

## A Conversation With



*Howard Gardner is a superstar among many art educators. He has written dozens of books, translated into 32 languages, that explore the mind, ethics, education, and the arts. His revolutionary theory of multiple intelligences is still a major influential force today.*

*On a recent spring morning, Gardner's followers began lining up an hour before his address at the 2019 NAEA National Convention in Boston. His presentation drew a crowd of 2,000.*

*Gardner is the John H. and Elisabeth A. Hobbs Professor of Cognition and Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, senior director of Harvard's Project Zero, and co-founder of The Good Project, which offers research-based "ideas and tools for a good life."*

*In this interview with NAEA's Janice Hughes, Gardner talks about his love of the piano, his realization that he simply was "not very good with young students," and the future of public education.*

*Gardner grew up in Scranton, Pennsylvania, the son of parents who left wartime Germany in the late 1930s. He is married to NAEA member Ellen Winner, who is well-known for her work in development psychology and the arts.*

## 2019 NAEA National Convention Keynote Speaker

# Howard Gardner

**I understand that, as a child, you loved playing the piano and taught piano lessons on and off for a decade. How did those years influence your studies and your research?**

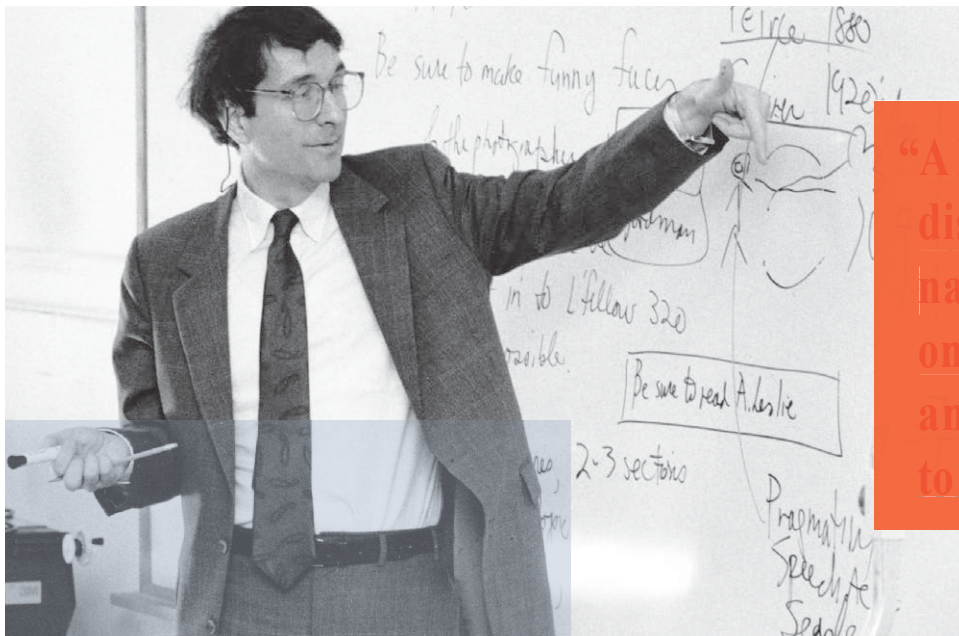
I love music and especially classical music. I listen to it all the time, either on the radio, or CDs, or in my own head. When I am home, I also play the piano every day, only for myself, because I am not very good, and all too often I hear what I *wish* I sounded like rather than what I *do* sound like. I play at least a dozen classical composers.

Certainly my lifelong interest in the arts began with my piano study as a child. As a teenager and college student, I became interested in the arts more broadly. A lifelong opportunity arrived when philosopher Nelson Goodman invited me to join a project devoted to arts education, called Project Zero. Now, Project Zero is over 50 years old! Under its auspices, I have been able to continue my artistic research directly or via teaching or via students. I also co-directed Project Zero for 28 years and am still the chair of the steering committee.

My interest in the arts has influenced both what I study and how I write about it. While I cannot write symphonies, I write books, and my composition process resembles what a composer does in planning and scoring a symphony. Or at least I think it does!

**You also taught a classroom of 5- to 7- year-olds for 6 months. How was that? Any particularly memorable moments?**

I co-taught a K-2 class with 50 students. It was very challenging. I did not have adequate preparation, and I found that I was not very good with young students—far better with those who are older. My proper place is in the college or graduate school classroom and not in the elementary grades.



**“A lot of life involves discovering what one is naturally good at, what one can learn to master, and what is better left to other individuals.”**

That said, I love children and learned a lot about what children like and understand and what they don't understand. This has influenced my thinking. (See my books, including *The Unschooled Mind* and *The Disciplined Mind*.) My life was transformed when I visited the preschools for children in Reggio Emilia in northern Italy. I wish I could teach in those schools, but it would require years of training and even then I am not sure how competent I would be. A lot of life involves discovering what one is naturally good at, what one can learn to master, and what is better left to other individuals.

**Your research projects at Harvard are among the most respected in the world and emphasize, among other things, good work, good play, and collaboration—including in the visual arts. Can you talk a little about that?**

For years, I thought that my task was just to develop and write about ideas; I had no responsibility for how they were used or misused. But when I saw some flagrant misuses of my ideas—particularly about multiple intelligences—I realized that I had some responsibility for encouraging positive uses and, when necessary, calling to account uses that seemed counterproductive or even damaging. And that gave rise to 25 years of study of the “goods”—particularly good work and good citizenship. My colleagues and I wrote 10 books and have also created various educational toolkits. You can learn about this set of projects, and my wonderful collaborators, by visiting [thegoodproject.org](http://thegoodproject.org).

**Your theory of multiple intelligences has had an incredible impact on the field of education in the decades since your introduced it. Why do you think this work has been so influential?**

I think that most adults who work with children realize that a simple IQ number is not nearly adequate for explaining the different intellectual strengths and weaknesses of the children whom they know. After 5 years of research, I wrote a hefty book, drawing on research from many areas, and suggested that it was

more accurate to speak about a set of intelligences. In *Frames of Mind*, I defined the intelligences and indicated how they operate and how they can yield different kinds of intellectual profiles. And I suggested various educational applications of these ideas. The ideas in the book, and the timing of its publication, caught on—particularly in education. Psychologists have been much more skeptical, because they have a lot riding on IQ and IQ testing, but the skepticism does not extend to other scientists who are better able to consider these ideas on their merits.

**What would you say are the most critical things you've learned about nurturing creativity—especially in visual arts education?**

Nearly every young child likes to draw and to work in various media that allow visual (and other forms of) expression. At first, we should simply encourage their artistry, commenting on it when it seems appropriate, perhaps suggesting some options, perhaps displaying the work. As students enter school, for a variety of reasons, they both become more critical of their artistic output and face greater competing demands on their time.

This is the time for more formal instruction, setting of problems, critiquing, etc. I have been much influenced by the ideas of studio thinking as put forth by my wife Ellen Winner and her colleagues, including Lois Hetland, Shirley Veenema, and Kim Sheridan.

As for creativity, I don't think that all artistry is creative nor should it be. Creativity refers to coming up with your own problems, questions, solutions, use of media, and the like. This is most likely to happen if teachers and parents want it to happen and if they create interesting problems, questions, challenges. And, of course, the ambient culture has to value originality, not punish it! It is much easier to quash creativity than to legislate it. And that is true in every area, not just in the arts.

Happily, because the societal stakes are lower, creative expression is more often encouraged in the arts. But I value competence and critical acuity as much as I do original creations.

**Your theories and research are popular across several fields. *The Wall Street Journal* selected you as one of the five most sought-after speakers in business. Was that a surprise?**

At one time, I wrote books and articles that were of interest to individuals in business—particularly about leadership, about changing minds, about the kinds of minds valued in the future. And so a decade ago, I was on the roster of speakers for business. But I have not sought that audience in recent years. My focus is much more on education, good work, good citizenship, and higher education; the invitations to speak reflect that shift of interests.

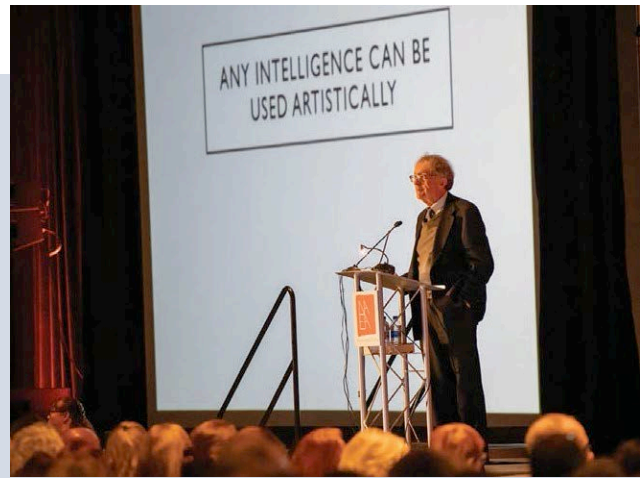
**One of my favorite titles of your many books is *Truth, Beauty, and Goodness Reframed: Educating for the Virtues in the Era of Truthiness and Twitter*, published in 2011. How can social media support our understanding of how people learn?**

Most people, including me, were much more enthusiastic about social media half a dozen years ago than we are today. We were not aware of the mischief of social media (fake news) nor of the destructive potential with respect to many young people (depression, bullying, etc.). Social media shows us how quickly information spreads, without much attention to the quality or truthfulness of that information. Indeed, fake news actually spreads *more rapidly* than warranted news, probably because it is more sensational.

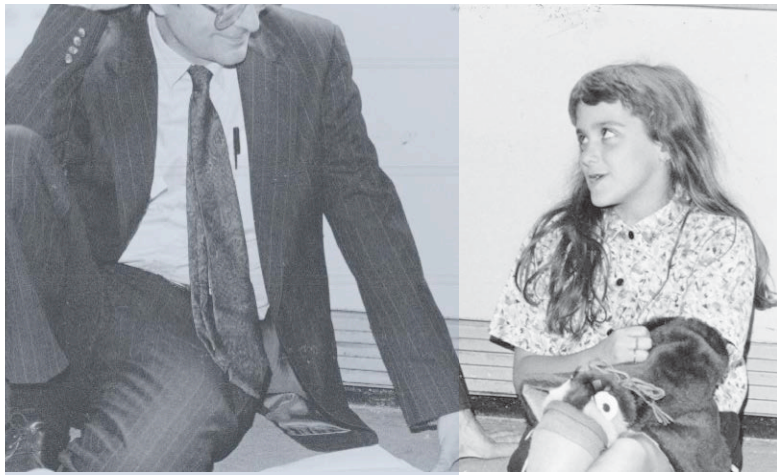
So I would reword the question to ask: How can social media be used to help people learn what they should be learning in ways that are applicable and transferable? And I would state two principles:

1. Don't spend too much time on social media and not on one site. Spread your attention.
2. Interrogate the sources, and don't believe what you encounter unless you understand the grounds on which claims are made. Be skeptical.

**“Creativity... is most likely to happen if teachers and parents want it to happen and if they create interesting problems, questions, challenges. And, of course, the ambient culture has to value originality, not punish it!”**



**Gardner speaks before an overflow crowd at NAEA's 2019 National Convention in Boston. Members from the audience ask questions.**



**This year, you and your team are releasing tentative findings from a massive research study of higher education in this country. Can you talk about them?**

We are beginning to post our results. We have written a score of blogs under the title “Lifelong Learning,” available at [howardgardner.com](http://howardgardner.com). In the coming years, my colleague Wendy Fischman and I will be speaking and writing a great deal about this study. And two members of our research team are focusing particularly on what we have learned about artistic practice and interests on 10 disparate campuses around the country. I suspect our team will blog about those findings as well.

**You’ve spoken about growing up in this country as a son of immigrants—your parents fled for their lives from wartime Germany—and as feeling like an “outsider.” Can you share a little bit about how that has had an influence on your life?**

Because I have thought a lot about this topic, it is discussed in various autobiographical writings, including a forthcoming intellectual memoir, *A Synthesizing Mind*. I think that my particular circumstances affected both the interests I have (the human mind, how it is expressed in different cultures and times) and how I approach them (through research and then writing large works of synthesis).

But I should also say that my own life has been relatively unstressed compared to that of my parents and of so many of my peers. I have had the luxury of studying what I want



**Gardner and Ellen Winner, a leading scholar in development psychology and the arts.**

to study, working with estimable colleagues, and being able to teach at a major research university. And I have had the incredible pleasure of working with such colleagues for over half a century at Project Zero, a research group founded on questions about the arts and arts education. I lament the likelihood that such a life will be available to very few individuals in the future—that’s one of the chief reasons why I have been studying higher education, on the one hand, and what it means to be a good worker and a good citizen, on the other.

**Given the important value of learning in and through the arts, how can we better advocate for art education in schools for all students?**

With Ellen Winner, to whom I have the good fortune to be married, I am not in favor of arguing for the instrumental reasons for arts education—higher tests scores, larger salaries, wealthier surrounding communities. If these happen, fine, but no one seriously involved in the arts participates primarily for these ancillary outcomes; at best, these are lucky offshoots and should be treated as such. Or, as I like to say, if you want to raise math scores, teach math.

I think that the best arguments are “demonstration proofs.” Good serious teaching in the arts by competent teachers, encouraging students to master skills and express and appreciate what is most important to them in ways that speak to others. In schools where this is done—whether preschools, high schools, or colleges—the arts do well and don’t need spurious arguments. My wife and my children were fortunate enough to attend such schools, and they are all enthusiastically involved in the arts in one way or another.

Alas, I am forced to admit that this is not the milieu in the United States today. But the people and schools and movements that I most admire don’t pander: They do good work in the belief that it will ultimately spread beyond their own circle. And in many happy cases, that actually happens. My favorite examples are the schools in Reggio Emilia; without any desire to proselytize, these schools are admired and emulated all over the world!

**Finally, as you consider current trends and look ahead, how do you imagine public education in the next 10-15 years? How will it be different?**

I think that individuals with means will circumvent the public system and rely increasingly on what can be done at home, in after-school programs with tutors, etc. Lots of learning will occur outside of school.

For those without means, they will be in a system that is currently under much stress. That will not change without a major change in political will in this country. We need to become more like the countries of Finland, Singapore, and those in northern Europe—as well as cities like Reggio Emilia—that value public education and put resources into our schools and the education of teachers.

I am glad that American teachers are increasingly willing to go on strike; I hope that they strike for the right things and show that they are worthy of being treated as professionals. ■