

Words in Honor of Peter London

By Patricia Rain Gianneschi

I first discovered and became acquainted with Peter London through our mutual membership and participation in the National Art Education Association (NAEA). I have attended every NAEA conference since the early 1990's when I began my teaching practice in the trenches of the Chicago Public Schools. There was no art program when I was hired, and I was situated in Chicago's North side in the Roger's Park neighborhood, the largest center of immigration in the United States. I taught 1200 students a year, with no art budget. I worked with a rich tapestry of students who spoke 37 languages in our neighborhood school. There was no bussing, and all the students and families from the rich immigrant community would walk to school. The NAEA became the center and nucleus of my teaching practice. Peter London became my inspiration for

so many curricula over the 25 years I taught at George Armstrong School of International Studies.

Peter London's book *No More Secondhand Art: Awakening the Artist Within* was my first encounter with the writings of Peter London. As the title suggests, he awoke the artist within me – and within my students. I can think back to the many seminars Peter presented on that topic over the years held in crowded meeting rooms with standing room only. I remember the first seminar I attended. It was on gardening and the relationship between gardening and spirituality. Peter later gave a marvelous talk about a series of very spiritually based paintings that he was working on at the time. The paintings contained faces – many faces – that he did not recognize, but he traced these faces and communed with them. Through his

process of art making, Peter discovered for himself that these very faces represented for him the faces of the victims of the Holocaust. It was one of the most moving presentations I have ever witnessed. Truthful. Honest. Deep. That. Is. Peter.

His book *Step Outside: Community Based Art Education* inspired several Oppenheimer awards I received. I created curricula based on the concepts he spoke of in this written work. I would take my students on walking field trips, visiting museums most of them had never seen. We also went to lunch, to the park, or to the tailor – walking in the diverse Roger's Park community so as to allow them to bond with their own neighborhood. When his book *Drawing Closer to Nature* was published, it was devoured and re-worked in my art room – and outside my art room in

the gardens we created as a school. The classes were based on his teachings about what students needed in order to feed the soul.

The transformative and spiritual aspects of Peter's work drew me in from the very first encounter I had with him. His elegant speaking style and the kindness in his voice was the first clue that this man was a very spiritual being and that there was much to learn about art education from him. I continually returned to my school filled with inspiration from the year's NAEA conference.

About 8 years ago I was rushing to a meeting room to speak to a woman who was giving a presentation on Japanese art. At the bottom of a poster describing her talk, she had a request and a sign up form, asking people to form a new caucus focused on the spiritual in art education. This was very interesting to me, and I ran to her meeting, put my name on her list, and then apologized because I was

on my way to hear Peter London speak instead. "Who is Peter London?" she asked. I could not fathom that she did not know his work, and I quickly gave her references and promised we would meet again soon. When I entered the room where Peter was presenting, he was greeting his participants, and I sat down near the front. I did not really know Peter at that time, but he knew me from my attendance at his presentations over the years, I was a loyal follower of his work. He approached me and said hello and I told him about this woman, and her desire to form a new caucus based on the spiritual in art education. He promptly said, "Sign me up, that's my shtick!"

These two individuals,

Peter London and Susan Nakao, tirelessly worked together for more than a few years, working with the NAEA to get this new caucus formed, which was later accepted by the board of the NAEA. Peter became the first chair of the Caucus for the Spiritual in Art Education. We were so lucky to have him in that position in those early years. Peter laid down the foundation for this very important work to which we committed ourselves. It is surprising how the very word "spiritual" can elicit such misunderstanding among people, among art educators, and scholars.

It is daunting to me – almost surreal even – to stand here before you today to speak on behalf of a man who has inspired me to inspire so many students who have walked through

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the door of my art room over the 25 years I spent at Armstrong School. Peter London is one of the most important art educators in our field. His views, his visions, and his example could very well lead us into a new direction in the field of art education. His books, his teachings, and his workshops should, I believe, be mandatory for pre-service teachers. For it is not the official standards with which he is concerned but rather the nurturing of the teacher. It is his wish that every teacher become the catalyst to propel students into the future. As surreal as it seems to me today, I assumed the position as the new president of the Caucus for the Spiritual in Art Education, and it is my wish and my hope to build the caucus into a vibrant community of art educators and scholars and pre-service teachers, who embrace the values, the lessons, the readings, workshops and spirit of Peter London. I find this to be critically important as we move forward in this country, so lacking in moral

strength as we are these days; so afraid of the very word spirituality; so afraid to commit to this kind of teaching.

Spirituality refers to an attitude of openness and enchantment toward life, and has to do with a person's orientation. Kandinsky suggested that a work of art is the artist's way of conveying that vibration in his own being, his own soul, to another human being. It is not necessarily tied to any religion. The spiritual artist searches for ways to transform their inner being, their internal self, born out of a relationship with other humans, the world, and the divine.

Peter London is a spiritual artist. He has allowed the vibration of his own being, his own soul, to permeate his work, his art, his writing, and his teaching. More than that, he has shared that vibration with all of us. I am thankful to have found him during my years as a teaching artist. I am honored to carry on his work with the Caucus for

the Spiritual in Art Education, and, as I pursue my MFA as a studio artist, I remain inspired by his teachings and example.

According to Kandinsky, the artist is a seer who reproduces what he sees, and, as Robert Schumann has suggested, the work of the artist is to "shine a light into the depths of the human heart."¹ Peter London, in his work concerning the spiritual in art education, embodies this perspective, and he has shined a light into the very depths of the field of art education.

¹ As quoted in John Sullivan Dwight's *Dwight's Journal of Music*, vol. 7-8, p. 12.

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Rain and Peter