

2009 TCG National Conference
Jeanette Winterson Pre-Conference Keynote Address
ACTivate Change
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TERESA EYRING: Now I would like to introduce our keynote speaker, Jeanette Winterson. Jeanette was born in Manchester, England, and raised by adoptive parents. She was on track to becoming a Pentecostal Christian missionary, evangelizing and writing sermons by the age of six. At age 16 she left home and supported herself while pursuing an education at Accrington and Rossendale College, and ultimately earning her bachelor's degree in English Literature at St. Catherine's College, Oxford. At the age of 24 she published her first novel, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, which won the 1985 Whitbread Prize for a first novel. The television adaptation by Winterson won the BAFTA Award for best drama in 1990. Her novels explore the boundaries of physicality and the imagination, gender polarities and sexual identities, and have won several literary awards, including the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize and the EM Forster Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Winterson's 2002 stage adaptation of her novel *The PowerBook* opened at the Royal National Theatre, London, directed by Deborah Warner, and starring Fiona Shaw, Saffron Burroughs and Pauline Lynch. She frequently writes and speaks about the importance and power of the arts in society, most notably in her book of essays, *Art Objects*. She was awarded the Order of the British Empire in 2006 for services to literature. And we are thrilled to have her with us today to talk about the importance of art in a global society. Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Jeanette Winterson.

JEANETTE WINTERSON: Thanks very much. Thank you.

So they said to me, everybody will be sitting in the front. There will be nobody spread around the back of the theatre. No, that's fine. That's why I've come down here. And I'm sure you'll all agree with me that the worst thing you can do is to stick a lectern in front of you, so I've just come as I am now, because naked is the best disguise. But I'm going to keep some of my clothes on.

Because we're short on time, I'm going to go straight into this. Thank you for inviting me. I'm very glad to be here. I've been involved in theatre in one way or another—because I think a gospel tent is pretty theatrical—for most of my life. And for me as a human being, as a writer, as a person, it's art that has made all the difference—and not from a place of privilege, but really from a place of deprivation. So I always feel very confident to speak in this area, because nobody can turn around and say, "Well, it was fine for you," because it really wasn't.

I want to start with a story. Because a story is where everything does start—creation stories, life stories, love stories, stories of war, stories of loss, stories we remember, and the stories we try to forget...

Even the most hard-headed realist, the materialist, the one who likes a clean line between what he or she calls real life and invention, can't help telling a story. We meet someone in the street, and straight away, the smallest exchange becomes a narrative; story of my day, story of how I feel, story I just heard on breaking news, and the mesh of that with the strands of my own life.

Humans didn't create language to say "Honey, can you pass me the axe?" or "Where's the nearest mammoth?" No, we created and evolved our languages so that we could express, to ourselves and to one another, our most complex ideas and our deepest feelings.

It is cause for concern that saturation bombing media babble is reducing language to a basic kit of information exchange. The democratization of language—that we are all supposed to be able to understand everything all of the time—is not a democracy at all, because it leaves educated privileged people with a wide and generous language, pulsing with life and color, and it leaves the rest to gabble along with the anaemic washed-out clichés of soap opera and lifestyle magazines.

It's not surprising then that street argot and the micro-languages of micro-communities, with their own vocabularies and expressions, are so attractive, especially to young people; the creative push to express isn't served by mainstream media, and the fallout is that kids who really want to say something—about themselves and their world—can't find a reliable language. I mean, yes, we need to educate better, but we also need to stop pretending that this phoney lowest level of culture is democratic. Because it's not....

And of course this is a problem for the arts—because literature and theatre really suffer when there is a language barrier. Theatre is a confrontation—a confrontation of assumption, of prejudice and of paralysed feeling, but not only through its content or its the subject matter; it is the *language* playwrights use, the language poets use, the language writers use, that should confront us too. Why? Because it's the clichés that cause the trouble. If the language is clichéd the thought will be too. And even if the language avoids cliché, but is too simplistic, then the thought is reduced.

If you don't believe me, here's an experiment you can try. Take a language you learned at school, or one you can get by in—I don't know, Spanish or French—and then try and frame a modest but serious thought—one with sub-clauses and more than one idea—you know, the sort of thing George Bush never managed. And the fact is, it's a struggle because either we modify the complexity of the original, or we turn to similes: It's "like" this, or it's "like" that. Or worst of all, "It's like, really, really yeah like y'know, yeah? It's like that."

But if things are always "like," they cannot be new. To think and feel freely we need more than "like." We need language.

Look, I don't mean we should be using incomprehensible jargon of the kind academics adore. I mean that language needs to be vibrant and surprising if it wants to get across a meaning and ideas that are beyond the obvious—and if art isn't getting beyond the obvious, then it isn't art.

The language of theatre, of poetry, of literature, is always, to an extent, an invented language; and this is where it splits from TV and most movies, where the visuals can cover for, or compensate for banality of language, or sometimes curve away from the necessity of language altogether.

Theatre can't do that; the best theatre-work is a pleasurable reading experience as well as a total theatrical experience. If I read *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, if I read *The Crucible*, if I read *Streetcar*, if I read *Angels in America*, if I read *Glengarry Glen Ross*, then I get a kick from the text separate to the thrill of the show. That's how it should be—there's no need to apologise for good writing. And if you don't get a kick

from the text, don't put the thing on the stage. Language is not an optional extra—it is central to any creative process where language is present at all.

This invented language I'm talking about is tied to, but not dependent on, the language that is around us. The point of good writing is to use words freshly, without cliché, without opting for sentimentality when we need emotion, without resorting to false emotion when we need clarity of thought.

Theatre writing, because it's dialogue, offers a unique chance to put into our mouths the things that we would like to say.

Now you'll have picked up that wasn't, "the things that we would like to hear."

Art is challenging, that's its nature. It tells the truth, the many truths, the difficult truths, the buried and submerged truths, and truth is not an easy thing to hear. A play may not be what we want to hear—or it may be a point of view with which we violently disagree. I am not offering up art as an oracle, a pristine place of good; I'm saying that any writer, director, actor, worth the calling will want to be in a place of *authenticity*. And in a world of spin and shabby lies, such a place of authenticity is very valuable to all of us.

But it may be uncomfortable, and it may not be what we want to hear—but, it may be what we want to say. That profound sense of relief when we actually say what we actually mean and find the words to fit the thought. You know that feeling? The creative match of thought and feeling with its verbal equivalent is both relief and exhilaration. Give that match to a director and an actor, and what's in the mouth will gesture into face and body.

Because language begins in the mouth before it hits the page, and the great thing about theatre is that it goes back into the mouth, is spoken—not just for us, but by the transference that happens in theatre, spoken by us. And if we hate what we are hearing, if we have the physical sensation that we want to spit it out—then that's a direct hit.

Remember that line at the end of Shakespeare's *King Lear*—"Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say..."

This authenticity is so important. You know there are a lot of people in the arts, and certainly in theatre, who care more about political correctness or crowd-pleasing or who are crippled with anxieties about being either relevant enough or socially aware enough, so that everything they do is a response to, and not a creating of.

And that's an important difference. Sure, you can create something in response to—that's what Picasso did with *Guernica*; it's what John Adams just did with his new opera about the Manhattan Project, *Doctor Atomic*—but the creative part is essential—and eventually, given enough time, it is the creativity, and not the response, that lasts.

What I mean to say is that art—the real thing—goes on being relevant in our lives long after any contemporary relevance or response is over and done with. Nobody goes to Shakespeare to find out about life in Elizabethan England; we go to Shakespeare to find out about ourselves now—yet he was one of the most intensely engaged and responsive human beings to his own time and place—but what's lasted is the creativity of his response—not the response itself.

And this is a crucial distinction—and one that every theatre fundraiser and arts politico and arts journalist needs to keep at the forefront of their minds at all times. We are here to do creative work—to make something happen in the heart and the head—and sometimes that will target whatever is going on in the world—and sometimes there will

be other territory to explore. The content of a play, its subject matter, is only part of the story, and cannot, by itself, determine whether a piece of work is good or bad, true or false, whether it will last or whether it won't.

Especially now, when we are in a big mess socially and economically, we shouldn't be swayed by those who call art a luxury and who say that, in times like these, if art's got to be funded at all, well, it must be...well, it must be.... You know as well as I do the kind of spaghetti people talk. I mean, they never were that comfortable with art, and a recession is a good time to get rid of it, right?

Okay, so let's talk about art and economic meltdown. I said we would start with a story....

Do you remember Midas? He's the one who loved gold so much that he wished that everything he touched could turn into gold.

So at first it was fantastic—that old garden chair, those tin plates, that worthless heap of boxes, his bed, his bath, his pots and pans—it was better than living at Trump Towers.

And then he sat down and had a servant pour him a celebratory glass of champagne in his newly golden goblet—and he raised it to his lips, and, oh my, he got a great solid glug of gold. So he sat like a baby while the servants fed and watered him. And then he bent down to stroke his hunting dog, and suddenly he had a life-size Jeff Koons on his hands. He swung up onto his horse, and in the second of touch and rear, his mount became a triumphal monument, glittering and priceless, but useless if what you wanted to do was to ride into the hills.

Soon he couldn't touch a thing—and Midas became the world's most expensive leper. He was his own contamination unit, his own isolation ward. No one wanted to go near him.

He had a garden of golden flowers, and his lake was a golden pond. People stayed away. He was alone.

Then one day his little girl, who had been away, came running back into the palace, delighting at the golden flowers and golden birds—she thought it was a game just for her. "Papa, Papa," she shouted, jumping into his arms, and there she was, lifeless, perfect, truly his golden girl.

It was time for Midas to rethink a few values.

So here we are, and we finally realized the old dream of the alchemists—to turn everything—*everything*—into gold—all of the planet and all of its peoples into a machine for making money.

What does it matter if the Poles melt, as long as we get the oil out? What does it matter if we wreck the water table in Africa, and cause the Gobi desert to advance 50 miles a year? What does it matter if we destroy the ozone layer, and wipe out species so fast we can't even be sure what they were? What does it matter if Indian children are quarrying stone instead of going to school, or if Chinese women are locked in factories that sometimes burn down—after all they are making toys for our kids, and that's cute. Global warming—yeah, it's a problem. Did that bank just collapse? This sub-prime thing could ruin our profits.

Before the collapse, Noam Chomsky was talking about how there's a global experiment going on right now, and we don't really know the outcome. How many people can you marginalize in the world, or make war on them, steal their resources, use

them as cheap labor, ignore their rights, their nationhood, without the whole thing tipping into chaos? See, we have to keep turning in these fabulous profits—we had to keep turning the whole world into gold....

But it went spectacularly wrong.

What can art do about it? How can we be asking for money for theatre and opera and galleries and poets and acting workshops and conferences like this one, when it will take generations just to pay off the frauds of men like Bernie Madoff?

The question—what about art in a recession?—is a false one, because hiding underneath the question, like a smug toad, is the assumption that art of any kind is about time and money to spare. When there isn't time and money to spare, forget it.

I have been called a self-indulgent elitist by well-fed businessmen and skinny angry political activists alike. Because my offence has been to say that the creative life is central to all life—any life, your life, my life, a slum kid's life, an urban ghetto life, a politician's life, a life with or without money. The life of the planet, and us as its tenants.

It's a big claim—but here's how it works.

I believe that there is a creative continuum that belongs to us all—something that is a birthright, something that is part of our natural human democracy.

And debates about art, funding of art, elitism of art, value to society of art, art as a minority interest, miss the fundamental truth that while there are different doses and dilutions of creativity—and some people's creativity is much stronger than others—and they are usually the artists of their generation—we are all on the creative continuum—and we all need creative expression. To deny that, to ration it, or to wilfully suppress it dams up the force of our emotional and spiritual expression and leads kids and adults alike towards violence or any quick fix that fills the empty space where creativity belongs.

You don't have to take my word for it—look at the evidence right in front of you....

As soon as kids have any motor control, they want to paint, get out the building blocks, sing songs, listen to stories, act out little dramas, and by the time they are four or five, they are making up their own stories, painting scenes from their own imaginations, grabbing an instrument, if they can get one, and best of all they don't even have to refuse the separation between their imaginative world and the so-called real world, because they don't even recognize that such a separation exists. We call all this play, fantasy, kid stuff, part of growing up, and we don't like it if it goes on too long. But why should spontaneous creativity, and the deep absorbing pleasure of the imaginative world be something we want to grow out of? The kids have got it right—just as in the study of indigenous peoples across the globe, we find play and invention at the heart of the cultural life of the tribe.

Every one of us is born with a brain that loves to be creative, and a brain that responds to creativity in others. Poetry and music, painting, dance, theatre, telling stories, these are not things that have been imposed upon us—they are mediums of expression that we have invented from our earliest times on this planet. They are not some invention of a middle-class academic elite with nothing to do on a wet Sunday afternoon.

When we were scraping a living from the backbreaking clay we were telling stories, we were dancing. Poetry began as a way of passing down orally, by memory,

important things about a clan, a tribe, a family, a victory, a defeat, a loss, a migration. In those days record-keeping was an art, not an act of administration.

Art is earlier than history—in a sense, art is what allowed history to happen. Without a record, those who come later cannot know, and from our cave paintings, our tapestries, our oral and written legends and myths, we have left a record of our survival, a record of who we are.

But art is much more than documentary—it's also the inventive, imaginative, inspirational part of us, the marvellous thing that we are. Look at the temple at Angkor Wat, look at the cathedral at Chartres. Look at everything we made without a machine tool in sight, look at our absurd delight in making a thing as beautiful and expressive as it could be, when the labor was vast and difficult, when a man knew he would not live to see his work completed, that his son, or other men would take over. Why did we decide we wanted Gregorian chants, choirs, musical instruments?

Think back to a place where there is no running water, no indoor heating, where food must be grown locally, or you starve, where there are no washing machines, where at most you can travel 20 miles in day, where operations happen without anaesthetic, where the mortality rate is 40 percent (sounds like England), and where, even so, someone sits down to write a poem, to spend hours making a harpsichord or a flute or a violin, where we gather in a unheated room to listen to music. Where the men and women working in the fields sing. Where a travelling show on a wagon was just something people who were working from dawn till dusk wanted to do, wanted to see.... Look at the evidence—then tell me that art is elitist, unnecessary, an imposition.

Art is an expression of our humanness—both in the making of it and in our participation in it, we are claiming ourselves back from the machine, back from the exploitation of others, back from the modern message that happiness depends on money and power. Back from the apathetic inertia that there is nothing we can do except work and go shopping.

The creative life celebrates ourselves in big and in little. From the child's drawing to the Jasper Johns, from Mozart to the woman singing as she cleans the windows, from the kid practising the piano to Glen Gould playing Bach, us here today, all of this is part of the creative continuum, part of what life is. This is not ornament, surplus, extra, this is the beating heart of what it means to be a human being. This is a record of who we are.

So I'm saying that art belongs to all of us, and we have to fight for that right, and argue passionately against the lie that art is a luxury, and against the falsehood that it is elitist, and against the cynicism that art can do nothing to change our world.

It can, it does, it is.

Well, how?

We've already looked at the misjudgement that assumes that a piece of theatre or a novel or whatever has to be actively engaged with now in order to have an effect—that's just not true.

Susan Sontag said that a work of art is not just *about* something—it *is* something. The is-ness of art is a steadying force in a crazy world. Because art, by its nature, is a different value system. Look, you can't contract it out, ship the plant to Korea, find someone who will do it cheaper, faster, in a another color, cancel the deal if it isn't ready by tomorrow morning—throw it away when you are tired of it—just go out and buy another.

In a throw-away culture of the new new thing, art lives in a permanent present—you can hang a Hockney next to a Holbein—you can go see Schiller's *Mary Stuart* playing off Broadway right now, and the next night pick up August Wilson, and the pieces will enrich each other—because the creative continuum works across time too, and whatever was real when it was made, continues to be real now. This is such a relief in the land of the wannabe and the phoney.

So making time for art—saying let's read a poem, let's go to the theatre, is not about spare time, it is about real time—time when you take your hand off the 24/7 panic button, slow the heart rate, and connect with vital energies that will replace what our life depletes.

And while this is pretty good therapy, it is something deeper too, because art is always on the side of the inner life—recognizing, existing by, the fact that life has an inside as well as an outside, and that our inner life is just as important as getting and spending, as power and display.

When our inner life is sound, we can think freely, because we are less afraid, because we have our own values, and are no longer reliant on the values of others. And when I am provoked into thinking or rethinking—I am also provoked into feeling. This is so important. We need to feel, and to feel deeply, not find ourselves in separations of heart and head.

The ancient Greeks knew that going to the theatre was a place of catharsis, a place where we could experience emotion of every kind, but contained for us, in a way that gives us both the experience and the meaning, that deepens our emotional understanding, our capacity to find the connections, not get lost among the separations.

So much of our world depends on separations—we separate our politics from its effects, we separate our economy from its consequences, we separate our private and our personal lives, we separate profit from its impact on people. And then, we live like this and get angry when our kids do the same. We separate our own morality—or lack of it—from the public malaise that we deplore.

We like little boxes—this here, that somewhere else—but the fact is that everything is connected—life at every level, at every manifestation, is a web of relationship.

The moon affects the tides, and holds the earth steady in her gravitational force. The rainforest affects the temperature at the poles. How I behave in England has meaning for someone in Africa. How you treat me will impact on how I treat others. What I read influences my values. What I risk reveals what I value.

In a world of separations, art connects—and it connects us to ourselves, our past, to other people, to the planet. If you think of a work of art as anything that has meant something to you, and let it rest in your mind for a moment. You become aware that one of the things it did was to make a join, to bring things together, to allow your own mind to re-form in a different way. Sometimes we say, "I'd never thought of it like that." Or, "I'd never felt like that," or "that made me laugh," or "that made me cry."

These emotions, these understandings, these realizations occur when what was split-off is brought back together again. Art's business is to take all kinds of disparate elements and fuse them into new wholes; this isn't an imposition, art is not colonialism, it is a revelation, a sense of things appearing as they are.

And I believe that one of the reasons that we go back and back to art, why we don't give up on it, why we keep wanting it, keep making it, is because art is the best representation we have of life's intrinsic quality—that everything is connected. This connection gives the self a chance to be a whole.

Do you remember that bit of William Carlos Williams? “It's hard to get the news from poems but men die miserably every day for lack of what is found there.”

So when we start to make connections—using our heart as well as our head, using our gut as well as our common sense, we start to imagine new possibilities. And whatever we can imagine we can bring into being.

The way we live now, the way we have ordered society, is not the only way, and while art is not there to do the job of politics, art is there to remind us, that creativity is at the core of living well, of thinking well, of finding the energy for change.

A lot of us feel exhausted, but art is a kind of mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, awakening in us desires and truths and understandings that have been buried or lost under our accumulating emergencies, the acute crisis of modern life.

We need to deal with the acutes as they need to be dealt with because a wound needs bandages, a hungry child needs food, crops need water, toxic waste needs cleaning, toxic debt needs a fiscal solution—but underneath the acutes is the way we got here—the chronic crisis of our lives.

The imaginative engagement that art makes possible—rewiring the damaged connections, making new connections, directly addresses the chronic crisis of ourselves.

As we reconnect with our own creativity, our own relationship to life, we begin to change, and as we change, we start to change our immediate world, and so on out into the world as wide as it is.

So it seems to me if we say that art is a luxury, we're saying that change is a luxury. I'd rather say that art, like change, is essential. And never more so than now.

Thank you.

We're running late, and it's our first session, but that's how the day's going to be. But I think we ought to try to take questions, so if there's anything you're burning to say—otherwise you can go and burn somewhere else I guess, and we can move on. And if you raise your hand, I will repeat the question just to make sure everyone can hear. I think I can see you. The house lights are coming up.

You're Americans. You're used to being able to talk. It's like being in England where nobody says anything for about three years.

AUDIENCE: I just have a commentary on your talk. I'm from Colombia, a country in South America, for those of you who don't know. And as many of you know we have a violent history, and we have had an internal war for the last 50 years. And recently there were several surveys done, worldwide, asking and trying to find out who are the happiest people in the world. And it seems Colombians are at the top of the list. And I always wonder, wow, this is amazing. And my explanation for it is art, and particularly music. If you go to Colombia, people are dancing all the time; there's music being played all the time; people sing all the time. And I think that's how people get through their day in a sometimes very difficult reality. So I just want to give that example of how art is vital when the situation becomes quite rough.

WINTERSON: You're absolutely right. We've gotten quite soft in the West over the past 50 years or so. We've forgotten and become cynical. And we really did believe this extraordinary story that it was all about money and power. And now as that begins to peel away, people are left with absolutely nothing: No values, no interests, no sense of themselves as human beings. And of course that's where art's going to come back big time. It's got a huge job to do. But I think you're absolutely right. It's that creative continuum; it's art at whatever level. You know, it doesn't always have to happen in a theatre. It has to happen in a person's own life, at whatever level is right for him or her, and that does make a huge difference.

You know, there's just been a study done by the World Health Organization on the place in France where they make foie gras and cognac. Everybody lives to at least 93, and that's quite young to die. The cholesterol levels are all enormous, but no one has any heart attacks. The Americans are going crazy just trying to suppress this report because they just cannot bear it. Everything is wrong about these people—everything they eat, everything they do, which is just drink cognac and foie gras all day. They all smoke unfiltered cigarettes. But they are all happy—and they say in the rituals, the whole ritual of farming, it's not just that they make foie gras and cognac, is that they really are—in the singing and dancing and painting sunflowers—they really are a happy people. And this is deeply, deeply distressing for the unhappy people in the Western world.

But I'm optimistic. I think this crisis, especially in this country with the change in administration, will really shift things, and we're going to get out of the lies and the spin and something closer to the truth of being human.

AUDIENCE: What part—this is a personal question, and if you don't want to answer it, please don't. I'd like to know what part of your religious background you still embrace, if any, and how that affects your work.

WINTERSON: Well, fortunately, I think God is religion-proof. I think—I can't put a name or a shape to God in that sense. The Jews had it right when they thought of him as Yahweh, the thing that could not be described or made into any sort of statue or graven image. That was a good idea. Because the more you try to pin the thing down, the more impossible it becomes. Look, I don't know what's out there or in here any more than you do. But I think some sense of a bigger life, of a spiritual life, is very good both for creativity and for personal mental health. It doesn't mean you have to go to church. It doesn't mean you need to worship any particular god. But it does mean you have to have a sense of something more than this small space that we occupy. So that's there. I think also what's there is what you might call some understanding of grace and some understanding of faith, that there are things worth believing in even if you're not always able to explain them. There are things which could be called miracles, if that wasn't an old-fashioned word. Things happen in life which are really not that straightforward, they're not caused, and they change the way you think about things; they change who you are. So all of that is still there for me. You know, I was brought up in a completely bonkers environment. We did have a gospel tent, and I spent most of my time in the seaside towns of north England trying to persuade people to give their lives to Jesus. But the real problem is that a lot of them did. I feel responsible. It's like making vampires, isn't it? Because then they go out and make more! And somewhere it's all your fault. But

it was a very reductive religion. Religion is often very reductive—it's about what you can't do, who you can't be, what you're not, instead of all the things that you could be and that you might be and that you are. And I'm sure if there is a god, whoever that god is, he or she, the divine presence is not reductive. I really don't think—God could care less who you get in bed with. I mean, what a thing to be worried about, if you created the whole universe. And you're looking down and saying, "Oh, look, there's two girls in bed. I can't take it." So, it just didn't fit the picture to me. It made everything, this huge vastness—and then the thing that's really bugging you is.... No. Next question.

AUDIENCE: I don't really have a question, but I have what I would call a corroborative story to what you were speaking about. And some of you here may have heard this before. Is Dijana here? Hi, so you'll tell me if I get it right. This is something I heard a number of years ago, is that during the NATO bombing of Belgrade in—'99 was it? 1999, I think. The bombing went on for 88 days, I believe. There was a curfew imposed, a strict curfew. And yet it was found that a rather large number of people were defying the curfew and leaving their houses at great risk of being shot. And guess where they went? They went to the theatres, with windows covered with sheets and blankets, and by candlelight, actors continued to perform. And when these people were asked why they took such great risk, their response was that it was the only way in the midst of all this chaos we could maintain some sense of sanity. And this story has stuck with me as a prime example of I think what theatre or art should always be, and what we often forget, which is a matter of life and death.

WINTERSON: I love that story. I'd never heard that, so thank you for telling me. It is true. I've got a Jewish friend who I love—a lot of my friends are Jewish—and she says to me, "Listen, you're going through life carrying two bags. One's time and money, and the other is the life-and-death struggle. And you've got to know which bag your problem is in." Which is kind of great. And I think art really is the life-and-death struggle. And it's absolutely serious. It's full of play and creativity, but it is a serious place. And we're lucky because it's the place that we inhabit. It's an atmosphere as well as a place, and that's why it's our duty to really make sense of that for other people and be willing to fight for it—and never, never, never, never, please, apologize for this thing which is at the center of life no matter what anyone else says.

I think we have to go, haven't we? Because you all have to have coffee, right? I've got five more minutes! Ooh! Okay. Anymore questions?

AUDIENCE: I loved your novel *Sexing the Cherry*, by the way. I want to ask you—and this is sort of a half-formed question—but I want to ask you about bad art. Because unfortunately not every play is *King Lear*, and we are all theatre professionals here. I'm sure we've all sat through productions where, at the end, we said, "Wow, I'm two hours older." And I guess is the act more important than the result? Because I agree with everything you said. Is it fair to inject sort of a critical eye into what you've said at this point? I'm sorry I'm not being terribly articulate.

WINTERSON: No, you're not.

AUDIENCE: But if you could still say something interesting.

WINTERSON: I'll tell you what it is. You have a great poet called Muriel Rukeyser. I think she's really underestimated, a '50s poet. She was really a mentor to Adrienne Rich. Wonderful. She's got an interesting essay about art where she says, look, there's no such thing as good art or bad art; there's either art or not art. It's like talking about good red or bad red. It's not a distinction. And I think she's completely right. Take a look at her stuff. You can get *Muriel Rukeyser: A Reader*. The essay is really good. I'm not sure if it's printed separately. There isn't. There are separate universes. There is this thing called art and it does exist, and there's no point spending hours saying if it does or doesn't, because it does. But there's also stuff that really isn't it. We all know that. There's tons of stuff that isn't it. I'm not interested in talking about that. I never do, because it's just beneath notice. Whenever I talk about art, I mean the real stuff, the stuff that lasts. And a very good test of art is the one we were discussing—that it goes on speaking to us long after any contemporary relevance is dead. That's why we go back into museums. That's why things that are 400 years old or 4,000 years old still happen now in our imaginations—because it was made real, it stays real. It doesn't disappear. If it wasn't real, it can be the most topical thing on the planet, but not real, and it will be gone in 10 or 15 years. Nobody will remember it. I don't think you should worry too much about that, you know. There's always going to be bad stuff. The thing is to expose ourselves to as much stuff as possible. And partly by that wide vision that we take with us in the theatre or when we're reading books, whatever we're doing, gives us a way of developing our own critical faculties of knowing the difference. And between what's the real thing, and what's not the thing at all. You can't talk about good and bad. Is this the real thing or is it not the real thing? And sometimes stuff's great entertainment and we can all have a lovely night out, and we know it's just flotsam, and hey, what's not to like? And that stuff doesn't matter. It's the horrible self-regarding mediocrity in the middle that gets in everybody's way. It's like just being in a horrible soup of treacle, and it's nothing. So if I go to something that's bad, I just leave. I mean, you have to wait until the interval because you can't be rude to the actors, but there's no point in wasting time on that. But at the same time we have to just make space for these things to bubble up and to happen. In our world, it's very cynical, it's been so much about spin and froth, that we encouraged really, really bad stuff in all media to come to the forefront, especially if it's going to make money. So it's been genuinely difficult for people who are interested in the arts to develop some sort of critical awareness, because you can't trust anyone to tell you. There's so much going on. There's overload. So my advice to you would be to start with the things that you know are good, that have stood the test of time in all categories, poetry, fiction, literature, theatre, opera, pictures. Go to what is good, what people for generations have gone to. There is such a thing as the canon as well. That's one of the things, one of the bad things about some political movements throwing everything out and saying it's all relative. It isn't relative. It's really good to go back to things that have stood the test of time and to make a personal engagement with them, and to use those things as a critical bedrock for building up an awareness of how to judge modern things that are coming up. You can't know too much, have seen too much, read too much—just sink yourself in it. And I always tell that to young people when I go into universities. Start with the stuff that has stood the test of time and build your trust from there. Do not

trust the critics, the spin doctors, the wannabes, the *New York Times*. Whatever. Trust the work itself to give you a definition of what work is and how it should affect others.

AUDIENCE: Thank you. I'm from a city that kind of lives in that life-and-death bag, and doesn't really pay attention to the other bag—which was taxes and money?

WINTERSON: Time and money.

AUDIENCE: And I think it's somewhat akin to the Colombia story, and I'm really interested in how we can nurture the people who are interested in the time and money and how the arts can influence that. Any thoughts on that?

WINTERSON: Just keep giving them good stuff. And also this business about not apologizing. I think it's very important that we go on saying that art is central, that creativity is central, that it spreads out, ripple-like, across everything else in society. And that therefore it's not a question of should we fund it. It's a question about how and about resources. There's no debate about whether it's important or not. It is important. And I think it would be really good if we all stepped back from those completely false debates and just said, "Look, it's important." We don't have to talk about hospitals and education. We know it matters. We have to get art in that place completely, so that we know that this is about a civilized world, about a cultured world. It's not up for debate. It's not an optional extra. It's central. What worries me is that there are so many people working in the arts who are always apologizing, who secretly don't actually believe in their job or the work that they do or the importance. Somehow they think it's a kind of soft option or a bit of a fraud. And it would be really good if they all went and worked somewhere else. And that's why we have to be so robust and always search our own hearts, our own consciousness. Is this the thing we really believe in? Are we 100 percent behind it? Can we stand up with confidence to young kids, to anybody, and just say, "This matters. It isn't elitist. It isn't minority. It's about you. It's about now. It's about us." You have to really believe that. You have to be true to yourself before you can affect others. Because if there's any ambivalence, let alone a lie, somebody will sniff you out. And art is the place where lies get you nowhere. It's a place of absolute truth telling. That's why I talked about authenticity earlier. In a world where everybody is trying to cut corners and get away with something, art is the place where you can't get away with anything because if you do you come away empty handed. It's a place of absolute engagement, of passionate encounter, not a place where anything can just be slipped in or slipped under or got by with. It has to be live; it has to be 100 percent; it has to be everything that you do in the moment that you're doing it. That's why it's such a great energy source, and why we get such a buzz and a kick out of it when it is real, because there's such power in there. And that's what we have to get across and find it in our own lives. And anybody who works in the arts and says, "I haven't got time to go to the theatre," really does need another job.

Thank you.