



A speech by acclaimed Film Editor

Walter Murch
2006 Honorary Doctor of Letters Degree Recipient

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I would like express my deep gratitude to the students, faculty, and Board of Governors of Emily Carr, and in particular Dr. Ron Burnett, for awarding me this Doctorate of Letters. It is a particularly significant honor coming from Emily Carr, where art, design, moving pictures and sound are taught as interwoven disciplines. Above everything else, I firmly believe in the profound value of this interweaving.

I would also like to offer my congratulations to all the graduates today. As students, you should feel great satisfaction at this moment, and pride in the accomplishments that got you here. As artists, however, you should also already know the feeling of dissatisfaction with those very same accomplishments: a nagging sense of how they could have been better IF... if you had had more time, or more money, or more resources; if you had better technical support, or not been distracted at a crucial moment; if, if and if... A whole phalanx of IFs that can get you down, but can also make you more determined to do better next time. I am here to tell you a slightly bitter truth: this feeling does not go away when you become professionals. Get used to it. It can actually be your friend and accomplice.

There is a lovely line from Rilke: "The purpose of life is to fail at greater and greater things."

Twenty years or so ago I was in England directing a film, positively bulging with IFs, and on July 4th I went to a softball party in Regent's Park that Jim Henson put together for expat Americans working on films in London. Jim himself was getting ready to direct "Labyrinth" on the same stages that I was using for "Return to Oz" and as he handed me my hot dog he asked: "How's it going? Are you happy?"

It seemed to me to be a surprising question for one director to ask another: Hadn't he been many times where I was now? And shouldn't he have known that I was feeling many things at that stage of shooting, but happiness wasn't one of them? At least not the lazy-full-stomach-swinging-in-the-hammock kind of happiness.

But at the same time I knew that he was just being sociable: when we ask "How do you do?" we don't really want to get the full list of aches and pains. So I quickly recovered and said: "Great! Yes, it's really looking good. The crew has been fabulous," and so on. He smiled and nodded and turned to the next person in line and asked: "How's it going? Are you happy?"

It was a wonderful afternoon, listening to the familiar "thunk" of the softball as it jumped from bat to glove in this most English of London's parks.

But that evening I rolled the question around. I couldn't get it out of my mind: what was the right and honest answer to that deceptively simple question? I tried many things, and none of them really worked, but the closest I eventually came was "No, I'm not happy. But I would be absolutely miserable if someone stopped me from what I'm doing."

In that spirit, I'd like to read you three slightly longer answers to that question. I keep them in the front of my notebook for quick injections of hope and good sense when needed.

The first is a letter from Martha Graham to Agnes deMille, written sometime in the late 1930's. deMille hadn't yet achieved the fame she was to receive a few years later for her revolutionary choreography of *Rodeo* and *Oklahoma*, and she had been feeling despondent about ever achieving her goals. Toward the end of the letter, Graham wrote:

"There is a vitality, a life force, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all time, this expression is unique. If you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and be lost. The world will not have it. It is not your business to determine how good it is; nor how valuable it is; nor how it compares with other expressions. It is your business to keep it yours, clearly and directly, to keep the channel open. You do not even have to believe in yourself or your work. You have to keep open and aware directly to the urges that motivate you. Keep the channel open. No artist is pleased. There is no satisfaction whatever at any time. There is only a queer, divine dissatisfaction; a blessed unrest that keeps us marching and makes us more alive than the others."

So if I had known about Martha Graham's letter before Jim asked me his July 4th question, I think my answer would have been: "Jim, I'm experiencing blessed unrest."

And I think he would have known exactly what I meant.

The second is from Werner Herzog - actually from Les Blank's documentary "*Burden of Dreams*" which was about the making of Herzog's film "*Fitzcarraldo*." There had been some crisis, in the middle of the Amazon, and the situation seemed hopeless. Les asked Werner how he was going to cope with this apparently unsolvable problem. Werner replied:

"The everyday reality is only an illusion, behind which stands the greater and deeper reality of dreams. The main thing that allows you to do a good job - or even to do the job at all - is to grant the dream a higher reality than the matter you are dealing with - to reverse the direction of the current so that it is not a piling up of matter that creates the dream, but rather the dream which - with you acting as an intermediary - puts matter in a certain revelatory arrangement."

The last was written by the Taoist monk Chuang Tzu more than 2300 years ago, but it gets as close as anything I've read to the mind-state I'm familiar with in film editing and sound mixing. By extension, I think it would apply to anyone caught in the act of creation. And optimistically, it concludes on the flip side of where we began, with the possibility of satisfaction and happiness.

Cook Ting was slicing up an ox for Lord Wenhui. At every push of his hand, every angle of his shoulder, every step with his feet, every bend of his knee, he slithered the knife along, and all was in perfect rhythm, as though he were dancing.

"Ah, this is marvelous!" said Lord Wenhui. "Imagine skill reaching such heights!"

Cook Ting laid down his knife and replied, "When first I began cutting up oxen, I could see nothing that was not ox. After three years, I no longer saw the ox whole, but only the joints. Now I go at the work with spirit alone and do not look with my eyes. Knowledge has stopped and my spirit wills the performance. I depend on the natural makeup to cut through the creases, guide the knife through the fissures. I depend on things as they are. So I never touch the smallest ligament or tendon, much less bone."

A good cook changes his knife once a year because he cuts. A mediocre cook, once a month because he hacks. I have had my knife for nineteen years and I have cut up thousands of oxen with it, yet the blade is as good as if it had just come from the grindstone. . . . "

The joints have openings,
And the knife's blade has no thickness.
Insert this lack of thickness into the openings,
And the moving blade slides through,
With room to spare.

Despite all this,
I often come across the unexpected.
Then it is hard to continue on the usual path.
I become alert;
my gaze comes to rest.

I move the knife very slightly,
Whump! It has already separated.
The ox doesn't even know it is dead,
and falls to the ground like mud.

I stand holding the knife,
And look all around.
The work gives me much satisfaction.
I clean the knife and put it away.

May your work give you much satisfaction. And Blessed Unrest.

Thank you very much.