

By providing the tools to reach a person's underlying spirit, or essence, Bill Rossi's approach enables teachers to bring forth aspects of students' being that truly humanize them. This volume is well worth reading.

— Wander de C. Braga, Ph.D., Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist

# Venturing Together

Empowering Students to Succeed

WILLIAM  
ROSSI

## BOOK ONE

Fanning an Inner Flame:  
A Case for the Effectiveness  
of the Creative Arts in  
Human Services and Education

## BOOK TWO

Enlivening the Creative Spirit:  
A Strengths-based Educational  
and Mentoring Approach  
Using the Creative Arts

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# Introduction

Doing art I can be myself, and not  
feel I need to be anybody else.  
—Student

We all need to feel acknowledged as human; we also have an innate drive to find the avenues we can travel to grow and realize our humanness. Creative growth is necessary for us to find out who we are, and if deprived of this we will have shallow relationships with ourselves and others and will be unable to express and share our nature, which is essential to happiness. If this growth isn't allowed, we will feel trapped and upset and will possibly become injurious to ourselves or others.

This book describes some of the societal conditions from which so many people suffer today, conditions that have been exacerbated, in part, by our inattention to the importance of the artistic creative process. It also delineates how development and implementation of that process could very effectively address them. Many of these conditions are the result of a dominant aspect of our culture that is based in self-centeredness, intolerance, materialism, and a lack of empathy. As a result of this focus we have insufficient time or motivation for the introspection needed towards the realization of inherent qualities that are so necessary for human development. There is also very little support for the many parents in the greater society who are struggling to counterbalance the negative influences bombarding their children.

I believe these attitudes have reached the extreme level of being oppressive because as they have become increasingly pervasive they have diminished other aspects of our society which at one time provided more of a balance. Not only does the absence of opportunities for creative growth intensify our problems, the lack of real efforts to broaden our perspectives—which could lead to more equitable communities—continues to contribute to the challenge. This in large part explains the increasing numbers of and degree of challenge in at-risk youth and adults today. It also points to the remedy.

Graffiti artists are an excellent example of an oppressed people: racism, poverty and other abuses have denied these young people the acknowledgement of being human and deprived them of opportunities to develop or grow. Their graffiti is a reaction to their plight, a primal scream that says *We exist. We are humans, too.*

The world has experienced varying levels of oppressions at all times in history. Some, like the Nazi Holocaust or African slavery in America, are patently obvious; others, such as that of many youth and adults today, are less so. I have chosen here to draw correlations with the African American experience because today's challenged populations share a similarity with the early African American in the way their circumstance limits acknowledgement of their humanity. Paradoxically, this also provides them with a singularly potent way out.

Considering the African American experience is helpful here for two reasons:

- By understanding the conditions that presented challenges to people in the past, we can draw correlations from those conditions to those of the present.
- By understanding the mechanisms used in past circumstances for emotional survival, we can create an approach to effectively address similar conditions today.

One of the most difficult conditions challenged people face today which has also historically been a reality for most African Americans, is their inability to be absorbed and assimilated into the dominant tenor

of the culture. But as Leroi Jones states in *Blues People*, the separation of the Negro from White society was at once a curse and a boon:

*There was always a border past which the Negro could not go, whether musically or socially. The Negro could not ever become White and that was his strength: at some point, always, he could not participate in the dominant tenor of the White man's culture. It was at this juncture that he had to make use of other resources, whether African, subcultural, or hermetic. And it was the boundary, this no man's land, that provided the logic and beauty of his music.*<sup>1</sup>

The same is true for today's at-risk and challenged people: their curse is also a potential strength. The question is, How can we help them fully utilize that strength?

Conditions like slavery and at riskness can force creativity: this is a powerful potential which we should recognize and promote. When I speak of fanning an inner flame, I am talking about providing oxygen for a person's humanness, the creativity or light that is within us all. Creativity has the ability to transform instead of maintain, and that's what our society needs to do to grow out of its current malaise. As I see it, the first steps are to acknowledge and more deeply understand our own humanity: we can then begin to acknowledge it in others and move forward together, contributing to each others' growth.

This book explores the value and historical use of the arts in the U.S. as a means to rise above trauma and oppression. It also looks at the problem of a growing at-risk population and addresses the need for adults to embrace change in order to bring about a healthier society. We do not intend for our manuals, trainings and consultation to serve as technical instructions for adding another method to a current mélange of interventions. Rather, we hope to provide the stimulus and support for original thinking and initiate and

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1 Leroi Jones, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1963), 80.

facilitate an ongoing *process* by offering a path worth pursuing and by encouraging like-minded people to come together. This, we believe, is necessary in order to proactively implement effective interventions and solutions.

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Creative growth is a necessary ingredient to producing good communities—sharing the human spirit provides the cohesion.

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For those of you who have experience with the arts, we hope to offer some new perspectives and add to existing knowledge with the intention of strengthening and corroborating your work. We hope that those of you with little or no artistic experience will gain a tangible understanding of the creative arts' effectiveness from a therapeutic and educational standpoint. We also hope you will begin to feel the arts' capacity to lead you into yourself to deepen your satisfaction with life, which will in turn enable you to offer others with whom you work new ways of thinking and opportunities to learn more about who they are.

A key facet of our work is to help adults understand the value that the arts can potentially bring to life and realize that involvement with the arts is essential for all people, particularly those who are emotionally challenged or traumatized. We are well aware that this is new thinking to many. Perhaps this is due to the fact that while there are numerous studies documenting the arts' often dramatic effects on cognitive functions as related to intelligence or learning, there are relatively few studies that scientifically document their psychotherapeutic benefits. Actually, at this point in time there are only a few arts programs that combine the elements of long-term mentoring with a progressive fine arts curriculum, a combination that is essential in order to attain the level of effective therapeutic intervention and educational initiative.

After a lifetime of teaching and playing professionally, in 1994 I founded a non-profit arts organization, previously known as Youth Advancement Through Music & Art (YATMA) and now as Educational Mentoring through the Arts & Humanities (EMTAH), to

serve youth and broadly demonstrate these capabilities. During the 14 years we implemented the program our students often became so stimulated, involved, and successful that they were willing to transcend their difficulties and fears, express themselves, and learn who they were. Time and time again we saw the most beautiful dance of all—someone who was headed towards trouble turning and walking in the opposite direction.

*During my 21 years as a pediatrician I have never seen a youth program that turns around lives as well as this one does.—Dr. Eleanor Graham, Medical Director, Children and Teens Clinic, Harborview Medical Center, Seattle, WA.*

A 1999 evaluative study conducted by Education 21, Inc. (Troy, NY) confirmed our success, finding the program to be “impressive” and stating:

*Students showed a statistically significant decrease in overall negative behaviors . . . and highly significant improvements in positive attitudes and behaviors . . . the program is a persuasive intervention and has had a powerful and statistically significant impact on the students.*

Results of our ongoing internal evaluations also corroborated our experience: the success of our students made a conclusive statement about the value of the creative arts in general and of our approach in particular.

*His involvement [with private and ensemble instruction] has helped him to mature and focus on the important things . . . My son has literally turned his life around.*

—Mother

A very pragmatic reason to consider an artistic mentoring approach is that it can be a cost effective investment that not only benefits the student but also will yield much for the public good.

As Marion Edelman from the Children's Defense Fund states:

*Education costs far less than ignorance, preventive health care costs less than emergency rooms, preventive family services cost less than out-of-home care, and Head Start costs less than prisons.*

Ms. Edelman also provides the following economic considerations:

- The cost of providing a year of employment training for unemployed youths is \$2,492.
- The annual per child cost of a high quality after-school program is \$2,700.
- The average cost of ensuring that a low-income family has affordable housing is \$6,830.
- The average annual per child cost of Head Start is \$7,028.
- The annual per child cost for a high quality comprehensive full-day, early childhood education program is \$13,000.
- The average annual per prisoner cost is \$22,650.

It only makes sense to consider and utilize the creative arts as prevention and intervention as well as an integral part of general education. The creative arts are a vital dynamic of individual growth, human communication, and community building. In this book we explain the arts' potential to facilitate one's ability to communicate with one's self and others, positively channel emotions, use imagination, develop focus leading to relaxation, create relationships, contribute to community, and energize the learning process, among other values.

We also attempt to shift the paradigm from that of perceiving challenged people as problems or victims to seeing them as a symptom of and potential remedy for our society's underlying problem. In exploring their at-riskness as a public health issue, we view it as a communicable disease that's spreading in this country (hurt children

hurt children), an epidemic that's running rampant and will have serious long-term repercussions for America. We also offer a solution in which the adults take the lead so that we can, to paraphrase Gandhi, be the change we want to see.

We hope these readings will deepen your understanding of some of the issues we explore, stimulating you to think in new ways and perhaps even consider how you can promote the arts as a valuable enhancement to schools, institutions, and other educational and therapeutic environments. Ultimately, we hope to provide an avenue to support personal, creative growth, with or without the arts, as the cornerstone for good education and relationship.

Book Two, *Enlivening The Creative Spirit*, describes the teaching approach I have developed to redress the issues, conditions, and potentials we discuss here. If you would like to learn more about our turnkey system for program replication or our other materials and curricula, please contact us at [www.merge-education.com](http://www.merge-education.com).





In *Venturing Together*, Bill Rossi makes a compelling case for his groundbreaking educational approach based in creative strengths-based mentoring. His argument—aimed at educators, human service providers, parents, and the general public alike—is that only a dynamic, positive, and personal approach can ignite students’ creative spirit, the force that drives learning and personal growth. Working from the bottom up, his approach focuses on the students, develops their strengths and talents, and guides them to follow their intrinsic motivation to find their way through life.

Although *Venturing Together* focuses on mentoring through the arts, the principles it expounds can be used in approaching many subjects, and can empower students to develop personal understanding and build good relationships that will ultimately lead to positive community involvement and productive communities.

Mr. Rossi is a 1971 graduate of Boston’s Berklee College of Music and lifelong jazz pianist and educator. He has demonstrated the effectiveness of his approach in programs in Seattle, WA and Albany, NY, and is currently building a center for mentoring through the arts in Chester County, PA.

“Bill Rossi reminds us that young people cannot grow up complete unless art, music and creativity are part of their lives, and demonstrates how to bring out the best in students with specific instructional approaches encouraging mentoring, strength-based teaching, motivation, and putting students first. What he demonstrates is that effective education is . . . about encouraging young people’s innate love of learning.”

— James Harvey, Senior Fellow, Evans School of Public Affairs,  
University of Washington; co-author, *A Legacy of Learning*.

“This volume provides valuable, specific tools for anyone wanting to creatively enhance their ability to teach or mentor. This is a very effective approach, and should contribute to educational and social reform.”

— Katherine Gerbino, Ph.D., Assistant District  
Superintendent of Instruction, Capital Region BOCES, NY

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