

In honor of Ken Burns' outstanding PBS documentary on the National Parks (October 2009), here is an essay on his work and creativity from the book, **Heroes of Giftedness** (2009, Gifted Education Press).

Ken Burns – Master Documentary Film Producer and Director by Michael E. Walters

Ken Burns is the foremost documentary film maker in the United States. Although born in Brooklyn New York in 1953, he has also lived for long periods in the Midwest and New Hampshire. These residences gave him a unique consciousness. He has focused on New York City and many other parts of the nation. Many of these films seek to understand the significance of popular culture in American life, e.g., *Baseball* (1994) and *Jazz* (2001).

His technique is a masterful fusion of such materials as photo archives, personal letters, newspaper accounts, popular culture and music. These materials create a holistic encounter with his themes. The viewers experience each film as if they were the participants. In his masterpiece, *The Civil War* (1990), viewers see the conflict from all different perspectives. Besides the visual aspects there is always a literary tone to his films, using the contributions of great American writers – Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, and Hart Crane. The New York City films include *Brooklyn Bridge* (1981) and *The Statue of Liberty* (1985). He captured these two edifices as examples of the human creative spirit in motion. Several of his films are biographies of American creative geniuses, e.g., *Thomas Jefferson* (1997), *Frank Lloyd Wright* (1998), and *Mark Twain* (2003). His film, *Lewis and Clark* (1997), is about the journey of the Corps of Discovery (1804-06) to explore the Louisiana Territory. It provided insights into how this expedition was both a physical and intellectual endeavor. The last two films he has made show that he still has a wide range of interests. *The War* (2007) is about the ability of Americans to make personal sacrifices for what they perceive as a noble cause, the struggle of American democracy against German Nazism and Japanese militarism. His latest film, *The National Parks*, is about the need to preserve the beauty of America's landscape, e.g., the Grand Canyon and Yellowstone National Park.

Ken Burns is a Hero of Giftedness as he has used film to awaken the consciousness of his fellow Americans. By studying his documentaries, gifted students can see how the media of popular culture, film and television, can be effectively used to create a new art form – the Ken Burns Effect.

“In a filmed interview for a documentary history of our national pastime I made several years ago, the writer and essayist Gerald Early said that ‘when they study our civilization two thousand years from now, there will only be three things that Americans will be known for: the Constitution, baseball and jazz music. They're the three most beautiful things Americans have ever created.’ Early's words tend to put a smile on the face of the listener, as if he meant them as a joke, a passing comment of little import, but I think he was deadly serious—and absolutely correct. And I realized that my colleagues and I have worked almost unceasingly for nearly seventeen years to honor that truth. Having grappled with constitutional issues in our series on the Civil War (the Constitution's greatest test) and many other films, and having explored our national pastime and its exquisite lessons in our baseball series, we have over the past several years struggled to understand the utterly American art form of jazz, . . .” Ken Burns (from Geoffrey C. Ward and Ken Burns, Introduction to the book, *Jazz: A History of America's Music*, 2000 (Knopf), p. vii).

“It is clear to us as well that the Second World War reverberates and echoes down the corridors of history, its lessons as fresh today-in our own difficult situation-as they were for those soldiers who struggled daily just to survive that horrible event. In the end, we have come to believe, in the presence of the young men whose stories we followed, that we did have one

overarching theme we could not ignore. It is a truth, we think, as old as history itself, but one we always forget, especially in a society like ours, addicted as we are now to the breathless embrace of spurious celebrity, to the great tyranny those synthetic ‘heroes’ have over the rest of us. It is a truth that this kind of nostalgia, and the mindless inattention that issues from it, prevents us from knowing. It is, however, the theme that issues out of every frame of our film and every page of our book—not so much from our own doing as from simply bearing witness to the stories of these remarkably brave young men. It is also an idea inherent in our country’s great and often forgotten promise. And that is: *There are no ordinary lives*. By stepping into memory, by stepping into the great gift of memory these men and women have given us, we liberate ourselves.” Ken Burns (from Geoffrey C. Ward and Ken Burns, Introduction to the companion book, *The War: An Intimate History, 1941 – 1945*, 2007 (Knopf), p. xvii).



Recommendations and Resources for Educators of the Gifted

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In the mid 1970s, the US Department of Education had fairly vibrant curriculum projects that were intended to reach school systems for a decade or more. They were conceived by men and women of talent, and they sent out a clarion call to their colleagues which said in essence – “Our Nation is sliding backwards toward a level of mediocrity that is embarrassing compared to other world powers.”

We have the physical and academic power to formally reinstate, within the US Department of Education, a fully staffed “Office of Reconnaissance and Development of Education Programs for Gifted-Talented and Creative Individuals.” The World Council for Gifted and Talented Children, registered in Delaware in 1976, has expanded globally and the American Creativity Association has done the same. The individuals who have participated in these organizations have made great accomplishments. The roster of illuminating minds has been impressive: Carl Rogers, Rollo May, Roberto Assagioli, Karen Horney, Howard Gardner, and Joseph Renzulli and his team, up-and-down the East coast. In addition, E. Paul Torrance with his Center for Creativity and his tests for creativity produced outstanding work for over seventy years. His legendary contributions toward understanding and measuring creativity have been used by the United States and Canadian armed forces and our Diplomatic Corps.

Some current innovative resources in the gifted and creativity fields that I recommend are *Gifted Education Press Quarterly* of Manassas, Virginia which is published by Maurice and Eugenia Fisher. This quarterly brings pungent and erudite articles to its readers, and should be a must in all education libraries and schools. *Dialogue House* in New York City emphasizes the creative analysis of personal and educational development, and is currently operated by John Progoff. It is strongly Jungian in orientation without omitting Freud’s contributions when required. I trained with both Roberto Assagioli and Ira Progoff in the 1960s through 1980s. The benefits of their wisdom have been the bulwark of my passion for teaching the gifted and understanding the importance of knowledge and study.