Welcome everyone! I’m Marlene Peterson and I’ve called today’s presentation Sleeping Beauty and True Love’s First Kiss.

2020 has really been something, hasn’t it?
Like the meme I saw, if 2020 was an ice cream truck, it’s been delivering liver and onions, right?

I live in kind of a bubble world back in the countryside of Appomattox Virginia and got my first clue that something was off when I went to get on a flight to Salt Lake last March and there were only about 7 people on my flight. And I thought..Hmmm. do they know something I don’t know? I flew out to stay with my 98 year old mother for a few weeks and when I got there and went to the store to get some groceries, the shelves were wiped clean! I couldn’t believe it. Thankfully we had toilet paper. Who would’ve thought toilet paper would be such a precious commodity?

And then I woke up a couple of days later to the house shaking. We were having a big earthquake and my initial reaction was, “Serious?” You didn’t want to run outside because you might run into people and die of Covid but you didn’t want to stay inside in case a bigger earthquake was coming. It was a bit unnerving. And then I kept watching my flight get bumped and there was talk of shutting down airline travel altogether and I wondered if I was ever going to get back home to my husband again!

Like I said, that was back in March and things have just gotten a bit crazier, haven’t they? Pandemics and fires and winds and riots and looting and unrest and murder hornets and asteroids speeding towards us

For whoever started this Jumanji game in 2020, can you just hurry and finish it?

Although you may be feeling like this:

When life is falling apart but you’re totally used to it now.

But do you know what? The world has been here before. Many times.
I was reading an old book about the fifteenth century world of Henry V:

“Old faiths had lost their inspiration. Old forms of government were breaking down. The very fabric of society seemed to be on the point of dissolution.”

Doesn’t that describe the world we are living in?

How do we get through this and what can you and I do about it? I am here to tell you there is much that we can do. But it may not be what you think.

I love this painting by Daniel Ridgeway Knight.

Notice how dark and gloomy the sky is. It even has the appearance that the sky is falling. But pay attention to the woman—she has left her home for a moment and climbed to a higher place – you can see the homes in the background. She will go back home, but right now, notice her focused gaze—she is taking time to feed her heart with beauty. And notice the container of water at her feet. That made me think of the prophet Jeremiah, who, in another troubling time of dissolution, told the people their problem was they had hewn out cisterns that could hold no Living Water. We cannot live without water! She has a supply of water at her feet.

This seemingly simple act of taking the time to feed our hearts with beauty not only is the way we will survive chaotic times; it is the one way the world can be healed.

 “Fortunate is the person who has been educated to the perception of beauty; he possesses a heritage of which no reverses can rob him. Yet it is a heritage possible to all who will take the trouble to begin early in life to cultivate the finer qualities of the soul, the eye , and the heart.”

Many years ago there was a poor gentleman shut up in one of the great prisons of France. He was very sad and unhappy. He had been put into prison wrongfully, and it seemed to him as though there was no one in the world who cared for him.

He could not read, for there were no books in prison. He was not allowed to have pens or paper, and so he could not write. The time dragged slowly by. There was nothing that he could do to make the days seem shorter. His only pastime was walking back and forth in the paved prison yard. There was no work to be done, no one to talk with.

One fine morning in spring, he was taking his walk in the yard. He was counting the paving stones, as he had done a thousand times before. All at once he stopped. What had made that little mound of earth between two of the stones?
He stooped down to see. A seed of some kind had fallen between the stones. It had sprouted; and now a tiny green leaf was pushing its way up out of the ground. He was about to crush it with his foot, when he saw that there was a kind of soft coating over the leaf.

“Ah!” said he. “This coating is to keep it safe. I must not harm it.” And he went on with his walk.

The next day he almost stepped upon the plant before he thought of it. He stooped to look at it. There were two leaves now, and the plant was much stronger and greener than it was the day before. He stayed by it a long time, looking at all its parts.

Every morning after that, he went at once to his little plant. He wanted to see if it had been chilled by the cold, or scorched by the sun. He wanted to see how much it had grown.

He named his plant, Picciola. Every day it grew larger and more beautiful. The plant had a thousand pretty ways which he noticed. He saw how it always bent a little toward the sun; he saw how the flowers folded their petals before a storm.

He had never thought of such things before, and yet he had often seen whole gardens of flowers in bloom.

One day, with soot and water he made some ink; he spread out his handkerchief for paper; he used a sharpened stick for a pen—and all for what? He felt that he must write down the doings of his little pet. He spent all his time with the plant.

As the summer passed by, Picciola grew more lovely every day. There were no fewer than thirty blossoms on its stem.

But one sad morning it began to droop. The prisoner did not know what to do. He gave it water, but it still drooped. The leaves were withering. The stones of the prison yard would not let the plant live.

He knew that there was but one way to save his treasure. Alas! how could he hope that it might be done? The stones must be taken up at once.

But this was a thing the jailer dared not do. The rules of the prison were strict, and no stone must be moved. Only the highest officers in the land could have such a thing done.

The poor man could not sleep. Picciola must die. Already the flowers had withered; the leaves would soon fall from the stem.

Then a new thought came to him. He would ask the great emperor himself to save his plant.

It was a hard thing for him to do,--to ask a favor of the man whom he hated, the man who had shut him up in this very prison. But for the sake of Picciola he would do it.

He wrote his little story on his handkerchief. Then he gave it into the care of a young girl, who promised to carry it to the emperor. Ah! if the poor plant would only live a few days longer!

What a long journey that was for the young girl! What a long, dreary waiting it was for the prisoner and Picciola.

But at last news came to the prison. The stones were to be taken up. Picciola was saved!

The emperor’s kind wife had heard the story of the prisoner’s care for the plant. She saw the handkerchief on which he had written of its pretty ways.

“Surely,” she said, “It can do us no good to keep such a man in prison.”

And so, at last, he was set free. Of course he was no longer sad and unloving. He saw how God had cared for him and the little plant, and how kind and true are the hearts of even rough men. And he cherished Picciola as a dear, loved friend whom he could never forget.

By focusing on something of beauty, we literally bring down the gloomy prison walls of doubt and worry; fear and anxiety. You may remember this from The Secret Garden:

Two things cannot be in one place

Where you tend a rose, my lad,

A thistle cannot grow.

Confucius gave the solution for today’s problems over 2500 years ago:

To put the world right in order

We must first put the nation in order;

To put the nation in order,

We must first put the family in order,

To put the family in order,

We must first cultivate our personal life,

We must first set our hearts right.

I have come to believe that the task of setting hearts right falls on the mother-hearts of this world. It is she who can best awaken a love for beauty in a child’s heart. And what I’d like to spend the next few minutes doing is showing you what that looks like. The work begins with the mother tending her own heart.

There’s a saying out there that goes: “When life falls apart…make art.”

The arts—Music, Visual Arts, Poetry and Story-- are how we feed the heart and set the heart ‘right’. You even find the word ‘art’ in the word ‘heart’.

Let’s take a look at each of these languages of the heart one at a time.

Music—

“There is something wonderful in music. Words are wonderful enough, but music is more wonderful. It speaks not to our thoughts as words do; it speaks straight to our hearts and spirits, at the very core and root of our souls. Music soothes us, stirs us up, it puts noble feelings into us; it melts us to tears, we know now how….This ‘heavenly Maid’ is a chief restorer of our mental and physical equilibrium. Music has the power to solve many of our problems for us.”

If we truly understood the power of music in our lives, we would surely fill our days with more music and song. Music was used on the battleground to stir up courage in the hearts of soldiers in the morning and in the evening, it was used to heal their broken hearts.

When Elisha’s advice was sought in the fighting of a great battle, he first called for a harpist, and when the harpist played, ‘the hand of the Lord came upon him’ and he saw clearly what to say.

When Saul was depressed and melancholy, he called for David to bring his harp. And his soul was restored.

In a dark, damp, dungeon, Paul and Silas sang hymns and the prison walls came down.

Hymns are the golden gateway to heaven.

As the Titanic was sinking, musicians calmly played Nearer My God To Thee until they went down with the ship. .

“Through music, the mind is stilled to outside influences and becomes a reflector for the inner light which comes only through stillness. Faith comes when the chaotic thoughts of the outside world are stilled.”

Until modern times when music became a performing art, music was used as a primary medicine in healing.

A young woman was dying. Her baby had died at birth a few weeks previously, and since that time the mother had steadily failed. The doctor had just left her room saying emphatically that there was no hope and to give her anything she wanted.

She looked up at her agonized husband and said: “Music. I want music. I know that will cure me.” The nurse thought it to be a foolhardy and useless errand, but the husband went in search of it.

The first day old familiar tunes and some of the Chopin that she had always loved, were played softly to her. Her body relaxed under the soothing influence, her nerves became less tense, her breathing deeper and more rhythmical, increasing the circulation. That night she slept. With the shutting out of the senses to the outside world the harmonic reaction brought about by the music continued its work of healing all through the night. The next day she was visibly stronger.

An hour of good music at bedtime will so harmonize the child’s consciousness that he will go to sleep happy and serene. Those thoughts will do their unfailing work of rebuilding, physically, mentally and spiritually, all through the night.

The Hindus have a morning song, a song for noon, an evening song, and a song for midnight. They have songs of praise, songs of love, songs of joy, songs of peace, and many others.

What if we were as diligent and concerned with teaching our children the language of music as we are in making sure they have mastered their multiplication facts? Harriet Seymour wrote:

“It seems extravagant to claim that, if everyone could be shown how to follow a tune and remember it, the world’s unrest would be ameliorated, but it would seem to be a fact, nevertheless. Because, by doing so, each individual would become conscious of the harmony within himself.”

And as Confucius taught: “Harmony has the power to draw Heaven downwards to the earth. It inspires men to love the good, and to do their duty. If one should desire to know whether a kingdom is well governed, if its morals are good or bad, the quality of its music shall furnish forth the answers.”

How do you think we are doing?

VISUAL ARTS

“When you come to a full appreciation of art…you will be possessed of one of the purest, loftiest, and most ennobling pleasures the civilized world can offer you.” –Henry van Dyke

We better be concerned if ‘man becomes the thing he gazes upon” as Hawthorne taught, when you consider that the American Psychiatric Society estimated that the average American child will have seen some 200,000 violent acts and 14 000 murders by the time he is 18 years old. That study was years ago-- I suspect that number is much higher today. The visual impressions made on children’s tender hearts last a lifetime. How many images of that which is good and truly noble will they have come in contact during the same years?

Our current culture isn’t helping us to that end. We have to seek them out for ourselves, and one place we can turn is to beautiful paintings. And for young people, I can think of no better era of art than the late 1800s and early 1900s when artists celebrated and shared the simple joys of living.

It was a time when babies were seen as something precious and desirable; and mothers delighted in them. How often is this portrayed in movies or art today? Children adored their fathers and fathers adored their children. Sisters wrapped their arms around each other in affectionate hugs and brothers walked hand in hand. Here, reading is done for the sheer joy of reading. Children were happily playing together outside, and given the luxury of time to enjoy the sunshine and beauties of nature. Families had joy in working and in playing together. They were even seen eating dinner together! My horse loving granddaughter thinks this is the perfect family. And there was time to put your feet up and enjoy a simple conversation with your neighbors. Don’t you love the little girl in this painting?
We need artists today who will create art like this using a diversity of culture and color of skin so that no child feels excluded from these simple joys.

We can do much to counter the vulgarity our world is offering by hanging paintings like these on the walls of our homes where they can be a quiet and steady influence and by finding other ways to get images in the view of children, even if you can but print the pictures out and tape them to your fridge.

Leonardo da Vinci said, “I hear it and its gone. I see it and it is there again. And again. And again….”

We have started gathering and sorting art like this at simplejoyart.com. It’s a work in progress so keep checking back— it’s free. All of these images are in the public domain so you can freely use them in your home.

And now if you want to discover even more beauty through art and unfold deeper layers of meaning, take the time to learn to sketch and paint. Drawing produces an exactness of thought. Once you pick up the painter’s brush, you will see the world around you with new eyes.

At age 40, after a significant defeat and a forced resignation, Winston Churchill was overcome with, as he called it, ‘the black dog of depression and anxiety’. A sister-in-law suggested he take up painting. He later wrote, “And then it was the muse of painting came to my rescue.”

John Muir Laws, a world renowned nature journalist, wrote: “Once you slow down and look long enough … mysteries will unfold before you…When we see with clear eyes, we know that we are surrounded with beauty. Let yourself fall in love with your life by paying attention.”

From time to time, take the time to sketch those masterpieces of art that strike a resonant chord in your own soul. They can be rough sketches. As you pay attention to the details, that work of art will be etched in your memory. And then, in quiet moments, you can close your eyes and stroll down the art gallery in your own heart and be fed with all its joys.

Poetry—

Some years ago, my husband and I were asked to serve in an Assisted Living Facility where we became friends with Grant and Edna, both in their 90s. Edna had suffered from Alzheimers and it had been years since she recognized her husband who was her sole caregiver. Their only daughter had died in her youth. Grant with his stooped shoulders and slight frame looked frail, but he had a hidden treasure. He had a lifetime of poetry stored in his heart, and when you would ask him to recite a poem, his blue eyes would light up and his voice would become strong.

One night we stopped to visit them in their little apartment and I asked if he had a poem for us. “Oh, yes!” he said. And off he went-Wynken, Blynken and Nod one day sailed off in a wooden shoe.” I asked if this was a poem from his childhood, and he said, Oh no. This is the poem I have been working on for the last several weeks.

He passed away just a few days later and Edna followed shortly thereafter.

Memorizing poetry is how this poor, lonely man kept his heart from failing. And in this simple act, he had great joy.

In the Nazi death camps, Viktor Frankl observed a group of prisoners who would secretly meet to recite poetry to each other, even though they knew the penalty of being caught was death. Poetry kept them alive. Beauty was the guardian of their survival.

Henry WadsworthLongfellow was working in his study one day when he heard his wife screaming. He rushed out to see her dress ablaze. She had been sealing packets of their little girls’ hair and a drop of the wax had ignited her dress on fire. He tried to put the fire out with his own body, badly burning himself in the process. But it was no use. Her injuries were too great and his wife succumbed to them, leaving him to raise their three little girls by himself. It was at this time in his life he threw himself into translating the poetry of Dante. And in the process, did much to heal his own broken heart.

“O Poet, what power lies in thy magic wand! No sooner dost thou touch us, the dull gray day is aflame with color and sunshine.”

Longfellow left simple instructions in how to extract the mysteries of the poet:

[R]ead from some treasured volume

The poem of thy choice,

And lend to the rhyme of the poet

The beauty of thy voice.

The mission of poetry is to ‘make glad the heart of man’. It does not teach—it inspires.

Set aside time to read poetry—out loud is best—and when something strikes that resonant chord within, take the time to copy it down in your own personal anthology. And then, develop a habit of always having a poem that you are working on committing to learn ‘by heart’. Do this, and you will have a treasure of immeasurable worth to draw upon.

Story

Orison Swett Marden’s mother died when he was 3. His father raised his little family as best as he could in the back woods of New Hampshire, but then Orison’s father died as well. He now had no home. He was separated from his sisters, this little boy of 7, and was sent to homes who took him in as the “hired boy” where he was required to work hard to earn his keep. He would pass through five such homes before striking out on his own. He was cuffed and whipped, starved, worked to the limits of human endurance, abused and insulted. There was no one to give him comfort or love or answer his questions.

And then, when he was in his early to mid teens, he happened upon a dilapidated copy of a book stored away in an attic. It was written by a Scottish man named Samuel Smiles—the book was called Self Help. It was written to give hope to young people. Orison wrote: “I felt like a poor man who had just by accident discovered a gold mine.” It was a book of stories; stories of great men and women who had overcome hard challenges in their lives.

These stories changed his life and healed his heart.

And in wanting to pay it forward, he created a similar book for the young people of America called Pushing to the Front. It became a runaway bestseller. Letters poured in from presidents like William McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt, the British Prime Minister William Gladstone, kings and rulers from around the world, telling him of how it had influenced their lives. A noted educator of the Italian Parliament strongly recommended the book be made obligatory reading in the schools of Italy, because he regarded it as ‘a civilization builder’. Make note of that---stories of great lives are a ‘civilization builder’. Thousands wrote and told how the book aroused their ambition, changed their ideals, and aims, increased their confidence, and how it had spurred them to the successful undertaking of what they before had thought impossible.

He went on to write 50 more books. Yet, for all his fame and fortune, he understood the true secrets of happiness—the true and lasting treasures of the heart—and that’s what he taught and lived.

I have been immersed in a similar activity for the last 15 years or so—and reading the stories of great lives has changed my life, as well. I have truly come to believe that our ability to maintain hope is in direct proportion to how broad and how deep our reservoir of stories is. Life is pretty rough when you are trying to operate off a mere puddle.

These great men and women are as dear friends and mentors to me. Through their stories, I find myself constantly in the company of kings and queens, poets, prophets, sages, artists, musicians, inventors, scientists, humanitarians, philanthropists, educators, writers, adventurers. “With their more appreciative souls, they have taught me to see beauty that I had previously missed.’. My life is richer for my association with them. They show me life through a thousand different eyes rather than through the narrow view of my own experience. There is nothing in my life that I have faced that there hasn’t been someone in this company of friends to show me how to navigate through or to just give me the courage to hang on a little longer. They inspire my heart to be better and to reach higher. When I get depressed or worried, I invite one of these friends to come over and it doesn’t take long before they have lifted my spirits.

And one activity deepens the experience even more—sharing the stories with others.

 “Storytelling is an ageless and beautiful art. When the lights are low and your child is in a quiet, reflective mood, the stories told him will never be forgotten and their influence will follow him the rest of his life.”

Fill the childhoods of your children with stories, and you will have given them treasures far greater than silver or gold. There is no budget so tight that a child cannot be made rich with stories.

And one more thing to remember:

“It is a law of life that the only thing which we may always keep, is the thing we give. If then, the prime function of Storytelling is the giving of Joy, the Joy is the thing which the Storyteller may have.”

Nature

Now that we have talked about the tools of the artist, let’s look at the ideal classroom for the heart. Nature is God’s university and when we spend time there, we are immersed in beauty and the music, art, poetry and story we bring with us help us unlock its mysteries. We associate the word recreation with outdoor activities—but if you tweak the word just a bit, it’s re-creation. When we spend time in nature, it’s like everything within resets. We see more clearly. We feel more deeply. Nature can change us and heal our hearts.
I found it interesting that Elizabeth Smart said she healed from her horrifying ordeal by spending a year riding horses on her grandfather’s ranch.

Louisa May Alcott, who you know from Little Women, wrote:

“My wise mother turned me loose in the country and let me run wild, learning of Nature what no books could teach, and being led—as those who truly love her seldom fail to be—‘through Nature up to Nature’s God.’

“I had an early run in the woods before the dew was off the grass. The moss was like velvet, and as I ran under the arch of yellow and red leaves I sang for joy, my heart was so bright and the world so beautiful. I stopped at the end of the walk and saw the sunshine out over the wide ‘Virginia meadows.’

“It seemed like going through a dark life or grave into heaven beyond. A very strange and solemn feeling came over me as I stood there, with no sound but the rustle of the pines, no one near me, and the sun so glorious, as for me alone. It seemed as if I felt God as I never did before, and I prayed in my heart that I might keep that happy sense of nearness all my life.”

To that entry there is a note added, years later: “I have, for I most sincerely think that the little girl ‘got religion’ that day in the wood, when dear Mother nature led her to God.”

“ If the trees and flowers, the clouds and the wind, all tell wonderful stories to the child he has sources of happiness of which no power can deprive him.”

A wise man has said, “The only safety we have in the world for our children is what they build within themselves.” I hope you have begun to catch the vision of how you can use the Arts to build a sanctuary; a place of refuge within your own heart and within the hearts of your children, so that no matter what is going on outside of them, their hearts will not fail them.

This is the work of the Well-Educated Heart and I invite you to join with thousands of mothers all over the world who are rediscovering the lost arts of educating the hearts of their children; who are giving them eyes to see, ears to hear and hearts to feel the beauty that surrounds all of us. If you visit welleducatedheart.com, you will find a treasure trove of music, poetry, art and stories to share with your children and much more. You are meant to be a Mother of Influence.

Let’s go back to Henry of Monmouth and his 15th century world that was crumbling around him. The passage from the book I read to you continues:

 “…the remedy for present evils was sought not in the creation of a new order but rather in the restoration of an old ideal. To bring back the Golden Past must be the work of a hero who could revive in his own person its virtues.

“Henry of Monmouth, deriving his inspiration from the past, was the champion of unity against the forces of disintegration.”

I see you mothers as today’s heroes who will be the ‘champions of unity against the forces of disintegration” as you set your heart right. The work is done through small and simple ways.

Consider this daring experiment run in 1982 during the war between Lebanon and Israel, which was referenced by Gregg Braden in a book called “The Spontaneous Healing of Belief.” Researchers trained a group of people to ‘feel’ peace within. At appointed times on specific days of the month, these people were positioned throughout the war-torn areas of the Middle East. During the window of time when they were feeling peace, terrorist activities ceased, the rate of crimes against people went down, the number of emergency-room visits declined and the incidence of traffic visits declined. When the participants’ feelings changed, the statistics were reversed. The study confirmed the earlier findings: When a small percentage of the population achieved peace within themselves, it was reflected in the world around them.

The study became known as the International Peace Project in the Middle East and the results were eventually published in The Journal of Conflict Resolution in 1988.

I am not concerned that our numbers may be few—I have baked enough bread to know that a little leaven can raise a whole loaf.

I look forward for the day that “… will come when our children will be taught…to consider beauty as a most precious gift . . .and regarded as a divine instrument of education. Beauty is a quality of divinity, and to live much with the beautiful is to live close to the divine. Every beauty in any form . . refines and elevates character.” (Orison Swett Marden)

Now in closing, if you recall Disney’s classic movie of Sleeping Beauty, Beauty had fallen asleep and when Beauty fell asleep, the kingdom grew dark and gloomy. Briers and noxious weeds and thorny vines grew around the castle. Along comes Prince Philip. He grabs his sword of Truth and his shield of righteousness—it really says that—and he fights and destroys the evil Malificent. But it wasn’t the destruction of evil that brought the kingdom back to life. The thing that brought the kingdom back to life was his love of Beauty. When Beauty received true love’s first kiss, Beauty awoke and the kingdom gloriously sprang to life with Light and Color.

May the prayer of Socrates be our prayer: “I pray thee, O God, that I may be beautiful within.” For then we may be assured that we will live happily ever after.