

**"REFLECTIONS: MISSION AND MEANING"**  
Remarks by Donna Oglesby, Counselor of USIA  
Women's Action Organization Luncheon  
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I am very grateful to the Women's Action Organization for the invitation to speak here today. I take as a blessing the opportunity it affords me to close this chapter of my life.

This gift of completion from the WAO is a particularly generous one because I was invited to speak about something that has "meaning" for me. And meaning is precisely what a person retiring from a long career is struggling to understand. What did my life's work mean? Was it worthwhile? Was my work to good purpose? Did I make any real difference? Meditating on such questions opens the door to memories.

In fact, with retirement, I recently read, your working life ceases to be an experience and becomes a recollection. One is suddenly aware that the battles, crises, and great decisions in which you participated have not really become history; they are simply your own personal memories.

And, remembrances, as we learned from Proust and his *madeleines*, are both fragile and powerful.

*No sooner had the warm liquid, and the crumbs with it, touched my palate than a shudder ran through my whole body, and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary changes that were taking place. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, but individual, detached with no suggestion of its origin...*

Memories can suddenly wash over you, triggered by a taste, a fragrance, a sound. They are charged with emotion and infused with meaning. It is the presence of emotion swirling around memories that most intrigued me when I began to prepare myself for retirement this year. I was so overwhelmed by the emotions that memories rekindled that I wanted to understand more about what has come to be called emotional intelligence, and its powerful effect on memory and meaning. I sensed it would help me come to terms with a career ending now in the middle of the road of my life and help me chart a new true path through the dark wood recalled for us in Dante's *Commedia* which opens:

*Midway this way of life we're bound upon,  
I woke to find myself in a dark wood,  
Where the right road was wholly lost and gone.*

*Ay me! how hard to speak of it--that rude  
And rough and stubborn forest! the mere breath  
Of memory stirs the old fear in the blood;*

Poetry and psychology led me to a teacher, Peter Salovey, a professor of psychology at Yale. As luck would have it he organized a course on memory this winter in Washington for interested Yale alumnae. Salovey's research, discussed in his book, The Remembered Self: Emotion and Memory in Personality, proves that self-defining memories are characterized by four qualities: they are vivid, emotionally charged, have a recurring narrative form, and are not necessarily historically accurate. In late spring Salovey returned to Washington as a panelist in a conference entitled "Ethics and Meaning." Because of his participation, I attended the conference -- which, parenthetically, was attended by a number of women employees of USIA; each one acting individually and discovering with delight the others' presence.

At the conference I had my first opportunity to hear the Jungian author, James Hillman -- a man whose scholarship has been popularized by the more accessible author Thomas Moore (Care of the Soul.) Hillman's presentation on aesthetics and political action stunned me into an intellectual comprehension of what my intuition and instincts had been telling me for years about the deep significance of culture to our mission of understanding, informing and influencing foreign publics.

Those who share my feeling about the importance of purposeful cultural diplomacy to the achievement of our national interests abroad are, I suspect, made to feel foolish when they try to justify the expenditure of tax-payer's money on art, music, teenage exchanges or even the more fundamental concept of cross cultural contact work abroad. It all looks pretty soft and fuzzy to a bean counter. At the risk of seeming foolish, or judged to be enthralled by sentimentalism, I'd like to talk today about the habits of the heart we practice in USIA, the soul work that we do for our country in the world. I think it is hard work, political in the pure sense of the word and essential to our well being as a people.

The world is first of all, as Hillman would say, an aesthetic phenomenon before it is logical, political or rhetorical. It is the sensate world that we must participate in as human beings and it is through the senses that we transcend ourselves and our differences with others. Cultural norms and habits do sway us -- and that is why cultural translation is essential -- but underneath our cultural overlay the world gets to us through sense perception, through instinct. Hillman argues that it is aesthetics that bring forth our ethical action; because when we are moved by beauty, love is aroused; when love is aroused, there is a desire to do something to protect what is loved.

Willis Conover broadcast jazz to the world over the Voice of America for years. In Poland, they listened to the jazz, and they heard the voice of freedom. In time, freedom came. This comment from the VOA celebration of his work recently triggered a

memory of my own: that of programming the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra in Stroessner's Paraguay. Orpheus performs without a conductor; a fact that challenged the authoritarian constructs of the regime's supporters to such an extent that the politics of our decision to bring Orpheus to Paraguay were subject to great editorial debate in the newspapers of the time. Orpheus was magnificent; democracy came to Paraguay. Not quite a neat cause and effect; but, I know deeply that Orpheus and the jazz groups USIS made a point of bringing to Paraguay during those years spoke volumes about our values and our support for those working for political liberalization in that nation.

Music is the expression of the Paraguayan soul. And I was given a return gift of music as I was ending my tour. A radio station, Radio Nanduti, whose owner was an outspoken supporter of the democracy movement and often in trouble with President Stroessner chose to thank me for the political protection our open cooperation with him provided -- international visitor grant and other public gestures -- by sending musicians to sing under my window in the early hours of the morning. It is a memory I cherish, and evidence I offer myself, that yes, I made a difference once in a land where it mattered to advance the values we cherish as a people. USIS is still making that difference as the stellar work of Mark Jacobs during the recent failed coup attempt in Paraguay demonstrates; and I know Jim Dickmeyer will continue the tradition when he arrives in Asuncion next month.

Right outside this room is another *madeleine* for me; it is a picture of some USIS Bangkok staff, me included, standing with young Thai artists in front of the wall of the American Embassy -- a wall we had just painted with a bright colorful mural to celebrate Earth Day. That mural, and the act of painting it on a stuffy U.S. Embassy security wall did more to help us get environmental concerns on the Thai public agenda than all the words on the subject we had distributed until then. Even the Prime Minister went out of his way -- that is saying quite a lot in Bangkok traffic -- to drive by and see what everyone was talking about.

To advance our environmental agenda in Thailand, USIS Bangkok worked with literature, poetry, and religion as well as economics and politics. Through our work with environmental activists -- moved to political action by their aesthetic outrage at what they were forced to taste, smell, see and hear in their degraded environment -- we connected with the democratic movement as well. Grassroots political action in Thailand is deeply rooted in the environmental movement for reasons I think James Hillman instructs us on. It was those grass roots environmentalists -- many of whom we had sent on IVs, worked with in seminars with American poets, activists, and ethicists, or to whom we sent books who stood with thousands of others on the National Parade Ground and held their ground until the military government fell in 1992.

People, the world over, need to feel connected, they long to be heard. There is also scientific evidence that people need meaning in their lives. We alone of the foreign affairs agencies of the United States government act on a daily basis as if we "get it." Our mission is to *understand* first, then to inform and influence. Our mission is to broaden the dialog between Americans, their institutions and their counterparts abroad. And through that broadened dialog we hope to establish the bonds of friendship that allow us to persuade others to act in ways that benefit our national interest. This is retail politics on a global scale and it is essential if the words negotiated by diplomats are to become reality on the ground.

I have come to believe that the Fulbright idea -- not just the program -- the idea of large numbers of people spending long enough in another culture to arrive at some understanding of what they value and how they think is critical to world peace. It is this time in another culture that gives a person the bundles of memory that allow them to process information from that nation into understanding and knowledge about it. The concept of public diplomacy as information dissemination alone without the companion cultivation of cultural connection is a sterile one. It is yang without yin. It is sperm without egg. It is masculine without feminine. It is incomplete.

Put metaphorically, I see our cultural work as preparing the soil to receive the planting of values and ideas that we want to grow. You cannot cultivate public opinion abroad without as much attention to the culture in which it is planted as to the germ of the idea being sown. Any good field officer knows that without cultivation of a personal relationship of trust and mutual respect with the people in that culture who matter to the achievement of our interests, no information sent out will be truly received. And, preparing the ground of that relationship to receive our policy message -- and to act on it -- is more likely to be successful if it was once double dug by a deep exchange experience.

The new work on memory helps us understand why this should be so. Our memory function is not like a tape recorder in the brain. It is not really historically accurate -- it does not play back what actually and objectively happened. Memories are not snapshots. Science now proves accurate Walter Lippman's assertion made in his book on Public Opinion in 1922, that there are the "pictures in our heads and the reality outside." It is those images -- and smells and tastes and sounds and the memories they trigger -- that provide the emotional prisms through which we perceive the truth of our world. Think about it: without memories that give context to information received, information is simply data that does not compute because it *doesn't mean anything* to you.

In 100 Years of Solitude, The Colombian author Gabriel Garcia Marquez paints for us a picture of how dehumanizing it is to lose memory. Villagers in Macondo are inflicted with a strange plague

that causes them to lose the memory function; first they are unable to remember the names and functions of objects, later the identity of people, and finally, "even the awareness of their own being."

*He...marked the animals and the plants: cow, goat, pig, hen, cassava, caladium, banana. Little by little studying the infinite possibilities of loss of memory, he realized the day might come when things would be recognized by their inscriptions but that no one would remember their use. Then he was more explicit...This is the cow. She must be milked every morning so that she will produce milk, and the milk must be boiled in order to be mixed with coffee to make coffee and milk.*

Without the context provided by bundles of memory, information is merely data; it does not lead to knowledge, it does not lead to understanding. We are now learning from science what literature has long hinted: that it is memory, by supplying our intellect and emotions with ideas and feelings from the past, which fuels our ability to act with purpose, to achieve, and to live rich emotional lives. Purposeful communication in the service of policy is our business in USIA and we would be wise to remember that complete human communication requires attention to both the intellect and the emotions of those we would hope to understand and influence.

Those of us who have worked with exchanges know deeply in our beings that it is the small everyday enchantments with ordinary American life that make the exchange experience so effective. It works for Americans abroad as well. I never see a firefly -- and the first fireflies of June were in my garden this week -- without being reminded of my homestay in Japan when I was an East West Center grantee. Fireflies seemed magical in the Japanese summer of 1967. When I see them now I am reminded of the Japanese family I lived with and their kindness to me. I am reminded of the importance of the traditional arts to their lives, of their garden and the hard work they did in their little lens factory.

It reminds me too, of my anger on learning when I joined USIA after obtaining a Masters in International Affairs from Columbia University with a focus on Japan, that female foreign service officers were not permitted to serve in branch posts in Japan. As WAO Vice President for USIA in the early 70's, I waged war on the practice until it was changed. This summer a woman will be the Public Affairs Officer in Tokyo for the first time -- that woman went to Kyoto as BPAO in the first wave of female officers to serve in the branches.

Fireflies in Japan led to political action in America. Corn-on-the-cob in Kansas, frangipani in the Hawaiian air, snow in

Minnesota are some of the thousands of small enchantments that can trigger the emotions and open the doors to the communication of information that may lead to understanding, and to political action. When these enchantments occur in the context of a structured exchange experience -- when the exchange is grounded in policy purpose and the participant selected accordingly -- the enchantments are bundled in memory with the substance and a powerful communication experience can occur. Only by addressing both the intellect and the emotions can we hope to cultivate the soil of the imagination for the growth of the specific ideas and values that we wish would germinate around the world.

In meeting with the I Bureau Steering Committee last week, I shared with them a comment by the Welsh poet David Whyte who insists that ours is not the age of information; it is the age of loaves and fishes. Whyte writes in his book, The Heart Aroused, "technology has marvelous benefits, but there are places its writ does not run. For instance, in that split second of creative consciousness before the finger actually strikes the keyboard."

We must master new technology; we will not survive into the next century without doing so. But, we must become so good at technology that it is invisible in our conversation with the world. As we said in *USIA 2000*, our goal is not electronic connectivity, that is but a tool. Our goal is to advance our national interest by nurturing purposeful relationships with people around the world who have the power to effect our well being by the ballots they cast, the ideas they propagate or the guns they carry. Technology plays a vital supporting role, but technology will not perform the intellectual work, the cultural translation or carry the argument home over those essential last three feet. That is the job of the people in USIA.