

OPERATION SOAPBOX SPARKER

Each month a guest artist shares an idea, activity or discussion with you. Lemn Sissay is poet in residence at Southbank Centre.



I just got some photographs the other day. They are photographs of me in my teens. As a young person I had no family so now I have no pictures or things to remind me of my past. I wish I did have. So I was really pleased when someone emailed me those pictures. They made me realise how important memory is and how memory is connected to objects, to things that remind you of a time, a place or a person.

So my Soapbox is about memory. And rather than standing on a Soapbox to talk about memories, let's fill the box with them.

Lemn Sissay's Memory Soapbox

First choose the memory you want to explore. Start by writing down three key memories. Just short titles, for example:

1. Seaside, Lochinvar, Scotland, 2004
2. Grandmother
3. The day I finished my first Harry Potter book.

Next, choose one of those memories. That's the memory you're going to put into your Soapbox.

Now for the real fun work! Find things to put into the box that remind you of the memory you've chosen. It doesn't matter what the thing is, as long as it is part of your memory. It's as though you are making a miniature museum for your memory. If you want to put in something that's too big or too awkward for the box – a plane; a spider; a cluster of stars – draw it or find a picture.

Put all your things into the Soapbox. You might have many, many things in your box or very few.

Memories are inside you just as they are inside the Soapbox and they're special to you.

I was thinking about making a Soapbox Memory called 'Autumn with my family' and I imagined filling the box with brown and gold leaves, to remind me of crunching through piles of autumn leaves in the park.

It could take a day for you to collect your things and put them in the Soapbox or it could take a week. But however long it takes, remember to label the finished Soapbox with the time, place and date of your memory, like the one below:

Soapbox Memory: Autumn with my family
Date: October 2007.

Here's a list of my things for different memories

Some sand from the beach where I spent My Favourite Holiday.
A photograph of My Grandad.
A copy of a picture My Grandad drew.
The favourite record that Me and My Best Friend really enjoyed.
A cup from My Grandma's House.
A flower from the park where I had My Best Summer.
The words to a nursery rhyme I remember or to a song My Grandma used to sing.
Two small little shoes that My Little Brother used to wear when he was one year old.
And a drawing he made on his first day at school.
How about a picture of his favourite toy?
A little plastic container with fifteen of his tears (I made this one up but you can do that too if you're clever)
A bag of humbugs (we always ate them on My Favourite Holiday)
A picture of My Foster Father (because he is no longer around)

I wonder what memory you will choose for your soapbox!



Activity ideas

Lemn is spot on. Working with memory is more than just a powerful way of understanding and communicating the past to ourselves and to others. It can also help us formulate ideas about the present.

Here are some ways to use Lemn's ideas in a creative exploration of the ideas that matter to you.

1. Make a Memory Soapbox with your group

Let's say that you are concerned about the fact that young children no longer play outside the way you used to do. Maybe it's because of fears about stranger danger or traffic or the power of the sun. You could use your box to collect memories of outside play when you were younger: photos of your tree house, a drawing of the local park, a poem about riding a bike, pebbles you collected on the beach down the road. Use these 'things', as Lemn calls them, as the basis for thinking and talking about questions such as: how has play changed since we were young? What makes some kinds of play so enjoyable? What could we do to help young children today have great experiences like we did?

You can use this technique to explore any issue that interests you. For example, if you were looking at the loss of trees, songbirds or wild spaces in your local area over the recent past, you could collect your own memories of what the natural world used to be like, and ask your parents or grandparents for their memories too, to build a Memory Soapbox that contained decades of remembering (and perhaps spark some ideas for looking after the planet).

When you've collected the memories, there are different ways of sharing them with other people. Each person in the group might take their memory out of the box and explain it to everyone, or you could take out someone else's memory and talk about how it makes you feel or how it jogs your own memory. This second technique is a great way of sparking new ideas and reflections.

2. Share the memories: Send a Memory Soapbox back to Southbank Centre

If you've made a Memory Soapbox as part of your creative journey, you might decide to incorporate some or all of the memories into whatever you send back to Southbank Centre for the Operation Soapbox exhibition. Alternatively you could make a Memory Soapbox especially to send back. Perhaps, for instance, you want to use your Soapbox to tell other people all about the place where you live, or about a special project or event that you organised. Rather than write an article or show a film, you might send back a box of memories. Visitors to Southbank Centre would begin to understand the place or event by taking out and handling these fragments from your box.

Another memory-based approach might be to ask people to contribute their own memories about something that matters to you in order to encourage them to really think about the issue. You could ask people that come to see your Soapbox to leave a memory about play when they were young. Or, if you wanted people to think about and celebrate the different ethnic groups that make up the UK's population, you might ask visitors to write a sentence about their memory of a favourite festival from when they were young and leave it in the box for others to explore.

Look at Idea, Dialogue and Message in the Teachers' Pack for more ideas about creative exploration with your Soapbox.