

## Filmmaker Touts The Value Of Storytelling

By CASSIE HORNER  
Staff Report

Charles Guggenheim, award-winning documentary filmmaker, is no stranger to Woodstock. He produced the film, *A Place in the Land* for Billings Farm and Museum that tells the story of Woodstock and three generations of conservationists. On May 4, Guggenheim was in town to give the keynote address that welcomed artists to the New England Artists Congress.

In his short talk, Guggenheim revealed himself as a storyteller, lacing his speech with tales about a French waiter and Senator Bradley, and his latest documentary about GI's imprisoned by the Japanese in the South Pacific Theater during WW II. In



Charles Guggenheim

his work as a filmmaker, he does not work alone to tell stories, but collaborates. "We all must be storytellers," he told the gather-

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ing of artists. "Storytelling must be more and more in the American lexicon."

Guggenheim referred to novelist Reynolds Price who once said, "Storytelling, next to making love and eating, is one of the most important things that keeps us alive." That has become increasingly clear to Guggenheim in his current project. Out of 350 soldiers imprisoned in the camp, he has only found 60 still alive and is interviewing 40. When he asks them, "why did you survive?" they refer to the many men who died of diseases. More importantly, though they tell him that it was "the ones who were able to tell stories to themselves" who survived.

These men were in a death camp and taken on a death march. Men who weighed 160 or 170 pounds were reduced to skeletons of 70 pounds, wracked by dysentery and other ailments. What kept the survivors going were stories they told themselves about their families and about what had happened in the past.

"If we didn't tell stories, we would have no future," Guggenheim said. "We're not on a death march," he said, "...but we're on a psychic journey." Writing,

painting, sculpture—all of these can be "a ray of something that allows (us) to go forward."

Guggenheim went on to say that limits help create art. The worst question he was ever asked was, "what would you do if you could do anything?" To be able to do anything seems like a dream-come-true, but is actually very hard. He cited the example of his experience making the documentary about the Johnstown Flood. He and his daughter Grace had the contract and, at some point, asked themselves why they were doing the project. The answer was that it was interesting and that there were limitations. "There is no art without restrictions," Guggenheim asserted. Art comes into being because of limits set by outside forces like short funds or time.

Restrictions can also be self-imposed. Guggenheim related the story about architect Charles Eames who gathered together five or six architects and gave each of them a box of colored tiles. His charge to them was to come up with a design in 30 minutes. The architects he admired most were the ones who only used one color to create a

design. "Not everything was available."

The theme of the sixth annual New England Artists Congress was art and the environment. Guggenheim related the idea of restrictions in art to the different looks of places created by architectural materials at hand. You get Los Angeles, he said, when you have access to every material known to builders. When you only have mud and straw, you build a pueblo. The classic aesthetics of the New England village came to be out of the local resources of wood and stone. "Those were the confinements of their art," Guggenheim observed.

The question of why an environment produces a particular artist remains a mystery. Guggenheim pondered why Abraham Lincoln came out of the provincial world with a special language for the creation of the Gettysburg Address and even for letters to friends. "I don't know,"

Guggenheim said.

Guggenheim closed his speech with a story about baseball player Ted Williams' last game. Williams, though a great ball player, never liked the media or responded to his fans. He hit a homerun in the eighth inning of his last game, ran the bases and disappeared into the dugout. Despite the roars of applause from the crowd, he did not come out to tip his hat or nod. The Boston Globe ran an editorial the next day, berating Williams and asking why he treated his fans that way. John Updike responded a few days later in a letter, asking why Williams' behavior was so surprising. After all, "God does not answer letters," Updike explained.

For all the reasons evidenced by Lincoln, Williams or the survivors of death camps, "we need our artists, our poets," Guggenheim said in closing, "for our survival."