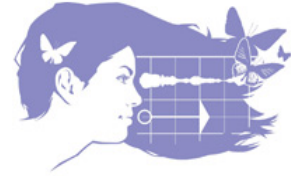


VISIONFEST 2005 KEYNOTE ADDRESS  
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I want to talk to you today about the future of animation, new media and interactivity, and your part in it. But the main message I want to get across to you is: "Do all you can. With what you have. In the time you have. In the place you are."

"Do all you can. With what you have. In the time you have. In the place you are." That lovely mantra is about living and doing in the Right Here and the Right Now. It's about fully using the gifts you have rather than the ones you wish you might have.

The words were spoken by a brave and wise little boy. His name was Xolani Nkosi Johnson, a Zulu from South Africa who died of AIDS at the age of 12. If you Google his name nearly 300 citations come up. In his brief time on earth, through speaking about his illness, he became a symbol of the battle against HIV/AIDS and inspired millions in Africa.

I find his words life-affirming, challenging, inspiring and applicable to everyone's life. For within them is a positive philosophy about maximizing all the possibilities available to us right now -- no matter what situation or station of life or job or stage of development we happen to be in at the moment -- not in the future, but right now.

What is the future of the art of animation? Well, the short and most true answer is: you!

Yes. You. All of you. Sitting here. Listening. Not listening. Dreaming. Sleeping. You, with your shining faces, your wild imaginations, and twitchy fingers. You are the future of animation, new media and interactivity. And it is a wide open future, full of promise and an array of opportunities.

Animation has always been an unruly and rambunctious art—the most radical form of cinema—and now it has its tentacles in numerous and varied fields that are available to you, the imaginative artist and job-seeker, if you are open to them.

Animators leaving school with highly transferable skills might find work creating interactive games; or feature-length films (both live-action and animated); or TV series; or advertisements; maybe comics and graphic novels; or personal independent self-expressive shorts? How about children's books? Or maybe theme park designs, among many other possibilities.

To become an active part of that future, I trust you are doing all that you can—right now—to develop your communication skills—right where you are—with what you have - in your particular school program, as well as experimenting and discovering stuff on your own.

I hope your learning includes a healthy mix of traditional animation and digital techniques, methods and aesthetics, plus a knowledge of (and respect for) the works of cinema's glorious past, both live-action and animation. Among the disciplines that can help you in becoming an excellent full-service communicator with transferable skills is: good ol' fashioned life drawing.

My friend Pete Docter, who directed *Monsters Inc.*, tells me, "The best animators at Pixar are also solid draftsmen." Pete also said that "good animation is based on keen observation of human behavior and life in general. The only way to get this stuff to stick in your head is to consciously observe it—to really see it, not just rest your eyes on it. The best way I know to wake up your brain and really observe is to draw."

And, in line with drawing (so to speak): another helpful component of your learning experience might include action analysis of films (both live-action and animation). Studying movies scene-by-scene and frame-by-frame reveals principles of motion and emotion used by great directors in great films. It is a wonderful learning experience (and you can do it on your own) to study Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Akira Kurosawa, Walt Disney, Winsor McCay, Orson Welles, Federico Fellini, Chuck Jones, Oskar Fschinger, Len Lye, Norman McLaren, Michael Powell, Alfred Hitchcock, Caroline Leaf, Rouben Mamoulian, Mary Ellen Bute, Alexander Alexeieff and Claire Parker, Jules Engel, George Cukor, Faith and John Hubley, Martin Scorsese, Hayao Miyazaki, and so many, many more.

You can find their works on DVD or home video in your library or video store. Find them and study them for they will open worlds to you. It is fascinating and great fun to try and figure out how and why these individual directors communicate so effectively with audiences visually, emotionally, non-verbally; through the movements of actors and the camera; through editing, color, music and sound effects, and the placement of figures, graphics and symbols within the frame. (You can also learn a lot from lousy films and poor directors: that is, learn what *not* to do!)

Another wonderful aid in strengthening your visual thinking and communication skills is the art of storyboarding. The placement of one sequential image after another and the psychological/visual effect of that choice; the staging of imagery within the frame; the pacing of a scene or sequence; the manipulation of audience's emotions and leading them wherever you want them to go.

And then there is the application of all that aesthetic knowledge and principles of communication through technology. For digital technology is your main tool today, and so it is essential for young animators (or moving image-makers) to learn as much as possible about 3-D and 2-D digital software and hardware.

Of course, experience is the ultimate teacher. To see your work on a big or small screen is really the best way to learn. In addition to advisement from teachers, friends and family, viewing your characters, designs, doodles, and stories in motion on a screen with an audience tells you everything about how well you are communicating your ideas and concepts, how developed your visual problem-solving abilities are; and ultimately it will help you find and forge your own artistic voice or style.

So, once you have this set of transferable skills, then what? Well, as Trudy Steinfeld, the director of NYU Career Services, recently put it: "You can't just sit in your pajamas and shop on-line for jobs. You need face-to-face contact. You need to network." You are already doing that by participating in VisionFest.

You also need an optimistic outlook. You may not know specifically what lies in your future or how you're going to reach your goal, but a recent psychological study showed that if you possess an over-all confidence that everything will work out fine in your life, it goes a long way toward helping you actually reach your goals.

In 1911, the great pioneer animator and comic strip cartoonist Winsor McCay spoke to a 15-year old aspiring cartoonist in Atlanta about this "cold, cold world" and advised the boy that "determination is the main thing . . . push yourself. If you go out with the idea that you're not going to make good, you never will."

Robert B. Reich, the former Secretary of Labor, wrote in the New York Times recently that "many college graduates [should] lower their sights in the short term" and take entry level jobs (even go-for jobs) in an area that interests them. "Even if the job doesn't pay much, it can provide a window on that particular world of work," Reich says.

I say take any job you can in any studio (large or small, live-action or animation); learn as much as you can there, add to your sample reel and skill base, and move on.

Thanks to technology, New York and Hollywood are not the only places to seek and find animation-related work. (Even giants like LucasAnimation and Pixar left urban LA for the boonies of northern California.) Animation jobs and opportunities can now be found everywhere. Two successful recent feature-length films – *Waking Life* and *Jimmy Neutron* – were made in Texas using off-the-shelf digital technology.

So, start where you are: find out what's going on animation-wise in your hometown. You may be surprised. Or better yet, discover what *you* can start happening in your hometown or any other preferred location.

In one of her last public speeches to the graduating class of Vassar, the writer Susan Sontag advised her audience to "keep your feelings" and "Don't let life's duties and necessities narrow you and your lives." There may come a time when you will work on a commercial project for a studio or one that perhaps you are producing, and it may not interest you. You may feel like a cog in a corporate wheel turning out a product which holds no interest for you emotionally, aesthetically or spiritually.

At those times, try to remember what it was you loved about animation in the first place. Remember, too, that animation is a great and largely unexplored medium for personal expression. Maybe you need to take the time to make a film just for you.

The poet Laura Riding said "making a poem is like being alive for always." Well, making your own animated film—controlling it, shaping it the way you want it to be as a vehicle to explore and display your feelings and thoughts about aspects of your life or life in general—is a way to become immortal. You can live forever through your art, and also leave something of yourself behind for others to learn from.

The great husband-and-wife animation team John and Faith Hubley found a way to alternate between earning a living making TV commercials and specials and industrial films, and creating brilliant, innovative personal films that expanded the horizons of animation storytelling and design. (Look 'em up at the library or video store!)

John Hubley described their personal films as ones in which "you make discoveries, you make breakthroughs, you have a sense of creative freedom that carries you beyond what a commercial job will. You are on a level that even helps your commercial work because you've grown as an artist."

His wife Faith Hubley agreed. She said, "If you are going to grow, stay alive, and valid, you have to keep working seriously. If your value in life is to be always doing what comes along, you are abandoning your responsibility as an artist."

It isn't easy to make films that are personal and unusual, and off the beaten track. The financial rewards are small compared to commercial ventures; but the spiritual rewards are great.

How does one begin? Well, that brings me back to the mantra I chanted at the beginning: "Do all you can—with what you have—in the time you have—in the place you are."

Joanna Priestly, a fine independent animator based in Portland, advises her students to "just start working, even if it's a little bit, even for half an hour every day." Apply for grants, make a film, make another, enter them in animation festivals, then go out and, as Joanna says, "be part of the animation community."

Your task as an artist is to figure out how to create art using whatever and all that you have right now. In closing, I would like to illustrate this point by telling you a wonderful story reported by Jack Riemer in *The Houston Chronicle* in early 2001. That year I was Acting Chair of NYU's Film and Television Department and my first day at work was on 9/11. One week after that horrible event, which changed all of our lives, I told this story to the NYU faculty at our first meeting. I think it continues to have a meaningful resonance.

It is about Itzhak Perlman, the great violinist, coming on stage to perform a concert at Avery Fisher Hall in New York. Here is what Mr. Riemer wrote:

[Itzhak] Perlman, as you may know, was stricken with polio as a child. He has braces on both legs and walks with the aid of two crutches. He crosses the stage one step at a time, painfully and slowly, majestically, until he reaches his chair. Then he slowly sits down, puts his crutches on the floor, undoes the clasps on his legs, tucks one foot back and extends the other foot forward. Then he bends down and picks up the violin, puts it under his chin, nods to the conductor and proceeds to play.

The audience is used to this ritual and sit quietly during it, waiting until he is ready. But this time, something went wrong. Just as he finished the first few bars, one of the strings on his violin broke. You could hear it snap -- it went off like gunfire across the room.

People who were there that night thought to themselves he would now have to repeat the ritual backward in order to walk off-stage and either find another violin or else find another string for this one. But he didn't. Instead, he waited a moment, closed his eyes and then signaled the conductor to begin again.

The orchestra began, and he played from where he had left off. And he played with such passion and such power and such purity as they had never heard before.

Of course, it is impossible to play a symphonic work with just three strings. I know that, and you know that, but that night Itzhak Perlman refused to know that. You could see him modulating, changing, recomposing the piece in his head.

At one point, it sounded like he was de-tuning the strings to get new sounds from them that they had never made before. When he finished, there was an awesome silence in the room.

And then people rose and cheered. There was an extraordinary outburst of applause from every corner of the auditorium; people on their feet, screaming and cheering, doing everything they could to show how much they appreciated what he had done.

He smiled, wiped the sweat from his brow, raised his bow for quiet, and then he said, not boastfully, but in a quiet, pensive, reverent tone,

You know, sometimes it is the artist's task is to find out how much music you can still make with what you have left.'

Good luck to you all. Thank you for your attention.