

Discovering What Democracy Means Bill Moyers



Bill Moyers studied journalism at the University of North Texas and graduated in 1956. He then studied theology and was ordained in 1959. During the Kennedy Administration, Moyers was first appointed as associate director of public affairs for the newly created Peace Corps in 1961. He served as Deputy Director from 1962-63. When Johnson took office after the Kennedy assassination, Moyers became a special assistant to Johnson, serving from 1963–1967.

He played a key role in organizing and supervising the 1964 Great Society legislative task forces and was a principal architect of Johnson's 1964 presidential campaign.

From July 1965 to February 1967, he served as White House Press Secretary.

In 1986 Moyers and his wife Judith Davidson Moyers formed Public Affairs Television. Among their first productions was the popular PBS series Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth. Moyers briefly joined NBC News in 1995 as a senior analyst and commentator, and the following year he became the first host of sister cable network MSNBC's Insight program. He was the last regular commentator on the NBC Nightly News. Moyers hosted the TV news journal, NOW with Bill Moyers, on PBS for three years. He retired from the program on December 17, 2004 but returned to PBS soon after to host Wide Angle in 2005.

In 2006 he presented two public television series. Faith and Reason, a series of conversations with esteemed writers of various faiths and of no faith, explored the question, "In a world in which religion is poison to some and salvation to others, how do we live together?" The other recent series, Moyers on America, analyzed in depth the ramifications of three important issues: the Jack Abramoff scandal ("Capitol Crimes"), evangelical religion and environmentalism ("Is God Green?"), and threats to open public access of the Internet ("The Net at Risk"). On April 25, 2007, Moyers returned to PBS with Bill Moyers Journal. The first episode, entitled "Buying the War", had Moyers investigating the general media's shortcomings in the run-up to the War in Iraq.

Bill Moyers is chairman of the Schumann Center for Media and Democracy and a journalist for the Public Broadcasting System. On February 7, 2007 the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation presented Judith and Bill Moyers the first Frank E. Taplin, Jr. Public Intellectual Award for "extraordinary contributions to public cultural, civic and intellectual life."

This is an excerpt from his remarks upon accepting the award.

We are often asked whether our kind of journalism matters. People are curious about why we give so much time to novelists, playwrights, artists, historians, philosophers, composers, scholars, teachers—all of whom we consider public thinkers. The answer is simple: They are worth listening to.

Some years ago I was invited to testify before a House of Representatives committee on funding of the arts and humanities. Opponents were making their skepticism felt toward PBS, the National Endowment of the Arts, and the National Endowment for the Humanities. I had been present at the creation of all three during my time in the White House with Lyndon Johnson, and now all three were once again in the crosshairs of conservatives like Ronald Reagan who were asking: “Why should we subsidize intellectual curiosity?” Reading Shakespeare, it was said, does not erase the budget deficit. Plunging into the history of the 15th century does not ease traffic jams. Listening to Mozart or reading the ancient Greeks does not repair the ozone layer.

We had recently produced two series on poetry called “The Language of Life” and “The Power of the Word.” Our series on “Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth” was resonating far and wide, much to the displeasure of sectarian dogmatists. We had created a documentary special called “The Power of the Past,” about how Florence valued art for public, and not merely private, consumption. Our series “A World of Ideas” offered conversations from a wide spectrum of voices: Chinua Achebe, Carlos Fuentes, Northrop Frye, Joseph Heller, Thomas Wolfe, Richard Rodriguez, Bharati Mukherjee, Jonas Salk, William L. Shirer, Tu Wei-ming, Toni Morrison, Joanne Ciulla, Ernesto Cortes, M.F.K. Fisher, Mary Ann Glendon, Leon Kass, and so many others who opened viewers to what my old friend and colleague Eric Severeid once called “news of the mind.”

Critics said these programs taught no one how to bake bread or build bridges. And they were right. Despite public television—not to mention symphony orchestras, municipal libraries, art museums, and public theaters—crime was still rampant, the divorce rate was soaring, corruption flourished, legislatures remained stubbornly profligate, corporations cooked their books, liberals were loose in the world doing the work of the devil, and you still couldn’t get a good meal on the Metro to Washington. Why persist, some members of Congress wanted to know, when there are so many more urgent needs to be met and so many practical problems to be solved?

I did not have a tried-and-true answer for members of the committee. I could not hand them a ledger showing that ideas have consequences. I chose instead to tell them what they could have learned if they had been listening to the people who appeared in our broadcasts.

They would have heard the novelist Maxine Hong Kingston say: “All human beings have this burden in life to constantly figure out what’s true, what’s authentic, what’s meaningful, what’s dross, what’s a hallucination, what’s a figment, what’s madness. We all need to figure out what is valuable, constantly. As a writer, all I am doing is posing the question in a way that people can see very clearly.”

They would have heard Peter Sellars, the iconoclastic director of Shakespeare in a swimming pool and Mozart in the Bronx, explain that he wants “to put our society up next to these great masterpieces. Are we thinking big enough? Are we generous of spirit? What does our society look like, next to the greatest things a human being ever uttered?”

They would have heard Vartan Gregorian, then head of the New York Public Library, talk about how “in a big library, suddenly you feel humble. The whole of humanity is in front of you. It gives you a sense of cosmic relation, but at the same time a sense of isolation. You feel both pride and insignificance. Here it is, the human endeavor, human aspiration, human agony, human ecstasy, human bravura, human failures—all before you. And you look around and say, ‘Oh, my God! I am not going to be able to know it all.’”

They would have heard the philosopher Martha Nussbaum confess that in one sense there is no message or moral in the ancient Greek dramatists—“simply the revelation of life as seen through the sufferer.” But there is a value, she went on, in seeing “the complexity that’s there, and seeing it honestly, without flinching, and without reducing it to some excessively simple theory.” You begin then, she said, to realize that trying to wrest a good life from the world may lead to tragedy, but you still must try.

They would have heard the filmmaker David Puttnam tell how as a boy he sat through dozens of screenings of *A Man for All Seasons*, the story of Sir Thomas More's fatal defiance of Henry VIII: "It allowed me the enormous conceit of walking out of the cinema thinking, 'Yeah, I think I might have had my head cut off for the sake of a principle.' I know absolutely I wouldn't, and I probably never met anyone who would, but the cinema allowed me that conceit. It allowed me for one moment to feel that everything decent in me had come together."

And they would have heard Mike Rose talk about what it's like teaching disadvantaged older college students in California. He had recounted to me his battle with a street-wise grownup who was flogging her way through *Macbeth*. "What does Shakespeare have to do with me?" she would ask. But when she finally got through the play she said to Mike Rose: "You know, people always hold this stuff over you. They make you feel stupid. But now, I've read it. I can say, 'I, Olga, have read Shakespeare.' I won't tell you I like it, because I don't know if I do, or I don't. But I like knowing what it's about." And Mike Rose said: "The point is not that reading Shakespeare gave her overnight some new discriminating vision of good and evil. What she got was something more precious: a sense that she was not powerless and she was not dumb."

Some members of Congress got it. They realized that we were talking not only about how to improve our lives as individuals but how to nurture a flourishing democracy. Wouldn't we have been likely to deal more effectively and quickly with pollution if we had thought about where we fit in the long sweep of the Earth's story? Could we better tackle our pending priorities as a society if we were prepared to acknowledge and confront the pain of conflicting choices, which the ancient poets knew to be the incubus of agony and the crucible of wisdom? Might we better decide how to use our wealth and power if we have measured and tested ourselves against the greatest things a human being ever uttered? Are we not likely to be more wisely led by officials who have learned from history and literature that great nations die of too many lies?

Furthermore, if we nurtured the higher affections of our intuition—what has been called our "inner tutor"—might we be more resolute in sparing our children from the appalling accretion of violent entertainment that permeates American life—what *Newsweek* described as "the flood of mass-produced and mass-consumed violence that pours upon us, masquerading as amusement and threatening to erode the psychological and moral boundary between real life and make-believe?"

We know who the enemies of democracy are. In his Jefferson Lecture the late Cleanth Brooks of Yale identified them as the "bastard muses" propaganda, which pleads, sometimes unscrupulously, for a special cause or issue at the expense of the total truth; sentimentality, which works up emotional responses unwarranted by, and in excess of, the occasion; and pornography, which focuses upon one powerful human drive at the expense of the total human personality. To counter the "bastard muses," Brooks proposed cultivating the "true muses" of the moral imagination. Not only do these arm us to resist the little lies and fantasies of advertising, the official lies of power, and the ghoulish products of nightmarish minds, they open us to the lived experience of others—to the affirmations of a heightened consciousness—to empathy. So it is that when Lear cried out to Gloucester on the heath: "You see how this world goes....." Gloucester, who was blind, answered: "I see it feelingly."

Many years ago we produced a series called "Six Great Ideas" with the didactic, irascible but compelling philosopher and educator, Mortimer Adler—one hour each on liberty, equality and justice, truth, beauty, and goodness. From the deluge of mail I kept two letters that summed up the response. One came from Utah.

"Dear Dr. Adler,

I am writing in behalf of a group of construction workers (mostly, believe it or not, plumbers!) who have finally found a teacher worth listening to. While we cannot all agree whether or not we would hire you as an apprentice, we can all agree that we would love to listen to you during our lunch breaks. I am sure that it is just due to our well-known ignorance as tradesmen that not a single one of us had ever heard of you until one Sunday afternoon we were watching public television and Bill Moyers came on with *Six Great Ideas*. We listened intently and soon became addicted and have been ever since. We never knew a world of ideas existed. The study of ideas has completely turned around our impression of education...We have grown to love the ideas behind our country's composition, and since reading and discussing numerous of your books we have all become devout Constitutionalists. We thank you and we applaud you. We are certain that the praise of a few plumbers

could hardly compare with the notoriety that you deserve from distinguished colleagues, but we salute you just the same. We may be plumbers during the day, but at lunch time and at night and on weekend, we are Philosophers at Large. God bless you.”

The second letter came from Marion, Ohio—from the federal prison there. The writer said he had been a faithful viewer of the series, and he described it as “a truly joyous opportunity... for an institutionalized intellectual. After several months in a cell, with nothing but a TV, it was salvation.” Salvation. Deliverance. Redemption.

I had to think about this a while before I realized what he meant. He was, after all, a lifer. How is it a man condemned to an institution for the remainder of his years finds salvation in a television program? And then one day I came across something Leo Strauss had written. The Greek word for vulgarity, Strauss said, is *apeirokalia*, the lack of experience in things beautiful. Wherever you are and however it arrives, a liberal education can liberate you from the coarseness and crudity of circumstances beyond your control.

As I watch and listen to our public discourse today, it seems to me we are all “institutionalized” in one form or another, locked away in our separate realities, our parochial loyalties, our fixed ways of seeing ourselves and others. For democracy to prosper it requires us to escape those bonds and join what John Dewey called “a life of free and enriching communion”—to become “We, the People.” The late James W. Carey, one of our noted scholars of communication, wrote that the very concept of “public” could once be defined as “a group of strangers who gather to discuss the news.” In early America the printing press generated a body of popular knowledge.

Towns were small, and taverns, inns, coffeehouses, street corners, and the public greens—the commons—were places where people gathered to discuss what they were reading. These places of public communication “provided the underlying social fabric of the town and, when the Revolution began, made it possible to quickly gather militia companies, to form effective committees of correspondence and of inspection, and to organize and to manage mass town meetings.”

The public was no fiction, Carey said. The public had no life, no social relationships, without news. The news was what activated conversation between strangers, and strangers were assumed to be capable of conversing about the news. In fact, the whole point of the press was not so much to disseminate fact as to assemble people. The press furnished materials for argument—“information,” in the narrow sense—“but the value of the press was predicated on the existence of the public, not the reverse.” The media’s role was humble but serious, and that role was to take the public seriously.

It would be hard to argue that we do so today, except in isolated examples. Our public conversation is mediated by politicians who have mastered “sound bites” sculpted from polling data, by “pundits” whose credibility increases with the frequency of exposure despite being consistently wrong, and “experts” whose authority depends not on reason, evidence or logic but on ideology and affiliation. The public, J.R. Priestly observed, “has been transformed into a vast crowd, a permanent audience, waiting to be amused.”

What kind of “public intellectual” survives in such an environment? Turn on the television and you’re likely to see them talking about the war in Iraq, for which they were cheerleaders, or the upcoming presidential race—still a year away. Notice where they sit—in a Times Square studio or a media stage in Washington, their messages beamed across the public airwaves courtesy of huge media conglomerates whose intent is not the informing of citizens but the maximizing of profit through the delivery to advertisers of mass audiences addicted to consumerism.

How forlorn a figure Socrates of Athens would be in this environment. Arguably the first public intellectual, proclaimed by the oracle of Delphi as the wisest of men, Socrates went about Athens on a divine mandate of self-reflection, some celestial spark glowing in his breast, some voice whispering in his head that only he could hear. Led by this voice he went to the wise men and great poets and master technicians of the city to cross-examine them, casting doubt on their knowledge by exposing their received opinions and unexamined assumptions, the deep-seated corruption of thought which leads to grave moral danger; or sometimes simply pointing to the common failing of so many experts: that of mistaking their expertise in one subject or practice for universal wisdom about the human condition.

Exposing the ignorance of the leaders was Socrates' way of helping the "cause of God," as he explained when he was put on trial. He reasoned thus from his interviews with them that the wisest of men—as the oracle, remember, described Socrates to be—is the one who is most conscious of his own ignorance, most aware of the limits of knowledge which are introduced by our limited methods of obtaining knowledge. Meletus, the main accuser featured in Socrates' Apology (as told by Plato), was a young religious fanatic who charged Socrates with believing in deities of his own invention rather than the gods recognized by the state. Scholars now believe that Meletus was simply a "front man" for political interests, put forward to stir the public against the philosopher—a forerunner of modern punditry, or maybe something quite like today's political fundamentalism.

I sadly think of [former Secretary of State] Colin Powell addressing the United Nations in February 2003, with his artist's renderings of those trailers that were supposed to be mobile biological warfare factories; and I think of all the rest of the cooked intelligence that sold so many of our public intellectuals on invading Iraq. It was too crude to even qualify as false wisdom on the Socratic model, really, but the resulting disaster—as great a blunder as Vietnam to which many of the same mistakes could be assigned—would result from relying on the knowledge of self-interested experts and deluded leaders. When they sentenced Socrates to death, he reminded them that they were proving how groundless knowledge made it impossible to escape from doing wrong. Succumbing to wishful thinking that leads to disastrous self-delusion, he pointed out, is the only real death. "When I leave this court," he said of his jurors, "I will go away condemned by you to death." But his accusers, he told them, "will go away convicted by truth herself..."

The Hebrew prophet was another kind of public intellectual, one who was also condemned and persecuted by the political elites he addressed. A century before Socrates, one of those prophets—Jeremiah—came from a small village into Jerusalem to preach repentance to a faithless Israel, with its houses full of treachery, and its rich kings and princes who gave no justice to the poor widow and the fatherless child.

And of course, near the end of his life, Jesus of Nazareth also went to Jerusalem, to preach the same message in an even more dangerous public way, confronting the ruling elites before great crowds on the Temple grounds. When he predicted their imminent destruction in his parable about the wicked tenants who hoarded the fruits of creation, his fate was sealed.

Jesus would not be crucified today. The prophets would not be stoned. Socrates would not drink the hemlock. They would instead be banned from the Sunday talk shows and op-ed pages by the sentries of establishment thinking who guard against dissent with the one weapon of mass destruction most cleverly designed to obliterate democracy—the rubber stamp.

A stock broker who makes bad picks doesn't last too long. A baseball player in an extended slump gets traded. A worker made redundant by cheaper labor abroad or by a new machine—well, she's done for, too. But four years after the invasion of Iraq—the greatest blunder in foreign policy since Vietnam—the public apologists and advocates of the war flourish in the media, while the costs of their delusions accrue in body counts and lost treasure. A public that detests the war is relegated to the bleachers, fated to watch from afar the playing out by political and media elites of a game that has been rigged.

Yet the salvation of democracy requires a public aroused by the knowledge of what is being done to them in their name. Here is the crisis of the times as I see it: We talk about problems, issues, policies, but we don't talk about what democracy means—what it bestows on us—the revolutionary idea that it isn't just about the means of governance but the means of dignifying people so they become fully free to claim their moral and political agency. "I believe in Democracy because it releases the energies of every human being." So spoke Woodrow Wilson, the namesake of your foundation and, I would suggest, still your guiding spirit.

The only Ph.D. ever to reach the White House was a public intellectual and genuine reformer who understood what a major battleground higher education was. He learned what the political struggle was about while a professor and later the president of Princeton, where he lost his share of institutional battles with wealthy alumni who largely controlled the university's development, and the nation beyond.

In his forgotten political testament *The New Freedom* (1913), Wilson took up something of the ancient, critical task of the public intellectual, a fact all the more remarkable in that he was president at the time. Louis Brandeis, the people's lawyer, was his inspiration and the source of this vision, but Wilson stood for it, right there at the center of power. "Don't deceive yourselves for a moment as to the power of the great interests which now dominate our development." "No matter that there are men in this country big enough to own the government of the United States. They are going to own it if they can." But "there is no salvation," he said, "in the pitiful condescensions of industrial masters. Guardians have no place in a land of freemen. Prosperity guaranteed by trustees has no prospect of endurance." From his stand came progressive income taxation, the federal estate tax, tariff reform, and a resolute spirit "to deal with the new and subtle tyrannies according to their deserts."

Wilson described his reformism in plain English no one could fail to understand: "The laws of this country do not prevent the strong from crushing the weak." That was true in 1800, it was true in 1860, in 1892, in 1912, and 1932; it was true in 1964, and it is true today. We have often been pressed to the limit, the promise of the Declaration and the ideals of the Gettysburg Address ignored or trampled upon and our common interests brought low. But every time there came a great wave of reform, and I believe one is coming again, helped along by the bright young people this foundation is nurturing.

We cannot build a political consensus or a nation across the vast social divides that mark our country today. Consensus arises from bridging that divide and making society whole again, the fruits of freedom and prosperity made available to the least among us. What we have to determine now, as Wilson said in his day, "is whether we are big enough...whether we are free enough, to take possession again of the government which is our own.

We haven't had free access to it, our minds have not touched it by way of guidance, in half a generation, and now we are engaged in nothing less than the recovery of what was made with our own hands, and acts only by our delegated authority."

As we face that challenge even today, a story about Helen Keller is worth remembering. Toward the end of her career, as she was speaking at a Midwestern college, a student asked: "Miss Keller, is there anything that could have been worse than losing your sight?" Helen Keller replied: "Yes, I could have lost my vision."

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