

Skidmore College's 100th Commencement May 21, 2011

Address by Anne Bogart

Recently I was invited to write a letter to my younger self, for a forthcoming book in which various artists were asked to write to themselves at a younger age. I found myself asking my younger self to become more attentive to the indications of the body—to think of the body as a barometer. Looking back, I found that when I did not pay attention to the signals of the body, I would get into trouble. When I ignored the warnings or indications, the subtle directions, sensations, and messages, I got stuck or pushed too hard in ways that I can feel in my body right now, and not in a good way. So I told my younger self to treat the body as a barometer.

Today I feel that this advice to myself might be useful for you to consider as you move into the next uncharted chapters of your lives. The body is the best barometer, and it can effectively measure a situation, adjust, and then make decisive action possible. Pure, decisive action is hard to come by these days and yet necessary for the forward momentum of our lives. We are chock-full of voices, all vying for attention—voices of our parents, teachers, bullies, and role models, all who have filled us with inspiration, values, fears, and prejudice. Their influence is wonderful and horrifying.

The influence can be wonderful because our dependence upon the bodies and minds of others is what gives life its meaning. Wonderful because, like cattle, we are a species that herds, and our connection to others contains grace and pleasure.

The influence can be horrifying because influences too easily become assumptions, and assumptions are dead things, of little use, and actually remove us from the fine tensile tissue of moment-to-moment living. Horrifying because we can hear too many voices. and we feel stuck and stranded upon the shores of too many opinions.

When in doubt, listen to the body. The body as barometer is a simple notion. The body constantly receives myriad impressions from multifarious sources: from temperature, visual stimulus, sound, ideas, suggestions, people, odors, colors, and so on. But the instantaneous journey of the body's responses to these stimuli is not so simple, because the physical sensations are immediately met by and intertwined with your memory, associations, ingrained prejudice, long-term goals, and learned responses. And in this way, your own body—which is so wrapped up in, and ultimately not separate from, the world around it—can instantaneously let you know, simply by the level of excitement and energy generated, what needs attention.

Similarly a sensation of numbness can indicate what to avoid. For me, one of the strongest and most useful signals that the body can generate for important decisions are goosebumps, or what the French perhaps more poetically call "frisson du corps." I have found that the goosebumps factor is most useful when making an important decision or deciding which path to take. When I receive a frisson du corps, I act. When I do not feel the goosebumps factor, I do not. That simple.

Similarly, the body as barometer helps me to handle other people's criticism. I listen to the criticism (or in the case of the theater critics, read the criticism), and if the content makes me angry, which is an ultimately useful kind of energy, I know instantaneously that the criticism has value and that I must act. If I feel nothing, I can ignore the criticism, because my body, the most knowing part of the brain, has let me know that there is nothing to respond to.

I hope this message is in some way useful to you. And I know that my body does not lie, right now, with the tremendous frisson du corps that I am feeling when I imagine the impact that all of you can have upon the world in the coming years.