it, because I felt the eagle was protecting me. I'd been raised to feel that America was my home. Waiting for my mom, to pass the time, I made up stories, which is maybe the beginning of the journey that's led back to Philadelphia tonight.

Like most American kids growing up in the '50s, I was taught to recite passages from American secular scripture: the second paragraph of the Declaration, the Preamble to the Constitution, and the Gettysburg Address.

Many parents and educators know that we need to prepare for the future of our governing principles by introducing these texts early through rhythm and cadence, even before the words can be fully understood. In the music of their language, there's something that speaks to and educates the rhythms of the heart.

“We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”

I'm convinced that, as I recited these words, with their exciting, rising, up-and-up motion, I was being given lessons in American democracy, but also lessons in art; in the importance and power of great ideas, and also of magnificent, soul-stirring expression.

This hall is dedicated to 4,400 words of prose out of which, essentially, the United States of America was invented. The Constitution described how our country might work, even though, at the time, its actual existence was touch-and-go. The Bill of Rights imagined ideals we are still trying to realize. We are citizens of a country made up out of words, written into existence – written by lawyers, but by lawyers who could really write!

Jefferson, and later, Abraham Lincoln, knew that the way great ideas are expressed is essential to their success or failure in finding a home in the human imagination. Would the American experiment in democracy have succeeded if Jefferson had been a bad prose stylist? Would the Union have endured and slavery been abolished if Abraham Lincoln hadn't been a writer of genius? We'll never know. Lincoln was a writer of genius and like Jefferson, whom he revered, he clearly thought the artistry of the text mattered; he worked very hard to make his writing that good. These were great artists.

Is it *useful* to consider the Constitution, or the United States itself, as a work of art? Is it *useful* to suggest that our best leaders, the ones who speak to the better angels of our nature, all seem to have understood the necessity of keeping in regular, honest contact with their own souls - exactly what the best directors, singers, painters, dancers understand? For me, it's useful. It helps keep in mind the deep connection between making art and making a better world, between the world of the film set, the studio, the theater, and the greater world our children get to grow up in.

Contemplating the list of previous recipients of this beautiful medal, of course I'm genuinely humbled. Who wouldn't be? You've recognized doctors, scientists, jurists, leaders, diplomats, emancipators - people who repair what's broken in human society, who work on our consciousness and our consciences.

I think in part you've asked me here, you've placed me among humanitarians and activists and organizers, to challenge me, and all artists, with your conviction that art is, and should endeavor to be, among the human enterprises which contribute to the building of decent, free societies. Perhaps, by informing our nightmares and our dreams, art helps sharpen our longing for progress.

I began my life as a filmmaker wanting to emulate the films I loved - not so much their style, but their combination of popular appeal and depth, their aspiration to entertain on a mass scale while addressing life in all its complexity: The films of William Wyler, John Ford, David Lean, to name only a few. I've always believed that to truly entertain, to fully engage your audience, you must engage fully *with* your audience, with their fears and passions, with life as it's actually lived, with history and with imagination.

Audiences, like the citizens of a democracy, are at their best when they're not treated like subjects.

Of course, over the years, I've changed - who wouldn't want to be able to say that? More than any other factor, it was having children of my own that encouraged me to take on *Schindler's List*, *Amistad*, *Saving Private Ryan*, or *Munich*. I don't feel that those are

necessarily superior to films with lighter or more fantastical subject matter. In fact, those are the films my kids would like me to make more of.

Nevertheless, there's been a darkening in my choice of material, and in my treatment of it, which I'm sure reflects the gravity of being a father. I'm not saying that my children have turned me grim; old, yes, not grim. But watching children grow simultaneously connects you with the future and also, powerfully, with memory and history. To know where we're going, we have to know where we've come from. Being a father has prompted me to consider more seriously how art is one very important way that the human community remembers what it's been through, one way that we distill what it's meant as we try to understand ourselves.

My family life outside of movie-making changed the movies I make, beginning of course with *Schindler's List*; and these movies have, appropriately, led me back out into the world again. They've opened up for me a path of work in the world. They've pointed me towards the task of tikkun olam, of repairing the broken world, compelled me towards tzedakah, of giving. These are mitzvot, they're blessings - about which you say to yourself, "you don't *not* do that." The Shoah Foundation, the Righteous Persons Foundation, are close to my heart, nothing that I expected ever to get awards for. The people I've met through the foundations, the stories they've told me about life under the most unimaginable duress, have rekindled my awe at our species' fortitude and moral grandeur.

The films led me to this work. But creating foundations takes money, and so I consider myself fortunate that, like many of my role models, I've always had an appetite to make art in the marketplace. The commercial success of some of my films have made it possible for me to create foundations, build organizations, to try to have an effect on the world. But I've never believed that all art must prove itself in the marketplace; or that the marketplace is a congenial environment for all artists. Poetry, theater, serious fiction, symphony orchestras, dance companies and museums require the material support of the society to which they make a vital contribution, or they won't exist. There are experimental filmmakers, there's challenging programming for television that isn't to the taste of mass audiences but which expands the vocabularies of all artists and in doing so, our cultural horizons. And, of course, there is the critical need to create future artists – and future audiences – by providing arts education in our schools.

If we believe that art can matter, that art can help transform our lives, if we reject the idea that art is merely a disposable luxury, if we believe that the questions raised by art are as essential as the answers our politicians sometimes provide – then perhaps, finally, our country will begin to do a better job funding the arts, through private donation but even more importantly, through governmental subsidy.

If we entertain the idea that our country, our world is a work of art, and our leaders and organizers are artists, then – from one artist to another – we should all support the arts!

But I'm perhaps most grateful today for the extraordinary company in which you've included me, the previous honorees and everyone who's gathered today. Thank you for

this bracing, galvanizing context. I'll treasure this honor as a call to action: In these times of danger and hope, everything we do has heightened consequences, every choice we make matters. I will strive together with my wife, Kate, and my children—Destry, Mikaela, Sawyer, Sasha, Theo, Max, and Jessica—to make good choices.