The Darkness and the Light

Reconceiving the Imagination

by **Maxine Greene**

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

The recent terrorist attacks were a powerful reminder that the imagination can be a destructive as well as a constructive force. In the following essay, Maxine Greene addresses the unsettling question: What does it mean to educate the imagination in the wake of September 11th?

Many, including myself, have described imagination as the capacity, as Emily Dickinson wrote, to light "the Possible's slow fuse." This "slow fuse" gives us the power to expand our vision of reality, to open and vary our perspectives, to achieve empathy with other human beings. It presumably gives us a means of freeing ourselves from repetition, boredom, and banality. It helps us, as John Dewey said, to break through "the crust of conventionality."

Only occasionally are we reminded that the imagination, breaking through boundaries and reaching beyond ordinary limits, can summon up ghastly brutalities and render thinkable such events as the destruction of the World Trade Center, the invention of extermination camps in the Second World War, and the massacres of the innocent all over the world.

Trying to understand this dark deployment of the imagination, I turn to literature—to works that probe the consciousness of terrorists: Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent,* Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Possessed,* and Henry James's *The Princess Casamassima.* I also recall paintings like Francisco Goya's *8 May in Madrid* or Pablo Picasso's *Guernica.* These works demonstrate the familiarity of artists with the cruel side of human life—the destruction brought about by those who imagine they have a right to change the world by killing. Through words, metaphors, and images, artists are able to render, perhaps better than the rest of us, instances of violence and unutterable despair. But their intent is not necessarily dark. It is a means to let us see, to make us indignant, or to inspire us to take action against the horrific.

Since the attacks on September 11th, well-wishing friends have advised so many of us to forget the ghastly memories of what happened and to return to normal life. But it is impossible to forget or to repress. The images, the sounds, the memories call out for integration in the fabric of our life experiences. I think of the poet Wallace Stevens, who warns us against the removal of fearsome ideas and images from renderings of the human condition. We ought not, he says, deny the existence of pain and injustice, our own or our loved ones' mortality. Undeserved suffering; inexplicable loss: to ignore or deny them would impoverish our consciousness. Or, as Stevens writes in "Esthétique du Mal," we would live our lives "as if hell, so modified, had disappeared...." In the same poem he describes those who modify life in that way as lunatics "of one idea," who require everyone else to "live, work, suffer, and die in that idea."

We too seldom consider the range of consequences, the concrete implications, of what we see as possibility. Merely to conceive of the "possible" as the sole alternative to necessity and determinism is not enough to enable us to achieve freedom. Freedom must always take into account choices that may be destructive rather than liberating. Freedom ought to be understood—not as freedom *from*, but primarily as freedom *for*. It is then that the burning fruitful questions arise: Freedom for what? To what end?

We have only just begun to imagine the origins of the recent terrorist acts that are changing our lives. Many of us are trying to reconcile our belief in civil liberties and multiculturalism with our need for unity at this time. We are trying to balance our empathy with the world's poor and powerless with our outrage at the destructive acts of September 11th. And yes, a new commitment to the right to dissent is needed, even as we imagine what thought-control and a native fundamentalism would mean for us all. It is not necessary to moralize about the arts or to spell out the rights we are required to defend. These rights must be reaffirmed, however, reimagined within the fabric of our sharing and our new and painful experiences.

I choose to end with the last stanza of Marge Piercy's "To Be of Use." I do so because it reminds us of the dualities, the tensions, and the wonder of bringing beautiful and significant things out of the rubble. It has to do with imagining new kinds of making, new modes of action. This may be the real responsibility of imagination as we exert our efforts to weave together the darkness and the light.

> The work of the world is common as mud.
> Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
> But the thing worth doing well done
> has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.
> Greek amphoras for wine or oil,
> Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums
> but you know they were made to be used.
> The pitcher cries for water to carry
> and a person for work that is real.

We must continue reaching out for that work. We must imagine, finally, how each us—humbly, wonderingly, ardently—can be of use.

Marge Piercy, "To Be of Use," *Circles on the Water: Selected Poems of Marge Piercy*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000.