

Janis Ian – Berklee College keynote April 9, 2010

When Pat Pattison first asked me to do a residency at Berklee, my reaction was one of complete disbelief. I left school in 10th grade and never looked back. I feel extremely under-qualified to offer advice, let alone words of wisdom. However, Pat is nothing if not persistent, and over the course of more than a decade, I got worn down.

Once I'd accepted, I thought to do a standard keynote, congratulating the students on their eventual entry into the big wide world, offering tips and suggestions to seniors and warnings to the rest. Yet the more I thought about it, the more I realized... I had nothing to offer in those areas that dozens of other speakers didn't also have at their fingertips. So I decided, instead, to speak about something I know intimately, something important to Berklee, and to you.

I am, in no particular order, a white, Jewish, brown-eyed, gay, female, American, vertically challenged artist... but of all these descriptions, *artist* is the only one I can lay claim to. The rest are accidents of birth; my artistry has been earned. So tonight, first and foremost, I speak to you as an artist.

You see, as corny as it sounds, I *believe* in art. I believe in the *power* of art. I believe it can heal the broken in spirit, give strength to the fragile, ease the weary soul. I believe art offers us emancipation, and salvation – even from ourselves.

To be born an artist is to be born an outlaw. To be born with the possibility of attaining what Nietzsche refers to as “the aristocracy of merit”, placing us *above* those who are merely aristocrats by birth, or by marriage. We are dangerous, we artists, because we accept nothing at face value, including our own worth. We question all systems, follow all problems to the source, and never stop searching.

It is no accident that Plato calls for the banishment of artists first. Art is, by its nature, seditious. It stands above the petty politics of its time, reaching beyond them toward a global understanding. It refuses the social morays of its era, daring instead to create its own justice and morality. It rises above nationality - religion – gender – color – above the thousand and one things we create, we human beings, to separate ourselves from one another, and from our Maker.

As artists, we create our own definitions - of right and of wrong, of perdition and grace. Sometimes for better, sometimes for worse, but always with a willing heart.

To be an artist is to simultaneously occupy heaven and hell. We're born with our talent. We can nurture it, protect it, strengthen it, make it our own, but we cannot take full credit for it. The talent itself is a grace, a gift.

And the talent we bear is ephemeral. There is not an artist alive who can honestly tell you where their inspiration comes from, let alone why it strikes sometimes, and disappears at others.

No singer can *guarantee* their voice will be at its best on any given night. No player can make that guarantee. In addition to the complex physical mechanisms we deal with –heat, humidity, fatigue - there are also the intangibles. Have I done too much business today, used up my concentration? Did I look in the mirror when I was changing and decide I hate my body? In the wrench of leaving, how much of my heart still remains at home, rather than where it belongs at this moment in time – here on the stage?

The biggest fear, of course, is that since our talent is so ephemeral, it will disappear. Dry up. Leave us naked, without its strength and its protection. It is because of this fear that we are

such jealous guardians of our superstitions, our rules and regulations, our illusory ability to control the world around us.

I myself have not had a hit record in decades; I refer to my standing in the entertainment industry as “semi-famous” – well-known enough to get work, but not famous enough to attract *too* much attention. Yet having had platinum records in pretty much every Western country in the world, and toured behind all of them, I remember the anxiety and terror success brings. It’s easy, as an artist who is also a commodity – and make no mistake, we *are* commodities. We sell soap. Our only edge is to make our soap just a little bit more attractive to the buyer than the next fellow’s.

It’s easy, as a commodity, to become overwhelmed with the amount of people pressing you for decisions, impinging on your time. Odetta told me when I was sixteen years old – “Never forget, they work for *you*. You do not work for *them*.” Yet even my cherished Odetta told me months before she died that she had not been able to take her own advice to heart. We artists are too easily scared for that.

We are surrounded by people who earn their livings through us. My US booking agents, mildly interested in planning my career, but much more interested in paying their bills, would have me take every show they offer. My foreign booking agents can’t understand why I don’t want to spend a year or two abroad. My recording affiliates would have me spend most of my time in their territories, helping them sell CD’s. My co-writers want me home to write more songs with them, my business managers want me to make as much money as possible so I’m secure in my old age, and my partner would just like to see me once in a while.

It is easy to become overwhelmed. That’s when you start saying “No” to everything and everyone, because “No” feels like the only control you have over your life anymore. Or the only *sense* of control.

This is not to excuse the wretched excesses of some of my fellow performers. I toured with an American artist who routinely demands that a barber chair be brought in for her to wear during makeup, even if it means four people have to hand-carry it up 3 flights of stairs in an old theater. I’ve watched her show up with 15 or 20 outfits, all of which had to be pressed and hung, the shoes that went with each lined up neatly in front, so she could choose the single one she’d wear at the last minute.

I toured Australia right after Diana Ross had been through the same venues. It was appalling to see how frightened the staff were when I arrived at each location, not daring to meet my eyes, trembling when I tried to shake their hands. Abuse of power is just that – abuse.

The worst example I ever saw was when I was working with the great Irish promoter, Jim Aiken. I’d invited his wife backstage for two entire tours, which Jim always politely refused. The third tour, she finally came to meet me. She was absolutely lovely, and we had a nice chat, during which I apologized for the amount of time Jim was spending away from home in order to be on tour with me.

When she left, I asked Jim why it had taken so long. His response was that he’d worked with an American female artist his wife had much admired years before, so he’d brought his wife backstage to meet her. The artist was icily polite, then asked to see Jim alone – at which point she told him in no uncertain terms that he was *never* to bring his wife *anywhere* near her again, because, as she said, “While I’m on tour with you, *I’m* the only woman in your life!!!”

I do not excuse that behavior. I only seek to explain some small part of it, and to warn you away from it. When you are in the power position, such abuse is unconscionable.

As you grow, and go out into the world, remember that we, as commodities, are surrounded by people in whose interest it is to keep us childlike. Childish. Spoiled. Ignorant. To surround us with people who cater to our every whim, until eventually we are deceived into thinking we are somehow more important, more special, than everyone else – that, having done *nothing* to earn it, we still merit that kind of consideration.

In my own experience, these are rarely the *great* artists. Because a great artist *knows* he or she is great – and also knows that greatness demands humility. A great artist stands humbled before the scope of their own talent.

But... I digress. As I noted, we live, we artists live in a state of fear. Our talent will desert us. Our managers will leave us. Our booking agents will dismiss us. Our record companies will fire us. Everyone will abandon us, and there'll be nothing – *nothing* – left. I know it doesn't look like that from the outside, but believe me, that's what it is. And for some of us, that fear turns us into monsters.

Still... concurrent with the hell of it, there is the heaven.

A friend of mine once asked what it was like for me, when I was in the middle of a song or a project. She said I seemed *so* concentrated in those moments that the world could fall apart around me, and I wouldn't take notice until the work was finished.

It's true. When I'm in the middle of something creative – be it a writing a song, giving a show, singing a vocal in the studio – I am as fully *there* as possible. Buddhists speak of “Being in the moment”. At those times, there is only *that* moment, *that* commitment, *that* piece of work. *Nothing* else matters.

The closest I can get to politely describing it, if you've never been there, is to say that that it's like being on the back of a runaway horse, without saddle, reins, or bridle. There's the unbelievable exhilaration of the ride, watching the universe stream past at light speed, feeling the rise and fall of the flanks beneath your hips, having to pay 100% attention 100% of the time as you struggle desperately to stay on. Knowing that if you *do* manage to stay on the horse... when the ride is over, you'll feel like you've conquered the world.

That's how I would politely describe it.

If I were among friends, I would just say “It's better than the best sex you can imagine. Just as exhausting, and just as exciting.”

Anyone who lives with a dedicated artist knows that they can never truly be a wife or husband to that artist – they'll always be the mistress. Because art, like it or not, is all-consuming. And that part should transcend ego, pettiness, the “more me is *always* a good thing” that we artists are so fond of employing.

As an artist I believe it is my job to try and make sense of chaos. To speak the unspeakable, to reveal what is hidden, to make sure *no one forgets their history*. Because my lineage, as an artist, doesn't begin with Western culture, or the rise of a twelve tone scale! My lineage goes back to the first caveman who made a *story* out of the day's hunt, or finger-painted a crude picture of it on the rock walls of his home.

I try to live a life congruent with my vision of what an artist is. I am all too aware that I stand upon the bones of those who went before me. If we allow our lives, as artists, to become

corrupted, until we care more for ourselves than we care for the work... well, then. We forget the bones. And the work, in turn, forgets us.

It is hard, in this increasingly fragmented world, to maintain the concentration required for our work. The level of energy that refuses to allow a bad show, that always has a smile for the patiently-waiting fan. It's hard. And that's not just true of artists; it's true of all of us.

But we are lucky, we artists, because we are part of the theatre, and the theatre makes us strong. The theatre is ritual. The theatre is tradition. If we didn't have ritual and tradition in our daily lives, we'd fall apart at the seams. Think about the amount of ritual you go through every day... Pass somebody in the street and say – “Hello, how are you?” Shake hands with your right, to show you're not holding a sword in it. Place a napkin in your life to avoid spilling food all over your host's floor.

Life is made up of thousands of tiny rituals, and the rituals help to define us. Rituals are part of what separate us from the animals, because animals have unthinking rituals. You can't even call them rituals, they're just instinct.

The theatre has its own rituals. Never say “*good luck*”, because that's tempting the fates – we say “*break a leg*” instead, because that way, if the gods overhear, maybe they'll decide *not* to give us what we ask for. We don't whistle backstage, just in case someone mistakes it for a signal to drop the scaffolding on your head.

Theatre is ritual. And ritual is *magic*.

At the end of the day, that is what we artists do.

We make magic.

We are alchemists of the soul.

We take nothing, thin air, and we turn it into gold. We transmute the ordinary happenstance of life into gold, into diamonds, into emeralds – and make it visible. *Here's a song about your life. Here's a painting of your world. Here's play, here's a vision, here's a moment to grab hold of and cherish.*

Our great strength, and our great privilege, is to hold on to the dreams of those around us. To speak for the silent. To give voice to the voiceless. To grasp the longing, the yearning, of those who cannot do so for themselves. It is our job to seize their hopes and dreams, their triumphs and their failures – to grab them in our hands and hold their hearts safe..

This is alchemy at its best. To transform the hopes and fears of a world To hold a mirror up to their eyes, and let them see – not just who they *think* they are – but who they *truly* are.

To offer them redemption, through the essence of truth.

That is what it is to be an artist, in its highest sense. To *serve*. To live *in service to your gift*.

So that, for the non-artist, there is someone to bring order out of chaos. When the world collides with itself – when their *own* world collides with itself – when all the balls they've been juggling in the air suddenly land on their heads... when life is *so* hard that they forget they even knew *how to dream*... we are there. We are there to come forward, hold out our arms, and say “Here. Here are your dreams. I've kept them safe for you.”

We are there, from cradle to grave. We sing them into this world, and we sing them out. We are their past, and we are their future. We are the best that humanity has to offer. *That is our job.*

There's a Zen parable that sums up my feelings about art. Years ago, a noted young painter went to a Zen master and requested training, hoping to leap from being a good artist to a great one, with all the wealth and notoriety that entailed.

Without a word, the master walked him to a nearby creek and handed him a fishing pole. The boy soon landed a fish, which the master removed from the hook and tucked into the folds of his robe.

He walked our young painter to a room on the grounds, placed the fish on a table, indicated a pile of paper, brushes, and ink, and said his first and only words: "Draw the fish".

The young artist watched as his master left, and then proceeded to paint a *stunning* picture of the fish – every drop of water shining, every scale in place. And when he was satisfied, he brought it to the master, who glanced at it, then ripped it in half. Dropping the pieces to the floor, he smiled, bowed, and said "Draw it again tomorrow."

The next day the young painter arrived, drew the fish, brought it to the master, and watched as the same thing happened. For six months he drew the fish every day, and for six months the master threw away his drawings.

The fish began to rot. The flesh fell from the bones. At times the stench was so bad that the young man painted with a handkerchief over his face to keep from gagging. He became demoralized, outraged at the futility of his effort. Yet he persisted, through the maggots, through the creeping flesh, though his own stomach rebelled and his eyes could barely stand to look any longer. Until one day, only bones remained.

Exhausted by his efforts, confused by the \ silence of his master, the young painter began to cry. Tears fell from his eyes onto the paper, and he had to take several new sheets before he could begin. Wiping his eyes on a sleeve, he watched as a shaft of sunlight lit upon the skeleton that had so recently housed life. Through the water of his tears, the bones were magnified, bigger than real, an entity unto themselves.

And at that moment, his relationship to the fish-that-had-been changed completely. Instead of painting in the hope of gaining fame, or fortune, he began to paint from his hopelessness, his fatigue, his confusion. He began to try and make sense of the chaos that had trapped him in a small room with only a carcass for company. He began to paint the fish *from the inside out* -- first the bone, then the muscle, and finally, the flesh. The fish came alive under his hands – and when he brought it to his master, the master smiled and said "Now, you are an artist. I can teach you no more."

I have always tried to draw the fish from the inside out, and to live my life accordingly. Yet no matter how hard I try, that story tells it more eloquently than I ever could.