

*Essays on the Frank Espada Archive*

*by Jason Espada*

## Introduction

The notes and essays that follow were written over the last couple of years, as I've prepared for events, and communicated with scholars, curators, and representatives from universities. In a few cases, I've included something just because it has a family story or two in it. Perhaps all together these will help someone who is interested to get a fuller idea of who my father was, along with his own writing, and his art, of course.

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{The linked essays in this collection and also be viewed online, accompanied by my father's photographs.}

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## The Artist As An Activist

I would like to introduce my father as an example of *the artist as an activist*. This is so important, not only for students and teachers of Latinx and Puerto Rican studies, but for all artists, activists, educators, and aspiring documentarians...

My father was a minority *within* a minority. He was both Puerto Rican, *and* a progressive, or a radical. And not only have latinos and Puerto Ricans in general been marginalized in this country, discriminated against and excluded in this culture, but as you can imagine, *the progressives* among them are even *less* visible.

This is understandable, after all. To be a progressive, by definition, is to be anti racist, and anti colonial; it is to fiercely oppose the rich and the powerful that have exploited people in the past, and that continue to do so today. Of course, this isn't exactly welcomed by the government, and by institutions here, including its universities and museums. In fact, we all know it's resisted.

It may be that this is slowly changing, but these historical forces are real, and they need to be contended with to even begin to speak about such things as human rights and social documentary work.

When it comes to the current state of Puerto Rican studies, I am told that it has largely been subsumed under what we now call Latinx Studies. And so, I have to question:

*To what extent has the loss of Puerto Rican studies been an erasure of this unique history and culture?*

As I wrote to one scholar here in California:

My father always had a very strong sense of himself as Puerto Rican. When asked if he was Latino, he made it clear that he didn't feel this label described him and other Puerto Ricans well enough, if at all, and for those who don't aspire to assimilate, as with simply becoming 'Americans', the dangers of marginalization, being co-opted, and erasure, are always present.

When he came to California in 1985, my father faced a new set of challenges to maintaining his sense of identity, and finding ways to support others in remembering their history, and celebrating their culture.

As various groups now gather in 2023 under this new umbrella term 'Latinx' it's as clear to me as ever that we need *to choose* to maintain our unique cultural and historical identities.

Going forward, as distinct groups, we are all lifted up, and made stronger by our individual histories and cultures being maintained in manifold ways, and honored.

This, to me, is where we find the United States at its best - as the realization of a harmony and a mutual enrichment among different peoples.

How can we then begin to speak of our struggles, and triumphs, our dynamic unfolding histories, and daunting challenges today? How can we communicate them in a way that values these histories, and our lives now?

If a story is just told in its bare form, as with so much news, or bland, perfunctory education, we are left unchanged by it. Something more is needed. We need the arts, to paraphrase Kafka:

*Art must be the ax for the frozen sea inside us.*

I know I have an ally in every scholar who understands the necessity of using art in education - poetry, drama, photography, film, music - all are needed.

Without the depths and power of what artists help us to see and to feel, history and the events that are happening *now* remain abstract when they should be compelling; they remain just one thing among many competing for our attention, when they should be our priority.

Ideally, someone coming away from viewing Frank Espada's work, and hearing about him will understand his story;

and because of this, and because of his documentary, they will know something more about the Puerto Rican experience in this country;

they will experience the beauty and power of photography, and of social documentary photography in particular,

and they will understand that it is essential to use art in education.

In a word, they will be inspired.

The vitality of a culture is its educated people who are educating others, and so, pass it on. What people may then do with their creativity and intelligence has no limits.

We can use this encouragement, as my father did with his teaching, to encourage others, to help them to believe in themselves, and to point out that we have the resources to change things for the better in our lives, in our communities, and in our world. It may not be once and for all, but this is the essential work.

The first thing you need to know about my father

The last few years, I've found myself in the curious position of having to introduce my father, Frank Espada, and his work to people who have never heard of him. To do this, I've had to step back and say some general things, of course, but I've also wanted to speak of the heart of the man.

My thinking has been that you can hear the details of his story, see some of his beautiful photographs, and maybe even find some of the larger patterns in his life and work, without necessarily knowing what motivated him. So I've tried to add what I feel was his defining characteristic, which was his compassion. To me, this is what made him the unique and powerful figure he was to so many people.

My father loved life, good music, good food, good pitching, and film, but most of all *he cared about other people*, especially those who were neglected, or exploited and abused. He became an activist in the 1960's, an organizer and educator, and a leader in the East Coast Puerto Rican community, and throughout his life he was an advocate for human rights and social justice. He didn't look to get rich or to become famous, but instead, wherever he went, he used his talents to help others.

As a photographer and teacher, he was not merely a social documentarian, as in - an objective reporter of events and people's lives. Instead, he had a very definite point of view - and an agenda. He wanted to lift people up, and he did this exceptionally well. What he did, he did out of love. If someone is new to Frank Espada's life story and work, this is the very first thing they should know.



## My Father's Son

In the Fall of 2013, I started what I thought was going to be a simple project that would take me a few months: I was going to organize my father's photographs. I had no idea at the time how this would lead me into a deeper relationship with the man who was my hero, and role model in many ways.

I wanted to help my parents sell some of my father's fine work, as they often struggled to make ends meet, but we didn't know what we had, or where it was. The method my father had used to identify photographs was very much like him. He called the prints by their names, and we got to be familiar with quite a few: The Ballerina, Paloma, The Man by the Fence, Margarite, Confessor, Jaime Jenkins, Willie Collozo, and others. This works well with maybe a few dozen photographs, but it doesn't work when you want to have a comprehensive record.

My father's photography was produced over 60 years, and for reasons that I could see played out time and again, the prints from different projects were all mixed together- like shuffled decks of cards, I would say. When I helped my parents move out of their home in San Francisco, part of that labor was packing their photographs, and as I tried to get my father to help me determine what print went where, he'd pick one up and look at it, and get this far off look in his eyes. He'd last about fifteen or twenty minutes before saying, 'that's it' and going upstairs. I ended up madly tossing everything into boxes and sealing them up, maybe to be sorted at some future time, or maybe not.

I had this sudden flash back in 2012 that what we needed was a visual record of what they had. I even started photographing his photographs with a card in front of the first print in a box, but then I let that drop and went off for a year. When I came back to California, I picked up where I left off. It took a bit of forethought to figure out a system that would account

for more than two thousand prints, but I finally figured out that by using a large format scanner, I could scan 95% of his work, and assign a box letter and number to each print. Then I could print out a catalogue with thumbnails and we could see what we had, and where everything was. Sounds easy, right?

I finally convinced my parents to let me start scanning them. At first my father resisted - he didn't understand what I had in mind, but after a couple of months I was able to show him what they looked like on his computer, and that I could print out contact sheets, box by box. It looked like we were getting somewhere. We had even begun identifying our favorite photographs, to be taken around to galleries. The fun part was within sight, at last.

On February 14th, 2014, my father had a major heart attack. I was with him in the hospital that night, and the next day, and he passed away on Sunday, the 16th. I think he knew he wasn't going to make it out of the hospital that time. Quietly, he said he would't be able to make our meeting to choose the photographs together with my mother and I, like we had planned. And so another chapter began, one I didn't see coming at all.

I always had this image in my mind that grieving was something a person had time to do, in quiet, solitary moments. Little did I know that after a person passes away, it's something you do when you can find a sliver of time. There is so much to attend to, not the least of which is caring for and comforting others in the family.

We needed to move my mother from their place in Pacifica, to an apartment, and find a way to store the archive. I asked a family friend, Karen Ande, what the best outcome could be for an artist's work, and she said, the ideal would be for it to all land in one place, where it could be seen and appreciated in times to come.

By that point, I had almost finished scanning the vintage prints, around 2000 of them. I'd been communicating with gallery owners, universities, and collectors. It was discouraging for a while until a family friend, Willie Vasquez, told me that the Smithsonian had a Latino Center, and that he had been in touch with someone there, and had given him my father's book on *The Puerto Rican Diaspora*. I spoke with Randal Woodaman, who told me the general impression in the museum world was that Duke University had gotten most of my father's work. When I told him that, no, actually what they had was less than twenty percent of it, he was surprised and delighted. He sent out a message to curators across the Smithsonian network, and several of them responded, expressing interest in visiting to see the collection.

In 2014, we had visits from curators from the Urban Studies Museum, the American Art Museum, and the American History Museum. The National Portrait Gallery and the American Art Museum each acquired a select number of prints, and *in June of 2016, the American History Museum welcomed into their permanent collection Frank Espada's Puerto Rican Diaspora Documentary Project* - some 800 prints, with 140 recorded interviews from across the country, all made between 1979 to 1981. I couldn't be happier about this. It means that artists and activists, students and educators in this and coming generations will have access to his inspiring work.

This is the story so far, that anyone can see. There is a public record of it. What I'd like to tell now is how this whole process changed me.

### My father's first student

When we had the memorial for my father in March of 2014, people turned up that we hadn't seen in some cases in twenty years. These were his students, and they remembered my father and his teaching like no time had passed at all. He had that kind of an impact on people. A few remarked that they were his earliest students out here, something they

were proud to say. After a while though, I remembered something I hadn't thought about much before, and that is, that *I* was my father's first student.

In 1970, we moved from Brooklyn to Valley Stream, Long Island, and in the basement of that house was a large cedar fur closet, that my father transformed into the first darkroom he ever had. Up until that time, handling his Nikon was a challenge for a young boy like me. If there are pictures taken of my father, they were likely done by my mother, who got to be pretty good at it herself.

By the time I was ten years old though, I started taking photographs, and I remember the first time we went into the darkroom. It was beautiful in there: red safelights, trays all lined up, an impressive enlarger, and most of all, I was with the master, my father. We projected an image onto the light sensitive paper, and he had me take it to the developer tray, and move it around by the edge with rubber tipped tongs. What happened next is something I'll never forget. Slowly, the image began appearing on the paper. I can still feel my father standing behind me, and smiling at my wonder. He was very wise about not saying anything, but just letting me see for myself what this was all about. This is probably why I remember it like it was yesterday.

I lasted as his student for about five years. Around the time I was fifteen, I discovered music, girls, and partying, all at once, and so I set photography to one side. We always had this language we could share, though.

I remember years before, learning to use a black cloth bag to roll our own film, and how to put exposed film onto spools to be developed, going by touch alone. I also saw how meticulous he could be when it came to his system, which was very much his own. The chemistry, the temperature of the solution and water used, the timing, right down to the number of times to shake the film canister - all this was engrained knowledge for him, and written down for it's own sake. Maybe some day in the future others could learn from it.

He also taught me, and later his other students how to 'push' film - that is, to expose it at a different rate than its marketed setting (pushing ASA 400 to 1200, for example), and to develop it in a unique way to get the best possible negative. There are a lot of ways of working with a poor negative, I learned, but, he told me, if you have an excellent negative, most of the work of making a good print is already done.

When I stepped back from taking pictures and got more into music, I felt nothing but support from my father. What's more, a lot of the things he taught me carried over. For example, he showed me that art is not about competition. Although he was prolific, remarkably, he never compared himself to anyone else. He was humble, and for an artist of his calibre to be like that made a deep impression on me.

Most of all, when I think of him as a photographer, I think it was his refuge. He'd go into the darkroom for hours, put on some classical music, and more often than not produce something wonderful. I think of him also as someone who did his art for its own sake. He didn't make a red cent from his work until he got his grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to document the Puerto Rican Diaspora. I was out here in California at the time, and I remember the phone conversation we had, where he said, Imagine writing a grant for yourself, for everything you do well, and for everything you want to do, *and getting funded*. This was 1979.

Identity is a deep thing

I never saw myself as Puerto Rican, or recognized that my father had been looked down on or mistreated because of the color of his skin. That was inconceivable to me, a boy who was loved by his father. Growing up, I didn't know what he was involved in either. We were too young in the 60's to understand much. It wasn't until later that I began to piece together what he was doing, and to see how the past, and the events of that era shaped the man I knew.

I have this image, of being so close to someone, that all you see is their eyes. This is how it was between my father and myself. I always felt close to him in a way that didn't allow for me to see anything other than his love. You can see this in the photographs Dave Heath took of our family, one Summer's day in 1964. I needed some distance, paradoxically, to understand the man my father was more fully.

When I started organizing his photographs, I had no idea that I would need to know where they were taken, or their context. I didn't know I would need to be able to trace out a history of my father, in order to be able to describe what took him into different communities with his work, and with his camera. But this is what happened. Thankfully, I have my mother to ask questions, and gradually I began to be able to put together his remarkable history. I've realized, looking back, how I knew that person dearly, loved him and was loved by him, without knowing the events that made him. Now that I know more, it only adds to my esteem for him, and to the feeling of being blessed to be my father's son.

I see now that I inherited some part of his clarity, his joy, his sense of humor, his creativity (just a small part, mind you), as well as his impatience, anger, and our family tendency to depression. I know I took to Buddhism and meditation on account of this feeling that this is what my family needs more of. We inter-are in this way, I'm sure of it.

I remember one time in the early 1990's when my father was getting ready to give a lecture and slide presentation here in SF, and he was getting frustrated with the process of trying to select some slides. They were scattered across the big wooden dining room table, and he was about to give up. I told him, Da, when I look in the dictionary under the word 'generosity' your picture is there - so why don't you just focus on that, and think of this event as a gift you can give these people? You know, most of them have never seen your best work, why don't you just share some of it? I'm glad to say that worked that night, and I went with him to a well

received event. It wasn't unusual to have people ooh-ing and aah-ing throughout a slide show, and that gave my dad a lot of joy.

My father did his art whether or not it was going to be received. As I said, he did it for its own sake, and it kept him sane, most of the time. I got something of this dedication, stubbornness, and love of art from him. I also got some of his right values - compassion and caring for others, and his fearlessness and passion for social justice, for which I am eternally grateful.

When it came time to figure out what to do with his art, to be honest, I wouldn't have trusted anyone else to handle it. For one thing, almost anyone other than a close family member would have mixed motivations for promoting his work. Another reason is that I learned his language from an early age, and I was lifted up by his art from the time I was in grade school. I remember laying on the floor of our house in Valley Stream, and looking through some books of photographs. I came across one that was all scenes at a racetrack, and went through it all, thinking it was very good before seeing that it was by my father. I realized then that he was right up there with all those other artists whose books we had. I've been his biggest fan for a very long time.

It seems that all this just sort of fell into my lap, and it was a good thing that I had the time to give to it. It took almost three years, nearly full time, and with the support and encouragement of dear friends, to accomplish the task of getting his Diaspora work into the National Museum. And so one chapter ends, and another begins.

Some gifts unfold over time. It's certainly been this way with my father's gifts to me and to others. I had no idea that what is given opens in this way. Now I know how it is. This joy continues.

Da -  
you may be surprised to know

how something of what you left behind  
jumped up and shook me by the shoulders  
how some of it pounded on doors until they opened,  
how some of it told me what to say,  
and how some of it continues now –  
reviving the stricken,  
answering our needs  
just as it was when you are you were in your prime,  
and as it will be



## A Sketch of Frank Espada's life

The following was written in 2014, in preparation for visits from curators, who were coming to view the entire range of my father's work, within the space of a few short days. I took this as an opportunity to touch upon the most significant events in his life, and to celebrate the man I had come to know more fully through organizing his archive.

My purpose was two-fold: first, to introduce Frank Espada's photography, produced over 60 years, by telling his life story. Second, I wanted to communicate something of what I have come to experience in working with his art. I feel now that each component complements the others, and that when the individual photographs are viewed in the larger context of his life and work, it is a richer and more powerful experience.

A sketch of Frank Espada's life, set down by the main time periods, with a few details

Here are the subject headings, followed by a description.

1. Early life: 1930 to 1949
2. Marriage and the post-war years, New York, 1950 to 1960
3. Years of activism, New York, 1960 to 1973; and Washington, D.C., 1973 to 1979

Interlude: Becoming disillusioned with politics, and turning again to art

4. The Puerto Rican Diaspora Documentary Project, 1979 to 1985
5. Moving to San Francisco, the Y. E. S, and Chamorro Documentaries, and his years of teaching, 1985 to 2005

6. Publishing the book, *The Puerto Rican Diaspora*, in 2006, at the age of 76 and,

7. Later years, some late recognition, and his color work, 2006 to 2014

### 1. Early life: 1930 to 1949

My father was born in Utuado, Puerto Rico, on December 21<sup>st</sup>, 1930. From what I understand, his family there had some social position – his grandfather, Buenaventura Roig, was mayor of the town, and his father was successful enough to own property and support other family members. Some events transpired that made it so that Frank's father needed to leave the island. He went to New York to look for work, and after a time sent for his wife, my grandmother, and their two children, Frank, and his sister, Luisa.

They crossed from Puerto Rico by boat, went back the island, and then came back again to New York. The story goes that the boat they came over on, the *San Jacinto*, was torpedoed on its return crossing by German U-boats.

We have a few family stories that have been passed down. One is of my father seeing his father cry at night because he couldn't get a job to support his family. The signs said "No Puerto Ricans need apply". The other story is of my dad being taken to his first baseball game in New York and seeing no black or brown skinned players on the field. He had grown up watching great ball players in Puerto Rico, including members of the Negro League who would come to the Island in the Winter to play.

My brother also writes about my father working carrying ice up flights of steps in the 1940's. See "The Immigrant Ice boy's Bolero", my brother's first book of poetry.

I remember one family story of my father as a young boy standing up to a bully. The story goes that Frank was being regularly terrorized by a neighborhood bully, and that one day he decided he'd had enough. The next time he saw the boy coming at him, my father picked up a huge rock and the other kid turned and ran and never bothered him again. The next day, the story goes, my father went back to that same spot, and couldn't even lift that rock.

This story was always part of what was behind what I remember my dad telling us as we were getting ready for school in New York in the 60's – he'd say "Don't take any shit from anybody". You could say we had standing up to bullies bred into our DNA. I know that the images told me we have strength we only seldom know about, but that will be there when we need it, so we shouldn't fear, especially in the face of some oppressor.

The last weekend of my father's life, we talked about how as a young man he made his way into the City College of New York, which was considered a top notch school. He told me that he remembered reading the plays of Plato, among other things and said he knew he had found a home in the Humanities. I asked him how many people of color there were in his classes, and he said the ratio was about 1 to 200 white people. He said he was told by more than one instructor there that he shouldn't waste their time, essentially that he wasn't good enough to be there. That he proved them wrong in the end is bittersweet. He was awarded an honorary degree by Lehman College, CUNY, in 2008.

In my mind I round out this part of his life with him not being able to afford books, being discouraged by his teachers, and, with his parents divorcing, him joining the Air Force in 1949, something he regretted for his entire life afterwards.

On leave from basic training in Texas, during the Christmas break 1949, on a bus on the way to New York to spend the holidays with his family, he was

arrested in Mississippi for not moving to the back of the bus. My brother tells this story well. When he went in front of the judge, the judge asked him how long he had on his furlough, and he answered that he had one week off, whereon the judge sentenced him to one week in jail. As my father told it, that was the best week of his life because in that week he decided what he was going to do with the rest of his life.

Many people who go on to become activists in one form or another have one incident that galvanized things for them, and certainly there were other events that were to bring out the radical in my dad, but this stands out among them.

I've often thought how close my father came to losing his life back then. In the 40's in the South, people of color "disappeared" all the time, and no one was held accountable. He must have known this when he was refusing to move to the back of an empty bus late at night, but at some point, anger and dignity rise up in a person, and, even if it were to cost them their life, they make their stand. There were no witnesses, but, for me, that event resonates to this day.

## 2. Marriage and the post-war years, New York, 1950 to 1960

Frank met Marilyn in 1951, and they married in 1952. My mother has some interesting stories to tell of how she viewed my dad, how her family viewed him, and all non-Jews back then for that matter, and how she came to know something of the anger at being discriminated against that he carried with him. My mothers also tells of their being Dodger fans, and particularly fans of Jackie Robinson, and his significance at that time.

After a second stint in the military, my father went to the New York Institute of Photography on the G.I. Bill. He also met the to-be renowned photographer Dave Heath, who he regarded as a mentor and friend. Dave introduced him and a small group of like minded photographers to Gene Smith, and they studied with him in the late 1950's in New York.

My brother, Martin, was born in 1957, I followed in 1960, and my sister came along in 1961. Looking at the photographs my father took in those years, I have the sense that he was developing what I call “his loving eye”. My mother says they were all scenes of affection that he was photographing, and we can see this is true. Looking at them now, I see in the pictures how he looked at us, with joy himself, and with the warmth and love he felt for each of us.

My mother tells a story of being woken up at 2 am one night by Dave Heath and my father, who had been out drinking, and Dave insisting that my father quit his job and become a photographer full time. My mother can tell you exactly what she said, but the gist of it was, “can photography pay the bills? We have three small children, and if the answer is no, then forget it” – or something to that effect...

My father worked as an electrical contractor for a company called T. F. Jackson from 1955 to 1965, of which my dad would say bitterly were “The best years of my life”, regarding that time in some ways as a complete waste. I would later tell him the sense of it I had was that it was a thrust block for him, as an artist, and an activist, and that when the way opened for him to use his talents in creative and constructive ways, he took to it with a real power that came from knowing how soul deadening it is to work for a paycheck alone.

Back then, my father would send us to bed at 7:30, whether it was dark out or not, and cover the windows with frames covered in black fabric that he had made. He would then print on the kitchen table, “with a \$29 dollar enlarger, *including the lens*”. One photograph he made, of my mother, is on our wall now. Ma remembers that it was taken in 1961, shortly after the birth of my sister. When she saw it, she said, ‘But oh, look at my hair’, and my father said, ‘Never mind. Some day you will love it.’ And he was right.

During these years you can see my father's artistic and humanist qualities in his Fountain House and Racetrack series, from 1958, and 1959, respectively.

From the earliest days in his photography, my father's composition and printing skills were simply there. All that remained to be developed, from what I could see, was his personal, signature quality that I recognize now in all of his work from the early 1960's on.

In his photographs from the 50's, it's quite likely the people had no idea that he was taking their picture. From the early 60's, though, and on through the rest of his life and career, another quality enters into it, one I associate most of all with my dad's work. In almost every photograph of people, he is engaging them, often in conversation before and during taking their picture.

One friend referred to an intimacy that can be seen. My father knew how to make people feel respected, and cared for, and they relaxed with him. So, even though my father didn't talk about himself much in later years, or about what made his photographs special, those who knew him can look at his images and say, as one did recently, that "they are full of Frank's heart".

### 3. Years of activism, New York, 1960 to 1973, and Washington D.C, 1973 to 1979

The racism in this country, in particular before the landmark civil rights legislation of the 60's, was pervasive, and something that needed to be fought against at every turn.

We were approached recently by someone who has taken on the task of documenting the role of Brooklyn CORE (Congress of Racial Equality), and highlighting what he sees as this organization's central position in the achievements of that period. My own sense of how things unfolded back

then, however, was that what took place during the civil rights era was very much a de-centralized movement, with many local, grass-roots organizations cooperating and gaining power and legitimacy, but most of all achieving greater and greater results for minorities.

My father had an important role in this time, as a natural organizer. Many people cite him as a trailblazer, and mentor. He founded East New York Action, on Blake Avenue, ten blocks from where we lived when I was born.

As I've heard the stories about what they set out to do, I have the vivid sense of what it means for something to develop organically out of the needs of a community. East New York Action organized rent strikes, educated people on welfare rights, and registered voters, among other things.

In her book on welfare rights in this country, Felicia Kornbluth cited East New York Action being one of the first organizations to develop the tactic of rent strikes as a political tool.

As important as all this was back then was the fact that groups worked with other neighborhood organizations. Witness my father's association with Evelina Antonetty, at the United Bronx Parents, Cesar Perales, and others who cite him as a leader and inspiration. Such was the activism of the time.

In 1965, Manny Diaz gave my father his first paying job as a community organizer, with the Puerto Rican Community Development Project. They remained lifelong friends and allies.

I've told his San Francisco students who knew my dad when he was in his 50's and 60's that they got the more mellow version of my father. That got a laugh. They knew him when he was a lion, but that back when he was younger, in New York and in his 30's and 40's he was a dragon – a really

imposing figure. It didn't hurt that he looked like a movie star, a claim we can back up with pictures, and that he had a booming voice when he wanted to. He was both brilliant and charismatic. As one person who encountered him back then put it, his presence filled the room.

Two things that came out during the East Coast memorial for my father, concerning those years: how he was respected by black leaders in New York, and that in the early 1970's he was the first to arrange meetings between Puerto Rican and Mexican activists.

Like many other important figures of that time, my father was part of many groups, often simultaneously: he was the founder of East New York Action, a Vice President of The New York Urban Coalition (I remember wearing a "Give a damn" button to school back then - their ad said, "Give a damn about your fellow man"). He was also a Deputy Commissioner of The Community Development Agency of New York City.

### The Drug Abuse Council

My earliest recollection of telling friends what my father did was to say he represented minorities on a Nationwide level in the drug abuse field. I had no idea what I was saying, beyond that, or what it meant at the time. I later learned that in the 1960's, corporations were being approached for funding for drug treatment programs, and that they quickly realized they didn't know who was a legitimate advocate, or where their resources would be best used. For that reason the Ford Foundation and others founded The Drug Abuse Council, that had Fellowships for advisors. In its second year, I believe, my father was a Fellow, and it was this work that took us in 1973 to the Washington D.C. area.

In all this time, my father did not earn his living with photography. He was an organizer, and, as I remember one person telling me, he always had his



camera with him. We have images, then, of East New York in the 60's, rent strikes, the famous school boycott of 1964, the March on Washington, the Young Lords, and Lincoln Hospital's drug treatment program in the 70's where acupuncture was used to help people who were dealing with addiction.

Interlude: Becoming disillusioned with politics, and turning again to art

My father had a life-long disdain for politicians, bureaucrats and hustlers of all kinds. I can hear his already clear sense of disagreement with his activist colleagues in an interview in 1980 with the future Secretary of New York State Cesar Perales. In it Frank asks him about the legitimacy of appointed representatives, who would supposedly advocate for minority rights, but who had no grassroots, or community level recognition or support. Cesar answered that there was a place for such people who, "knew how the system worked" and could get things done. Clearly this is so, but you can imagine this situation at its worst as well, where professional politicians moved in and took over the process. I think this is what my dad saw happening more and more to minority representation in the late 60's and early 70's.

Others, such as the family friend Willie Vazquez can tell this chapter better than I, but, as I understand it, my dad gradually moved away from what he saw as the corruption of democracy and the disenfranchisement again of the underclass in this country.

#### 4. The Puerto Rican Diaspora Documentary Project, 1979 to 1985

By the time my father got funding to work exclusively as a photographer, his art was already fully developed. His political philosophy as well was completely developed, from almost two decades of activism. Receiving a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1979 then, gave

Frank the opportunity to realize the long held aims that he had for both his art and activism. I remember the phone conversation we had where he said to me, "Imagine writing a proposal for everything you do well, and for everything you want to do, and getting funded for it." The Puerto Rican Diaspora Documentary Project took him across the Continental United States, to Hawaii and to Puerto Rico. He conducted over 140 interviews, in some cases with people he had known for decades, but mostly with people who came to know him as an advocate.

There has not been a project before or since of the range and consistency of my father's project documenting the Puerto Rican experience in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nothing even comes close. The project culminated with 45 exhibitions over a ten year period, brought to local galleries in the second phase of the project by *Padrino*, or patron, organizations. Twenty years after the exhibitions, a book would be produced with photographs and framing accompanying text.

For me, the book is passionate, infuriating, depressing, uplifting and beautiful all at once. It represents what art can be in the hands of someone committed to social activism, in other words, a full human being. This is a work that awakens the best is in us all.

As of this time (August, 2016), the oral history interviews from this project, "Voices from the Puerto Rican Diaspora", have yet to be transcribed, translated, and published.

5. Moving to San Francisco, the Y. E. S, and Chamorro Documentaries, and his years of teaching, 1985 to 2005

Michael Lesser at the UC Berkeley Extension gave my father his first opportunity to teach, and right away word began to spread of this extraordinary teacher. Reading the testimonials, even from his fellow teachers, they all say that my father offered something that few, if any other teachers had to give. Technical expertise aside, by that point in my father's

life, he could easily focus on the aesthetic and social vision that could be accomplished with photography. Many students asked for private lessons, and so began the famous workshops my father offered from their home.

From 1989 to 1991, my father also worked for Y.E.S., or Youth Environment Studies, founded by Harvey Feldman. In those years, Frank documented their landmark efforts to combat the spread of HIV and AIDS in San Francisco among the underclass of IV drug users. The aim of Y.E.S., according to Jerry Mandel, was to address all of the problems associated with drug use from a sociological perspective. Frank's connection with both Jerry and Harvey went back to the Drug Abuse Council, where they were all Fellows in the early 1970's.

Y.E.S had a national reputation because of Harvey Feldman's long involvement in the field of policy and drug treatment, so when the AIDS crisis hit in the 1980's Harvey recognized that a second wave would be coming that would effect IV drug users in particular. His organization started the then unheard of method of handing out first bleach, and then needles, as well as condoms and encouraging life-saving changes in people's regular drug using behavior. As Jerry put it, AIDS went in that time from being a death sentence, to a life sentence. Y.E.S. also developed the concept of the compassionate Community Health Outreach Worker (or C.H.O.W.) who could engage an risk population. Their model programs went on to be replicated on a nationwide level. This is what my Frank documented in those years, and his powerful images were used for education and fundraising purposes.

### The Chammoro Documentary Project

In 1990, Frank was asked by his friend and colleague from Chicago, Samuel Betances, to photograph the Chamorro people of Guam, Saipan, Titian and Rota in the Marianas Islands. Modeled on my father's Puerto Rican Diaspora documentary, their aim was to chronicle the culture, as well as the social challenges faced by this group.

My father's teaching continued in the 90's at the Berkeley Extension, and the Academy of Art College, where he encouraged and helped to develop the careers of a number of magnificent photographers, including Ken Oppram and Karen Ande.

After decades of living with potential that was yet to be realized, my father had an instinct for his students artistic and personal vision and he was fully committed to helping them each fulfill their aims, and to go beyond what they thought was possible. He delighted in teaching, as it brought together his art, political conscience, gift for communicating and love of people.

When I would pick him up at school after class, or would stop by my parents' home when there was a workshop going on, I would smile because I knew his students were getting something very special.

At his memorial here on the West Coast, many former students came, decades after they had studied with him, and all of them spoke of how his influence has remained with them, guiding and encouraging them over the years. It has been a great comfort to my mother, sister and to myself to hear this.

6. Publishing the book, *The Puerto Rican Diaspora*, 2006, at the age of 76

When lifelong friend Julio Rodriguez called my father on New Year's Day, 2006, and told him "It's time to get your book published" he thought he was kidding. It turned out he was serious, and he made the offer that day to support making that dream a reality. There had been a few false starts with proposals to have the book done. Most of the time my father wasn't satisfied that it would be to his standards, and his feeling was he'd rather not do it, if it couldn't be done right. Over the course of the year working with the book designer, Doug Da Silva, my father was re-invigorated. He was viewing again images taken in some cases more than 40 years before, but many of the stories he remembered as if they had just happened.

When I was in the process of cataloguing his darkroom work, I noticed that the name of the person photographed was often on the back of the print. My father not only remembered their names, but their stories as well, and this brought up a lot of memories and emotion for him. An artist has a lot to deal with, and the real work, from what I've seen in my father's case especially, is being that sensitive and feeling so fully and also keeping one's balance. We all did what we could to help, but on a number of levels, exhilarating as it was, we can also say it was not at all easy on any of us. I'm glad he did it, of course, more than I can say, but what an effort it took!

#### 7. Later years, some late recognition, and his color work, 2006 to 2014

In 2008, Frank Espada was awarded an honorary degree from Lehman College, in New York, and this was something he was proud to receive. Many of his long time friends, such as Willie Vazquez and Julio Rodriguez turned out for the event.

The Library of Congress purchased 75 of my father's prints in 2009, and in 2010, Duke University acquired many of Frank's papers, teaching materials, and a good number of his documentary photographs. Their aim is to continue to use this material in their Documentary Studies Department, as well as in their courses on History and Human Rights.

We can add now to this list of accomplishments, the acquisition of the Puerto Rican Diaspora Documentary Project by the Smithsonian American History Museum in 2016, and their American Art Museum, and the National Portrait Gallery having also acquired a select number of his prints.

In his last years, my father turned to color photography, making beautiful digital prints of the sky and ocean from his home studio. I took his move to color as his needing another photographic challenge to surmount, technically, which, astonishingly, he succeeded in with each new mode of printing.

I also take the art of his later years as absolutely being on a continuum with all that came before. In it, he is focusing on what is positive, always new, tangible, and all of our common heritage. He was always the humanist, and a day didn't go by when he wasn't aware of both the beauty and the injustice in our world. He lived his life as the most eloquent and persuasive answer to those facts.

In his latter years, my father had a number of health problems that limited his mobility. Fortunately, they had an amazing, ever changing view from their balcony in Pacifica, and all of my father's Pacific Skies images were taken from the same vantage point, although, owing to their diversity you would probably never guess. My mother heard me telling someone that when Frank Espada couldn't go out to beauty, beauty came to Frank.

My father also had trouble hearing others, even with high tech hearing aids, and I know this was isolating for him, and yet he persevered taking beautiful images until the last weekend of his life.

I like to think that in his later work, my father is looking into the face of eternity and eternity is smiling back. Of all his photographs, some of these of the sky, the light, and ocean are the ones I choose to have around me in my room. They are uplifting every time of day and night, which is as my father intended, his last gifts from his great heart to us all.

## From Eugene Smith to Frank Espada

As soon as I heard the photographer W. Eugene Smith's voice, in a documentary produced for Japanese television, I recognized him immediately as a spiritual ancestor. It was not just what he said that was so moving, and familiar to me, but his fierce love and commitment to the people he photographed.

Called 'the father of social documentary photography', Smith refined his craft with essays for Life Magazine, and raised the standard for journalists by bringing the full power of humanist photography to his narrative.

My father, Frank Espada, was introduced to him by another great photographer, Dave Heath, in the late 1950's, and they were part of a group who studied with Smith in New York. Up until that point, my father was already technically accomplished, having studied at the New York Institute of Photography, and, as part of the Puerto Rican minority in this country, his values were formed early on. He brought to their meeting at the age of twenty-nine a commitment social justice that came from his own experience with discrimination, and what he witnessed all around him.

I imagine that their encounter galvanized something (was a catalyst) for Frank Espada, as he saw in Eugene Smith's work how profoundly moving art could be when joined together with the advocacy for universal human rights.

In speaking with Dave Heath years later, and asking him about the materials they used, bridging the 1950's and 1960's, he replied that they didn't talk much about those things. He told me they mostly talked philosophy, which was really something to hear. I know my father revered both Dave, and Gene Smith, not only for their accomplishments with their chosen medium, but for their deep love of people that is tangible in their work.

Surely all this was communicated in their first meetings, that happened right in the middle of the Civil Rights movement, and before Frank Espada would photograph the early 60's New York rent strikes, school boycotts, and voter registration, the March on Washington, and his own renowned Puerto Rican Diaspora Documentary Project.

Eugene Smith's philosophy of art and life made a deep impression on him, and this is what he in turn communicated to me, and to all of his devoted students.

W. Eugene Smith said:

"Photography is a small voice, at best, but sometimes - just sometimes - one photograph or a group of them can lure our senses to awareness. Much depends on the viewer; in some, photographs can summon enough emotion to be a catalyst to thought. Someone - or perhaps many - among us may be influenced to heed reason, to find a way to right that which is wrong, and may even search for a cure to an illness. The rest of us may perhaps feel a greater sense of understanding and compassion for those whose lives are alien to our own. Photography is a small voice. I believe in it. If it is well conceived, it sometimes works."

When the Smithsonian curator Carmen Ramos visited us here in California to view my father's work, she was impressed by the fact that the names of the children my father photographed were written on the mounted prints. To her, it was something special that they were unique to him, and not just 'subjects'. *Of course* they were precious to him, and he felt a responsibility to tell their stories, and to advocate for them, and others in our community.

In 1963 he founded East New York action to organize and work with the poor and marginalized in our neighborhood, and he kept that same motivation as he became a well respected activist and people's representative in New York through the 60's.



That whole time he continued taking photographs.

As much as Dave Heath continued Eugene Smith's artistic vision, producing deeply moving portraits that show the inner life of those he photographed, Frank Espada, more than anyone else, continued Smith's humanist vision of documentary art.

He said to his own students

"The purpose of showing my work is to get young people thinking, to stimulate their minds and hearts, to make conditions known, and to attack injustices wherever they exist."

In the fifteen years he taught photography here in San Francisco, he found fulfillment, as it brought together all he'd learned with his love for people, and his astonishing ability to communicate. Continuing the precious legacies he had received both as an artist and activist brought him the greatest satisfaction.

W. Eugene Smith is well known as a master printer, and for his compassionately engaged social documentary photography. Dave Heath is known as well, primarily in the art world, but the name of Frank Espada is seldom mentioned alongside them, and it deserves to be. His gifts continue through his students, and I am proud to say I am one of them. As it is with so many others, his teaching, and his values, and those of Eugene Smith are with me, as a creative, uplifting and sustaining force, lighting the way.

Two stories by Frank Espada

{A few months before he passed away, my father wrote out a few stories from his youth to pass down to us. These two stand out.}

### The Beast

His name was Joe Fleming. He was the neighborhood bully, 18 years old, about 6'3" and 200 pounds. He got kicks out of terrorizing the younger kids - his favorite instrument of torture was his cigarette, with which he burned his victims' arms. Most of us avoided him like the plague. Seeing him approach was enough to break up whatever games we were playing, still, he always managed to get a smaller, slower victim.

I was about 12 years old, skinny, and not very tall, so I was in his sights as much for my size as for the fact that we were the first Puerto Rican family in a working class Irish neighborhood on Manhattan's west side.

We had moved from Brooklyn in 1942 about a year before to a small apartment at 216 West 108th Street . I slept on the couch in the living room, my sister in the small bedroom, and my parents in the other.

So, one day we were playing against the school wall, a baseball derived game, with a "Spalding" (a pink rubber ball used for all such sport, primarily for stickball - more on this later) when we saw him lurking behind a car, sizing up the group, probably selecting his prey - we scattered like wildebeests in all directions when becoming aware of a predator.

We lived right across the street at 216 West 108th Street, across the street from my school, P.S. 165 - so I made a break for it - to no avail - He cut me off and grabbed me from behind - I yelled "let me go you bastard" which, naturally made him angry. "You skinny little spic"! he said trying to twist my arm to burn me, at which point I pried myself loose, turned and gave

him a well-placed knee in a very sensitive spot - he yelled as I freed myself, running straight to my stoop. For some reason I still haven't out, I turned around and yelled "215 tomorrow, after school!! Translated this was a challenge to fight.

215 was the building across from the backyard, was enclosed with a 10' high wall, effectively creating a space similar to a boxing ring. Here was where fights took place, and there were several basic rules. First, there was to be an impartial "referee" whose only task was to halt the fight when it became one-sided. Also, there were to be no weapons other than your fists.

I had watched a fight between two evenly matched kids, who beat each other pretty good for a good ten minutes, after which the ref called a stop to it. They then shook hands and the spectators cheered and everyone went home satisfied with the results. I didn't think this would happen with me and "the Beast"

I decided I couldn't mention this to my parents for fear they (especially my mother) would forbid me from going through with my challenge. Were this to happen, I would be tagged as chicken, a tough thing to deal with. The first night, I remember, I had a hard time falling asleep. School is now a blur in my memory, all I could think of was the fight at 3pm, which came pretty soon. I walked through the basement at 215, past the coal bins and the garage cans, and entered the brightly lit "arena". Along the three walls it was totally filled with spectators, mostly young kids who hated Joe Fleming. This made me feel a little better, although I was still very nervous.

Joe Fleming was doing a bad imitation of shadow boxing - he looked huge- Archie Smith was to be the referee - I don't know who appointed him, but I didn't really care. He shouted "start"!, and before I had a chance to get set, the Beast was on me with a shot to the top of my head and several to my stomach and back. Something then happened - a very strange slowing down of time, coupled with a fire in my gut, which translated into a desire to kill the bastard. The rest of the fight, which I guess lasted no more than 5

minutes, was all Fleming. Essentially, he beat the crap out of me. I heard Archie yell "OK, enough"! and, also strange, no one cheered, or clapped - it was pretty weird, the silence - The Beast, smiling, walked away, grunting as he was leaving - "I hope this teaches you a lesson" or something to that effect. Suddenly, I heard someone say "Tomorrow, after school" - then I heard a cheer from the spectators - for that was my voice challenging the Beast to another "round" - He turned, surprised, said "I'll kill you tomorrow, you little shit", and strode off.

I went home, my mother was at work, a sweat-shop where she was paid 24 cents for making a blouse. My father, a CPA in Puerto Rico, was at his job with an export import house, where he was a clerk and made \$30 a week. Of course, they were surprised to see my face, which had several black and blue bruises, and a bump on my forehead, the result of a direct hit. What they didn't see were the bruises only body, nor my aching ribs (which really hurt when I took a deep breath). I refused to answer their questions, all I said was that I wasn't going to be anyone's punching bag.

That night, I slept very well.

The following day, I was anxious to get back to 215. And, this time, the word had spread - there were easily twice as many spectators. Also, this time I was there first. The Beast swaggered in, with a cigarette hanging off his mouth, just like George Raft.

I remember that I couldn't wait to get it started - I wanted to kill him too. "Start" yelled Archie and I went right at him, running right into the hardest shot to my face I had ever experienced - it knocked me to the ground, and I saw stars (really). I heard a groan from the crowd and saw him coming at me as I was about to get up - he wanted to finish me off. I timed my shot perfectly as I rose- I brought my fist back and landed a beauty to the pit of his stomach. I heard a cheer, which for a moment felt great - until he got me in the ribs (again). I bent over and he hit me in the back of the neck, throwing me again on the deck -

Now I was furious, seeing red, (really!) and attacking with whatever I had left - I got to him, finally, with a shot to his Adam's apple, which shook him up for he had to stop to catch his breath. All this took, I think, less than 5 minutes. Archie called a halt - shouting "a draw" which brought a great cheer from the crowd. The Beast looked up at Archie, disbelief in his face, and cursed him.

Again, he started to leave, entered the basement, at which point I, again, offered another challenge, "tomorrow at 3"! The crowd loved it. I saw him stop, and without turning around, muttered something vile under his breath -

That night, I was again drilled by my parents. My mother was very excited, my father only wanted to know what was going on - I finally told them the story, and that there was to be another fight tomorrow. My mother totally forbade me, but after a quiet conversation with my father, looked at me and said "Pared que te vas a hacer hombre" (It appears you are about to become a man). My pains suddenly vanished. My sleep was sound.

I was up early, very sore, but ready for whatever came. The crowd was even larger, with some arguments over the spaces on top of the walls. Archie winked at me, others shouted words of encouragement "Go get'm Frank" and "Let him have it".

It looked like I had packed the joint with my friends - actually these were simply kids that hated the Beast. 3 pm came and went - then 3:15, then 3:30 - the crowd was now really into it, sensing what was happening, yelling, hooting, singing ditties, like "Where have you gone today Fleming"? Well finally after waiting for 45 minutes, Archie rose and announced "Frank by default"!

Then they really went wild, calling the Beast all kinds of nasty raunchy names - It was a sight to see and hear. At first, I couldn't believe what was

happening - I kept looking at the door to the basement, expecting to see him. Then it began to sink in - He quit - he chickened out - He is really a coward. This seemed to be what we were all thinking - no one would be afraid of him ever - for he had disgraced himself, he had exposed who he really was.

I don't recall getting back to my place, other than several kids walked me back to my stoop, patting me on the back - some of these love taps hurt - but I couldn't care less.

My mother came in first - she took a look at me and said "Que paso"? What happened? To which I answered "He didn't show" - then she sat down and cried, laughed, cried - my father came home in the middle of this - he was very surprised, thinking something awful had happened - Then mama said "Tu hijo complio" Hard to translate - the closest I can come is "Your son did what he had to do"

### Postscript

Joe Fleming became a New York City cop. He was kicked out after about 3 years after several police brutality charges, which were settled out of court. Some accused him of burning them in their arms with cigarettes. He died in a fire some years later, started, some say, by his smoking in bed.

## Stickball

Baseball at 12, was life. My father took me to my first game when I was about 7, and I was hooked. This was in Puerto Rico, where it's the national pastime, even though Puerto Ricans were excluded from the major leagues, not being white enough.

At 9 we migrated to New York City, where we found a cold-water flat in Brooklyn. Naturally, we immediately became Dodger fans, especially when they signed Luis Olmo, a Puerto Rican outfielder, who apparently was white enough.

Over the next several years, I indulged in many varieties of the sport (sand lot, PAL, stoop ball, stick ball, Base Hit (a board game)).

We had moved to Manhattan's west side when I was about 12 - a working class Irish neighborhood. We were one of the first P.R. families on the block. The first few weeks of the summer of 1942 introduced me to American racism.

I was called a spic, a nigger, and a few other creative names.

For awhile I was lost, lonely, and very miserable. I had no friends, no one to pal around or play ball with. That's when I became a reader - astronomy, science fiction, the Civil War, Dickens, Kenneth Roberts, Mark Twain, and more.

Stick ball was a big time game then, 3 sewers defined the field, each one about 50 feet apart. One was home plate, followed by 2nd base. The 3rd was the outer limits of the playing field - anything hit past this, according to ground rules, was an automatic home run - a "3-sewer shot" home run.

Saturdays were when the big games were played - and 2nd base was almost even with my stoop at 216 W. 108th Street, from which I watched. Games were usually played for money - anywhere from \$5 to \$20 per player.

Teams would come through from other parts of the city, so the competition was serious, and sometimes fierce. The street was cleared of cars - car owners (there weren't many in those days) co-operated, parking either beyond the 3rd sewer or on the next block - (and we had an appreciative audience, fans leaning out of windows).

The game was played with a pink rubber ball (pronounced Spaldeen) with broom handles for bats. The pitcher had to throw the ball on one bounce - the batter had 2 shots at it - foul balls counted as a swing.

Stick ball was played all over the city, and survived until the end of WWII - probably good economic times killed it, for suddenly everyone seemed to have cars.

Anyway, the story goes on. One very warm Saturday in the summer of '43, word got around that a big-time team was coming in to play the locals, who styled themselves "The Shamrocks" - to us small-fry. They were also "the Big Guys" -

I parked myself on the top step of our stoop, sucking on a popsicle, ready for big action. The game was about to begin when I saw a Shamrock huddle. The game called for 7 players: pitcher, catcher, first, second and third basemen, a "short" fielder and a "long" fielder who played right on the 3rd sewer.

Well, fate struck. They were short one man. There was more huddling, then I saw Marty leave the group and head straight for me. I looked around thinking he was looking for someone, but he looked directly at me and said "Hey, kid, you wanna play?" I froze, like a deer under headlights. I never expected anything like this to happen. He looked at me with a quizzical expression, as if I hadn't understood him.

"Well whadayusay?" I nodded yes, to which he hollered back at the group - "Play ball!"



They sent me out to deep outfield, and I realized that they had been watching me play with the "Little Guys". He had faith that I could catch a fly ball. They put up my share, which was \$10, and away we went, as Jackie Gleason used to say.

The rest has become a blur, except for the last inning - We were winning by a run, with two out - they had men on 2nd and 3rd. The fly ball was atmospheric - it kept climbing up, up, up - it was far above the roof of the 4th floor apartment buildings, where it reflected the late afternoon sun - then it began to descend - I held my breath as I tracked it, just inside the 3rd sewer - all of a sudden I felt incipient panic, for someone had parked a car right along the 3rd sewer line - and, of course, the ball was heading right for it.

The rules stated that a hit ball was fair no matter where it hit, as long as it was past 1st or 3rd bases - I headed for the car, looking at the ball, and without hesitating, climbed on the running board - stretched as far as I could, stuck my hand out and felt the ball land nicely in my hand. It was a tremendous catch, a game saver, and my passport into the consciousness of the group.

I was a momentous hero, slapped on the back, screamed good things at, but most of all, I gained their acceptance - for the first time. It was a memorable day plus they awarded me \$20.00, which was a small treasure in those days

My mother didn't understand at first - then she caught on and let out an "Hay que bueno"! for we were behind on our payments to Dr. Tarregrota, a sadistic, alcoholic and very unhappy man, whose only quality was that he was a Dodger fan. And never used novocaine. But that is another story.

Opening remarks at the Tribute to Frank Espada, hosted by John Santos,  
August 9th, 2015

Good afternoon, welcome everyone, and thank you all for coming. We have a very special event planned for you today, and I'd like to say a few words about what you are going to see.

The last two years I've been on an unexpected journey of discovery. We all grew up with my father's photographs all around, and so I thought I knew my father's work, but it turns out though that there was a lot more to it, that I didn't even know existed.

A few months before my father passed away, I began organizing his archive, and I kept finding things that I liked as much as his better known work. There were times when I would literally run up the stairs to ask him about a print I had never seen before.

Many of the photographs you will see today have never been displayed, or published, and so, again, thank you for coming. You're in for a treat.

For those of you who never met Frank Espada, and are not familiar with his life and work, there is one more thing I would like to say up front, and that is, that my father was a human rights advocate. He was *a radical*, from before I was born, and right up to the end of his life. In ordinary times we would call a person with his politics a progressive, but then, these are not ordinary times.

I have two quotes from my father's photographic mentors, that I would like to conclude with, on the relationship between art and social action. The first is from Dave Heath, and the second from Eugene Smith, who Frank Espada met and studied with in the 1950's, and who has been called The Father of modern photo journalism.

First Dave Heath: "What I want of the work is lightness underlined with disquietude, where the viewer can enter and expand his or her emotional being, not in the character of catharsis perhaps, but in a sense of assuagement, the touching of the compassionate core of one's being, the infusion of another's moment in time into one's own."

And, Gene Smith:

"Photography is a small voice, at best, but sometimes - just sometimes - one photograph or a group of them can lure our senses to awareness. Much depends on the viewer; in some, photographs can summon enough emotion to be a catalyst to thought. Someone - or perhaps many among us may be influenced to heed reason, to find a way to right that which is wrong... The rest of us may perhaps feel a greater sense of understanding and compassion for those whose lives are alien to our own. Photography is a small voice. I believe in it. If it is well conceived, it sometimes works."

Thank you, and enjoy the show.

## Towards a useful definition of Latino Art

Latino art is art that is informed by a unique history. That history includes coming from, or having family roots in what is broadly referred to as Latin America - the Caribbean, Central and South American countries and cultures. The particular history that is a part of and that informs all Latino art also includes the experiences of being an outsider, of racial discrimination, the struggle for human rights and dignity, of stereotyping, marginalization, and underrepresentation in this country's politics, media and education (schools, libraries, and museums).

For a term like Latino to serve a useful purpose, while keeping these common elements as part of its definition, it would also have maintain the distinctions of the various groups it refers to. If these precious, unique histories are not given the enough emphasis, then the term Latino can become almost meaningless, cut off from diverse people's ancestry, from their adversity, and triumphs. There's the risk ironically that such well intended language can move us closer to the very assimilation and loss of identity which progressives, activists and those of us who would honor and draw from our past fight at all costs to avoid.

No doubt there is resistance to history. There are plenty of people and institutions even now that would rather not face up to the deplorable way minorities have been treated in this country. There has been tacit and overt cooperation with injustice. The legacies of colonialism, slavery, legal discrimination, and stratified class are in fact with us today, in compelling ways, but they are only seen as such when we have a historical memory.

Latino art, if it is to function as more than merely art produced by a person of Latin American descent, is informed by this history and perspective. What form that then takes has all the latitude contained in the word art, which is of course boundless. The aesthetics and values of such people speaks of their experience, and their aspirations in light of what they've

known. By Latino art, we are enriched and moved towards the more just and beautiful world that was our ancestor's dream, and that was their wish for their children.

The Puerto Rican Diaspora - Documenting the Puerto Rican Experience in the 20th and 21st centuries, by Jason Espada

Imagine if you will conceiving of a project that would document the Puerto Rican experience across the United States... Imagine further that this project would be undertaken by someone who is widely respected as an advocate for these people, and that this person, in addition, is a first-rate photographer. Now let's say that this project, by some extraordinary miracle, were to get funded, that all the doors open, and that across the continental United States, in Hawaii and in Puerto Rico, over 140 oral histories were recorded, beautiful and moving images were captured, and that a traveling exhibition as well as a book were to result from this project; that in the end a comprehensive and moving portrait of a people was produced....

Such a project, you'd be right to think, is rare in its conception, and the likelihood of accomplishing such a vast and complex undertaking would seem to be very small indeed. And yet, this is exactly what has happened. For those of you who do not know, The Puerto Rican Diaspora Documentary Project was conceived of by my father, Frank Espada. His proposal to the National Endowment for the Humanities was funded, the photographs were taken, the oral histories recorded between 1979 and 1981; this exhibition then traveled for fifteen years throughout the United States and Hawaii, as well as to Puerto Rico; and, in 2007 an award winning book of photographs and narratives was published with the title, *The Puerto Rican Diaspora: Themes in the Survival of a People*. This last stroke of good fortune only happened as a result of a generous gift from a lifelong friend and ally of my father's.

Scholars and students both of the modern Latino and Puerto Rican experience are basing their deep research in every case on the labors of those who have come before them and done the work, with vision, with passion and with skill. No one would deny that the finished work of those

who have come before us is the cornerstone of any comprehensive scholarship we would do today.

In the interviews, Frank would almost always begin by asking people to tell how they got here, and in turn, more often than not, they would start by telling their family's stories. In that way, from multiple angles, the entire 20th century's history was covered. Modern scholars could do no better than to base their efforts on achievements such as this.

## Frank Espada's social documentary photography in the 1990's

In the early 1990's, Frank Espada continued his social justice work on the West Coast, using his photography to advocate for marginalized communities during the AIDS crisis.

Access to health services has always been a struggle for the minorities in this country, for the poor, and disenfranchised, and in the late 1980's "an inordinately high proportion of IV drug-related AIDS cases occur(ed) in the black and Latino communities."

The *Youth Environment Studies* (YES) program effectively used community health outreach workers to connect with at-risk groups, the poor, addicts, and the homeless; and The *Out of School Youth* project (OSY) sought to educate a vulnerable population in San Francisco on the dangers of HIV transmission. A majority of its subjects were African American, Latino and Filipino youth.

The photographs taken in those years by Frank were used for educational and fund raising purposes. They show programs that were responsive to needs of people *across lines of race and class, gender and sexual orientation*. Reaching beyond the stigma of poverty, addiction, homosexuality, criminalization, AIDS, and at times homelessness, they aimed to foster understanding and compassion.

Beginning with the photo essays on Lincoln Hospital in the Bronx in the 1970's, (included in the Civil Rights Era photography acquisition) and *Promesa*, in the 1980's, (part of the Puerto Rican Diaspora Project) *these two projects continue Espada's documentation of sociologically based minority drug treatment programs in the United States.*



As with his previous work, these profound essays show the power of social documentary photography to awaken our humanity.

## The Glory of the Good Fight

To join in what my father's generation called "the good fight" was to enter into the timeless struggle for human rights everywhere, with like-minded, courageous souls. It meant to stand with them, to march with them, to raise your voice with them, to fight along side them, and perhaps most of all to be inspired by their dedication and action, and to give your encouragement at every turn.

It means even now to set yourself apart from those who would turn their backs on compelling causes, those who live only small lives of callous self interest, and with all our strength and to our last breath to work to see that no one is denied their rights or dignity, that no one is exploited or abused, excluded or forgotten.

In this time we need more and more dedicated souls willing to act on a vision of humans and life here that is noble, and that we have not yet realized. Isn't it clear with all the extraordinary waste and shallow, narcissistic self-indulgence in American culture, that to become a mature human being is just this – to take responsibility for each other, however far we can reach? In other times we may not get to see this value so keenly, but in these times especially, a compassionate life is like water in the desert or light when all else is an impenetrable pitch of night. Against this sad and confused backdrop, the tremendous value of such an aim couldn't be more clear.

We may not make a living as activists, or become famous, but we are all called to do our part here, and there is noble worth inherent in that, something no one can take from us. We're all seeking meaning with our lives, even if we don't put it in those words, and we won't feel fulfilled and satisfied until we find it.

The way is well marked for those who would take it. A few steps in, and we enter this mighty stream with our greater family in this land and

generation, and in other places and times; we become larger, and we receive renewed strength and vision. We go from time to the timeless, from evanescence to what has eternal value.

*For my brother, the poet Martin Espada, on his 57<sup>th</sup> birthday, and in memory of our father, the photographer, educator and human rights activist Frank Espada, August 7<sup>th</sup>, 2014.*

## The barest outlines of a Master

We don't have to see a lot of the work of a master craftsman to know we are witness to extraordinary quality. It is like this in all the arts: the way a wood worker turns the lathe, a few stokes by a painter, the posture and fully articulate hands of a dancer... In each, in a moment, we enter their world, that is rich and complete to overflowing. With just a few simple gestures from them, we enter into their vision and their nobility, which is the treasure-house they draw from to share freely with us all.

For every one true master, many more are left grasping for words to describe the ineffable, that which transcends language. Our response to their work is elemental. When we meet art that stirs up wonder, we still somehow have to exult, even if it can never reach the majesty of what is shared, and the feelings that are awakened in us. At their best, our praisesongs can only point to the presence of something great and profound among us. If it does just this much, the light of our seeing moves from one to another, and the gift has been shared.

Where do you begin if you have discovered a true artist, and if that person also happens to have been your father? A few of his photographs should be enough to convey his mastery, that he grasped the significance of his art, and achieved its full expressive power.

A small sample shows also that he was a master printer, accomplished in his craft, his methods fully in the service to his art.

But where to begin, I ask myself, when there is this much to show? I so want to do him justice, that I usually don't feel up to the task of introducing his work, beyond letting the images speak for themselves. And so here we are: a son with a heart full of love and gratitude for these and countless other gifts; feeling himself to be an inadequate messenger of the sublime and ennobling, of this life affirming work.

I realize that I can only do this much. I can just give the barest of outline of what my father created, but I think this should be enough to begin to grasp the dimensions of an extraordinary life and art.

I can only lead you  
to the crest of a hill,  
where the vision is waiting...

How things change, by Jason Espada

(number 59 in a series)

If you set out to write the most optimistic words you can manage in hard times, you have to start with what we're up against. And so, piled high on one side of my desk, I have the latest news about Monsanto, corporate control of the media, puppet politicians, and a shallow and distracted American public;

if we want, we can add the seeds of violence that are being sown every day by the use of unmanned planes dropping bombs, with 'every innocent killed, a victim with family and friends' – I said I was going to write optimistically – I didn't say it was going to be easy.

Actually, it is amazing to me that people face down these facts every day, and put themselves to caring for a world that looks set on self destruction. I saw how one commenter to a post vented that trying to change a corporation was just an ego game some people play, to feel better about themselves, but that we're 'outnumbered 50 to 1', *and I thought, Are those really the odds? Why not 500 or 5000 to 1?...*

I remember laughing the first time I heard the cut that 'old people don't have to learn history – they remember it'. Well, here are a couple of things I remember:

I remember wars with little or no protest, inequality before Occupy, factory farming and fast food consumed without questioning if it was any good for us;

I remember thinking this county would never in my lifetime, elect a person of color to the white house, and, even if O has been a complete washout, I think, if this is possible, what more can we do?

I have an image in mind, several in fact, just to chart more fully where we are now, on the way to where we want to go.

My father was the great documentary photographer and educator Frank Espada. In the 1960's, while we were in grade school in New York, my father was helping to organize voter registration, and although it was many years before he launched his career as a photographer and teacher, my dad always had his camera with him.

Recently, I found some of the pictures he took of a voter registration drive and voting machine demonstration. In them, we see a young white woman holding up a sample voting box, and explaining to people lined up how to punch holes to cast a vote. To me, the most amazing thing in these pictures is the determination we can see in people's eyes. Although it was late afternoon and starting to get dark out, something in their look said they weren't leaving until they understood how to take that step toward greater self determination that was in front of them.

It's important to remember other times when things looked impossible to change: America in Vietnam, blacks excluded from lunch counters, parks and libraries, the pre-war apathy of the left and middle America: If we don't remember the world wide anti war protests of February 15<sup>th</sup>, 2003, for

example, and keep it vividly in mind, we have nothing to guide us when things start to feel really oppressive.

History moves slowly, but it does move. Listening to Dr. King's speeches, we can't help but wonder what he'd think of the changes in our country since the 60's. There is still *a lot* of work to be done, everywhere you look, but there are also large and small successes that we need to draw from, and use to build on to move forward.

Take for just one example the development of microfinance. This movement started in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, in response to the overwhelming unmet need for poor people to have access to small loans to improve their lives. The organization Kiva, and others like it have picked up this simple concept, of directly lending small amounts, and millions of people worldwide have benefited and will continue to benefit.

As I write this, we have a lot of knowledge that wasn't available 20 years ago. More of us know more now about the food we eat, and how it's grown, about our history, and about global economics. We also have the internet, which has immense potential as a tool for social change. I hope to live a while more to see what we'll do with it.

My first reaction when seeing the '50 to 1' comment was briefly one of agreement with it, and despair. But then something else kicked in. It goes back to another family story. This one relates to when my father was a young boy, growing up on the island of Puerto Rico. The story goes that there was a bully who was terrorizing him, and that one day he decided he'd had enough. The next time he saw the bully coming at him he picked up a big rock, and scared the living shit out of him. The bully, he says, was never a problem again for him after that. What's more, as the capper to the story goes, my father went back to the spot where he had confronted the bully the day before, and he says, he couldn't even lift the rock. After hearing this, or repeating it ourselves for the umpteenth time, there is usually a dramatic pause, to let it sink in...

Now, I don't know what other kids' parents told them when sending them off to school, but I do remember my father telling us, 'don't take any shit from anybody'. That I do remember. Point being, I see, all these years later, that when you're threatened, you'll have strength that you didn't know you had in you, so don't be afraid. After a while, you go out looking for bullies. This has been the trajectory of my father's career, and, in our own ways that of my brother, sister and myself.

You want to know how change happens? It starts by looking the bully in the eye, and saying, that's it, I'm not going to back down. This is something bullies are not used to hearing. Nixon wasn't used to it; neither are corporations, high government officials or military men. But they do fall.

If we know ahead of time that bringing life saving changes, or some improvement in human rights isn't going to be easy, we won't give up so easily.

So what if politicians are bought and paid for, while people here are distracted by silly cat videos on their so-called 'smart' phones? or by reality tv, or the latest food and shopping? There are also these days more informed, dedicated people than ever before. I have to remember this, or else reading or even thinking about the news would be too much to bear.

I remember now: Aung San Sui Kyi was released from her second or third extended period of house arrest last year. She lives in one of the most oppressive military dictatorships in the world, and has been their steadfast opponent for decades. This reminds me that things change, not by themselves, but because some people don't give up when it's hard to keep hope. So make your own list of heroes and heroines. Think of what they have done, or are doing now to fix the hurting world we live in. Share what you know with your cohorts.



I was thinking the other day how no one of us gets to work with anything more than a part of the whole, and to think otherwise is just our pride talking. And yet it is important that we do our part as well as we can. This very work we are doing now will be our legacy. Just as we received an unfinished work from our ancestors, so also the work will be unfinished when it leaves our hands. No matter. 'Ours is the labor, but not the fruits thereof', says the Bhagavad Gita.

Just this is how change happens: we hold the dream in our hands, and carry it forward, with all our courage and care.

## I Become We – A Confluence of Rivers

I was surprised recently to hear the phrase *'I become we'* and it reminded me of something important, especially in these times. This is an idea that's been made use of for generations in the Civil Rights and Labor movements, as well as in religious teachings. Whether we hear it as *'There is strength in numbers'* or *'Together we will be heard'*, or, *'when two or three are gathered in my name, I am with them'*, the phrasing may change, but in one sense the message is the same. When we shift our identity from being an isolated self, struggling against the forces of the world, to one of a part of a great body moving through time, with a purpose that has brought us this far, and will take us forward, all the way home, we are reclaiming something essential.

Though I don't often think of myself as a Christian, I do appreciate many of the deep teachings that are found in that tradition. As a Westerner, I recognize the values laid out in their canon to be the foundation for our culture. Along with other religions, Christianity invites us also to reclaim our noble heritage, with language that may sound mysterious, until we see it at work in our own lives.

It's reported that Jesus said to his disciples, who he was sending out into the world to teach, *'he who receives you, receives me; and he who receives me, receives Him who sent me...'*

In this verse, I find all that is essential in understanding the profound nature of transmission, where a tradition is communicated across generations.

My father was the great social documentary photographer, educator and activist, Frank Espada, and my mother, who is still with us, is a deeply spiritual person. For these reasons, my brother, my sister and I grew all up in what I would call a socially conscious household. We were aware that there was injustice in the world and that we each had a responsibility to

stand for people's rights. We may have processed what we heard from them as children in our own way, but those ideals were certainly there for us from an early age.

Whether loss of a parent or teacher results in our renewed working for others, I think depends on the relationship we had with them before their passing. In my case, with my father, the three of us were each given something precious by him.

I think the word that best describes the feeling of receiving a gift that carries some responsibility is 'legacy'. It's not just something we can place on a shelf and forget. We have to do something to honor that gift. My father's life was all about art and activism, and the struggle for human rights, and that is something I inherited and intend to continue in as many ways, and for however long I can. I think my brother feels the same way, and my sister too, in her own way. He's a poet, and she's a lawyer.

My father said,

*"The purpose of showing my work is to get young people thinking, to stimulate their minds and hearts, to make conditions known, and to attack injustices wherever they exist."*

Now that he is no longer here, who will continue the essential work he was part of? Who will stand up for the exploited and abused, for those who are pushed aside and forgotten by society? Because my father is not with us physically to do this anymore, it's imperative, now more than ever, that we continue the work.

In 2014, one of my teachers, Thich Nhat Hanh, had a stroke that rendered him unable to speak. We have to ask, who will speak now that our teacher is silent?, and I have to answer that all of us who received his wisdom will speak. They will continue through us.

The movements for human rights this last century has suffered so many losses, from environmental activists, to social justice leaders. In some cases, they lived long lives, but so often their lives were cut short. In each case, those of us who were inspired by them felt the need to continue their message and their work. *We take the part that does not fade.* When we look at what we lost, we are bereft, and desolate. But when we look at what we were given by them, their great gifts of vision and courage, intelligence, and powerful commitment, we can't help but be lifted up by it, and empowered to take the next step on the path, and the next, together with our brothers and sisters. When we really see things as they are, we break down the imaginary barriers between 'I' and 'them'. I then becomes *we*, and we are empowered to continue this work.

A friend of mine recently shared a poem by Dawn Markova, called "fully alive", which really resonated with me. It has the lines:

*I choose to risk my significance,  
to live so that which came to me as seed  
goes to the next as blossom  
and that which came to me as blossom  
goes on as fruit...*

That's it, exactly. When we are part of a tradition, it's a great gift, a privilege. The traditions of progressive social activism and true human values we have received continues with us, and through us.

I have no doubt now that when someone meets me, and we talk politics and social justice issues, they are meeting my father, and my teachers, and all those who came before them and taught, and nurtured, and inspired them. All this is being shared. *Truth be told, we are a confluence of rivers, meeting one another.*

This is true of me, and I know that it's true of you as well. We have each received great and precious gifts that have been passed down to us through

the generations. We are each part of a noble heritage, and this is what we share now with one another.

*Twenty-three sixteen – a letter to the future*

I am writing this to my friends and family in 2316, three hundred years from now. If you are receiving this, it means we have somehow survived the threats to our collective existence, environmental destruction, and large scale war. I've heard only recently that the population of bees has been declining, and in our fragile ecosystem, this effects many crops and other forms of life. We're witnessing the rapid loss of species, mostly due to human beings encroaching on natural habitats. We also seem intent as ever on war, and our weapons now are more powerful than ever. So my writing to you now can be taken as a gesture of hope on my part, that these words will somehow reach you.

Given all that's going on these days, personally and in the world, it might seem that writing a letter to possible descendants, 300 years in the future is the most impractical, irresponsible thing I could be doing just now. From another point of view, however, I'm thinking that it's really the most practical thing I can do, and hopefully my reasons for saying this will become clear as I go.

I am writing this for you, and for myself also, truth be told, because it's of great value to me. I don't know how it will be centuries from now, but in these times, people are mostly materialistic in their aims and how they see themselves and others. I would like to write out at some length how these values express themselves, but first I should say that, in future times, what follows may be of interest not only to anthropologists, but to philosophers as well, those who are seeking to understand the perennial questions of human nature, and how best to live.

Writing and reflecting like this, then, is a relief to me as well, to step out of the narrow confines of how I usually view my life, and see it in this broader context.

One of my teachers, Thich Nhat Hanh, suggested that when we are having a problem with someone, we close our eyes, and imagine them one hundred years in the future. He went on to say that we would open our eyes and see them very differently. We will naturally have more love and appreciation for each other, and much less of a tendency to get caught up in pettiness, or with things that are ultimately unimportant. Contemplating our mortality and the preciousness of our lives here can have such wonderful effects.

Some biography here will perhaps illustrate the values of my era, and my reasons for writing.

I am a 55 year old man, never married. I've played classical guitar since my mid twenties, though I don't do this as a profession. I'm also a Buddhist these last 25 years, and this is something I spend a lot of time thinking and writing about. Again, not as a profession. The last couple of years I've managed my father's collection of photography, and earned enough from sales to museums to get by, and help support my mother. My father passed away in 2014, at the age of 83, from a heart condition. Frank Espada was an artist, activist, community organizer, and educator, as well as a social documentary photographer. To me, most of all, he was a noble human being.

My father thought a lot the last few years of his life about his legacy, feeling mostly that he had failed. He had some success as a teacher, and was loved by his students, but as far as his art and documentary work were concerned, he didn't feel it was appreciated or acknowledged as it should have been. In some ways, he felt like a failure for this reason, which at least in part was financial, or the material side of it. Most years, my parents struggled to make ends meet.

I was quite close with the creative side of my father. He took me as his first student when I was ten, and even though I set aside photography when I

was a teenager, and pursued music instead, we always had this language of art we could share. He knew I was a great admirer of that side of him.

I've often thought of how he did his photography even though he didn't get paid for it for decades. He did it for the pure enjoyment of it, and because he knew it had value all by itself.

He didn't do a lot of marketing for his work, and had a hard time putting a price on his photographs. He would rather give them away, which he often did. When a university curator and his agent at that time came to select photographs for an acquisition, he couldn't bear to be there to see it. These were like his children.

I learned a lot about materialist values, art and the spiritual life from watching my father. There are a certain class of what I call 'gate keepers' in any art – such as writing, music, poetry, or photography. Gallery owners, curators, collectors, agents, publishers and critics, all taken together couldn't produce anything near what a creative person does, and yet in some ways they hold the keys to their recognition, and perhaps even survival as an artist. They can also be antithetical to a person's art. It's no wonder my father wanted nothing to do with them, for the most part. He got by thanks to the support of his most loyal students and friends, and later in his career due to one agent who took up his cause for a while.

I can only imagine my father going into a gallery with a portfolio of his magnificent photographs, and asking permission to show his work. After doing this and getting rejected no more than once or twice, my father withdrew to work on his craft for its own sake.

In this country, when people meet each other for the first time, one of the first things we usually ask is 'What do you do?' (for work), which is a way of trying to get at how much money a person has, their social status and value as a human being defined by what they are worth materially.



I have a girlfriend these days whose parents own quite a bit of property, and referring to me, they ask her, Why doesn't he like to work? It's a very common attitude to have in these times, and yet it misses so much.

When a person focuses on material gain so much, it narrows their perception of beauty, truth, and any better purpose to our being here, other than accumulating wealth. They gain little satisfaction from their possessions themselves, but it has an insidious way of taking over people's lives. Look at the sad, desperate insecurity of even slightly famous people, and you see the deep poverty of materialism, when it gets to the level of self identification.

One of the reasons I'm writing this, as I said, is to step out of these motions, of seeking personal meaning in work or possessions, getting money or the fear of not having or losing the same. It seems at times like this can crowd out every other human value, and then what a loss it is!

If as a group we've survived long enough for you to get this letter, I'm sure part of the reason is that more of us have been able to go beyond such shallow and destructive views. When we and others are reduced to a number, and our utility as producers or consumers, we lose sight of a transcendent dimension we all share, our common humanity, and our great and noble inherent worth. If we don't know ourselves as we are, how could we ever treat ourselves and others properly?

*This morning, shortly before waking, I dreamt of my father. He was sitting in a big easy chair, and we were talking. I asked him, if it was possible before to bring about meaningful changes in our society through activism, shouldn't it be possible to do again?, and he said, yes, it is possible...*

Looking ahead 300 years, I know there are some things we would have in common. Although I have no idea how you will communicate, travel, and enjoy your days, what struggles or challenges you will have, I do know there are some ways you all will be the same as we are now. I have to reach

down below the level of just this one time I'm living in, but it is here with me now, this common basis for our understanding each other, and being able to share something of our lives with each other.

Three hundred years ago, we had composers like Bach, Handel and Vivaldi, whose music we continue to enjoy. They tapped into something universal, beyond any one time and place. The same could be said of painters and writers, sculptors and deep thinkers from that century, and reaching even further back in time. There is something immediately recognizable in art from any era. It speaks to us on a deep level that we forget too often when we are caught up focusing on work and money. If we identify too strongly with the material side of us as who we are, we miss the depths, the enjoyment, and the purpose of being alive on this earth, which is to delight in the treasures that are all around us, naturally and produced by men and women, and to care for and support one another as much as we can.

I forget, then I remember again, and the whole world changes for me. I write this then also as a warning to you, our descendants, our to-be-born brothers and sisters.

In our DNA we have the full range of options for living here on earth. I know that in the generations between now and when you read these words, out of this fundamental potential, we will have produced artists and businessmen, leaders and followers, saints and criminals, confused people and wise ones too. We have unlimited possibilities, but we forget this, because of how we limit ourselves. We sometimes focus on the wrong things and so we doubt, and despair, feel impoverished and desperate. We reduce ourselves to something that barely resembles a human being any more, but this too can change. We can regain our noble stature.

It's said in the sciences, that crops such as potatoes and apples have the inherent potential to adapt to circumstances such as a new environment or

invasive species. Within the DNA of a plant is the potent ability to change and continue to thrive.

As humans, we have the same creative, adaptive potential in us, if only we knew it, and made use of it. There are things we can do to block our knowing, such as drugging ourselves, or letting our mind relentlessly scatter and become shallow and numb, or succumbing to depression. These are very difficult states to correct, and so we struggle against self fulfilling prophecies of isolation and failure.

Art can remind us of who we are, on a deeper level, as can meditation, if it's done well. There is a level of our being we can know directly that shifts our entire experience, and what we know for ourselves is possible.

This experience of our deeper nature is of something that is not conditioned, and caught up in the reactivity of thinking about our material circumstances. We should all be able to glimpse, at least from time to time, this dimension of natural peace and perfection. Our innate light is how we know each other, beyond the temporary conditions, which are the various guises and roles we take on, or project onto others.

What is called 'the natural sphere of great perfection' is beyond any one time or place, and seeing it, even briefly, shifts what we think of the relative world, of time, of our work and our assessments of self and others. We can find this common, profound identity, free of change, free of sorrow and distress over conditions, and live from that awareness.

I hope that by the time these words reach you, you will already know these things, and you will have been teaching them to your children. Who knows? It may be that way in your future.

In these times, we fear and loathe death so much, seeing it as a total loss, an absolute disruption to our lives here and the lives of our friends and families. This has to be because we don't understand life, and, embracing

materialism as our basic philosophy, we turn away from these deeper meanings of our being here together. We have made things much more difficult for ourselves and each other than we needed to, and what's more, we've too often missed out on celebrating each other's beauty and gifts to the world.

Our lives consist both of greater worth and meaning, and that which is only incidental and of small importance to our being here, like what hat we are going to wear today, or perhaps what we are going to eat. If we learn to appreciate our natural and inherited treasures, the provisional right away takes *its* rightful place, as supporting our essentially spiritual lives here.

Perhaps I will write more to you later, my future friends and family, but for now this is all I want to say. I thank you all for being there, in my thoughts at least, and I hope that wherever this finds you, you all are dwelling in safety and in peace. May you all be well and at your ease. May you all have every happiness.