

EDUCATION WITH A SENSE OF WONDER: A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

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The visual arts offer ample opportunities for educators to teach to the soul. This essay opens up some of the possibilities present in art education, opportunities to inspire dreams, announce visions, and ask ultimate questions.

When you start on a long journey, trees are trees, water is water, and mountains are mountains. After you have gone some distance, trees are no longer trees, water no longer water, mountains no longer mountains. But after you have travelled a great distance, trees are once again trees, water is once again water, mountains are once again mountains.

Zen teaching

On one of his paintings Paul Gauguin wrote three questions: Where do we come from? Who are we? Where are we going? Pondering these questions can lead us into an attempt at empirical, historical answers or into a fuller understanding of the true mystery of who we are and what we do as educators, especially in Catholic schools.

This article will explore the mystery and wonder involved in teaching the visual arts. The search is in itself an artistic action and hence defies explicit logical analysis. Therefore, the inquiry into this mystery will possibly become a journey in itself.

In the contemporary world of instant information accessibility, it is easy to be swept away by the violence, wars, and human frailties that the media plays before us every hour of the day. We are not often shown the modern heroes and heroines who make their life journeys ones that use their wisdom

and power of imagination to serve others. Somehow, the image of an isolate artist performing gentle acts of creation without expectation of fame and glory stays before us as an odd beauty.

The painter Wassily Kandinsky believed that the guiding principle for harmony, vibration, and painted color in his work was the soul.

There is nothing on earth so curious for beauty or so absorbent of it, as a soul.... Generally speaking, colour is a power which directly influences the soul. Colour is the keyboard, the eyes are the hammers, the soul is the piano with many strings. The artist is the hand which plays, touching one key or another, to cause vibration in the soul.... Painting is an art, and art is not vague production, transitory and isolated, but a power which must be directed to the improvement and refinement of the human soul—to do, in fact, the raising of the spiritual triangle. (Kandinsky, 1977, pp. 25-26)

The interplay of colors in a painting, the movement of lines in a drawing, the complement of shapes in a sculpture, or the tonal ranges of gray in a photograph may reflect upon our own lives and allow a questioning glance and a raising of the spirit.

WHERE DO WE COME FROM?

Every blade of grass has its Angel
that bends over it and whispers
“Grow, grow”

The Talmud

Art making has occurred throughout the history of human life on earth. One has only to witness the ancient rock paintings in Australia, the petroglyphs of the Southwestern United States, or the stained glass windows in a Gothic cathedral in Europe to find testaments to the unnamed artists who created them and the cultures that required them. It is probable that those who created the images did not see themselves as expressing their own identity, but rather as serving in the role of a visual communicator for their community. The view that equates art with self-expression is a contemporary addition. More recently now we see a trend to further separate those who make “art” from those who make “craft.” Historically, people who were visual artists had support systems for their work. The Church always had a symbiotic relationship between art and Christianity. More ancient artwork provided a vehicle to connect with the spirits and pay honor to the ancestors of First Nations people. There was an understood power in creating art for God or for the clan. This secure common ground of tradition has slowly eroded, or has been completely removed from our collective unconscious, leaving contemporary artists to search for and find enough faith in themselves and their work

to clear the ever-present doubts and contradictions that are inherent in any creative process in order to proceed with their work.

Irrespective of our chronological age, when something catches our attention, when we connect to an image, we see it in relation to something that has happened in life and this connection often gives us a new perspective. When we confront ancient visual images that formerly supported human life, we sense an awareness that others before us have shared the same eternal questions of passage through life's mazes. The shapes we view from time long gone once led their observers to wonder at the mysteries supporting the traditions of that culture. Those we now label as artists passed to each generation information of a deep, life-supporting sort that probably helped people to come to terms with their world and to find harmony within it, as well as a sense of protection against the abyss of the future. Every culture has had some members who gave of their creative energies for the greater whole, understanding more than many that we humans are a mass of imperfections when held against the ideal whole.

Contemporary educators, especially those in the visual arts, are now part of this story because we hold a precious gift of support and encouragement for students while the collective work becomes the work of dreams and imagination, of journeys into self-discovery, of the creation of powerful images that have formed the interior system of our own individual and cultural beliefs. We who teach are the lucky ones, for we can share with students a joy for creating and an ability to live with a sense of play. At the heart of this play the true mystery of joy is found. The creation of a piece of artwork raises the imagination, stirs a fresh look at life, and makes the artist feel truly alive. To give others a sense of wonder and respect for the creative process is a gift for both the giver and the recipient. To accept the reality that what we are each doing is what we can do; to acknowledge the fact of inevitable changes in what we intended to do; and to be able, when the work is finished, to celebrate what we accomplished lead us to the creative force that infuses all life. This is our inheritance as art teachers and the heritage we share with our students.

WHO ARE WE?

The purpose of art is not a
rarified, intellectual distillate—
it is life, intensified, brilliant life.

Alain Arias-Misson

I myself do nothing. The
Holy Spirit accomplishes all
through me.

William Blake

Teachers of art and all educators hold out to their students the power of life and death. When we participate in creative projects we are called to be more deeply aware of our environment by being alert and remaining sensitive to life's small nuances. It requires effort to participate in this way.

Artists have worked to understand the voice of the wind and the thunder. They have found a wealth of imagery in the drifting sands of a desert or in bubbling water moving rapidly down a mountainside. For centuries they have seen the whole earth as a sacred place, as a watershed of material to draw upon, as a spark for their creative imaginations.

On a piece of flat land at the southern tip of England in Dungeness sits a black varnished fisherman's cottage with bright yellow window frames owned by the late Derek Jarman, a well-known painter, theater designer, and film-maker of genius. As a private man it was here that he created his own garden paradise in an environment that would remind many of hell rather than of heaven, for in the distance stands the brooding presence of a nuclear power station. Jarman combined his painter's eye with his ecological convictions to produce a garden out of anything that surrounded him: driftwood, shells and cork floats, stone circles, iron sculptures, and rusty detritus.

In his final book, Jarman records how his garden evolved:

At first, people thought I was building a garden for magical purposes—a white witch out to get the nuclear power station. It did have magic—the magic of surprise, the treasure hunt. A garden is a treasure hunt, the plants the paperchase.

I invest my stones with the power of those at Avebury. I have read all the mystical books about ley-lines and circles—I built the circles with this behind my mind. The circles make the garden perfect—in winter they take over from the flowers. There was magic and hard work in finding the colored stones for the front: white, difficult; grey, less so; red, very rare.... The large circles are four feet in diameter and between the flint dolmens are shells and colored stones from the beach. The stakes are head-high. I haven't named them, so they are difficult to identify; some have the holey stones made into necklaces, some have large single stones or bone caps; there's one twisted tangle of chain that has a lobster claw—that one has got a name: "the snake"; there are wind chimes—two of them with metal triangles to swing. There is a lantern, a crucifix, and a verdigris trumpet. (Jarman, 1995, pp. 47-48)

The strength of Jarman's garden lies in its integrity. He used the land to spark his imagination rather than manipulate it into something it was not, leaving as his legacy a unique garden without boundaries either to itself or to its spirit.

Making art depends upon noticing things, making the connections between one thing and another, and between one form or line and another. Once a relationship is noticed, it is almost impossible to see it in its original

form. From that moment on each shape and space relate to all the other shapes and spaces. As an artist continues to develop his or her work, these relationships increasingly define new perceptions of the world. The making of art can also provide a connection to relationships with something or some-things outside of an artist's immediate realm. What is outside the artist's immediate boundary?

In the last three decades, our human horizons have expanded. For years we believed man existed in the center of all things; but when we ventured into space, we saw this spaceship earth in a new way. It appeared as a beautiful blue ball floating in a great, dark universe of infinite expanse, and each of us who saw it was left to deal with the awesome and fascinating wonder of living life on such a fragile globe. This new perspective could not help but change the way many people viewed the world. Now a deep mystery lay at the base of all the high drama.

In the images of other cultures, contemporary artists and educators can witness the recording of other human adventures. We have only to look to see the connections, to sense how the pieces fit, and to understand how educators can serve as facilitators to help young people fear less, and welcome more, of Joseph Campbell's "mighty multicultural future." Art rooms, studios, and lecture halls can all provide venues to new and different ways of seeing the universality in other cultures' artifacts. This work can lead students into the fields of delight, across the realms of illumination, and to the dance of life. What an awesome job we have!

All teachers teach from within, from their individual and cultural beliefs, from their hopes and dreams. But what of this mysterious relation between a teacher and a student? It is as complex in nature as any other. Teachers are always looking for a good example or a model that students can use for their own unique expression. Students are always demanding a good leader. What adds to the distinctiveness of this interaction is the human ability to reflect on creative work as an authentically personal effort, and to question all this even as we are doing it.

As we dance life's dance we may pretend to be satisfied and strong, but inwardly we are often essentially afflicted with a sense of helplessness, discontent, inferiority, and fear. Therefore, we must remember that the protective guidance of a compassionate teacher is that which helps young artists to journey on the road to self-knowledge, and that we carry that obligation by choosing the occupation that we have.

We all start out the same way. Our lives begin with bodies that don't quite fit. Little children are lovable in their awkward attempts to walk upright on two legs; they fall down a lot; and their heads are too big for their bodies. The artist Walt Disney must have sensed this when he created his now famous illustrations of the seven dwarfs. With their oversized heads and little bodies; with names like Dopey, Grumpy, Sleepy, and Bashful; they repre-

sent universal human conditions. This artist's imagination made human imperfections part of the being alive experience and brought it all together with a smile.

To live is to know we share the larger questions of human life. To be a participant in the wonder-filled mystery called teaching is to take responsibility for encouraging a belief in one's self and in others, to explore the hidden meanings of the human journey, and to continue to encourage communication both through the senses and the spirit. The results of these efforts become teaching as loving and for loving. The major questions of human life are timeless, the inflections are what any given culture places on them. Whatever their country of origin, our students are dealing with parallel themes and images; we only have to look a little deeper to find that any differences are minor and can be complemented by the artist's touch.

Making things, drawing, and painting are natural human activities, but for many they remain as wishes—"I wish I could paint as well as she does," or as potentials—"If only I had more time." Doing and making are acts of hope; and as that hope expands we remember that we, as individuals or as a group, can contribute something to the larger arena of life. There is a comfort in creating images—remember the big circular sun you drew high on a paper's corner when you were young? It shone down on the people or the plants that you had drawn below and gave a steadiness to life. There was a plant consciousness and an animal consciousness; anyone trying to interpret your drawing in mechanistic terms simply would not have grasped what you were thinking as you created this earliest artwork. Sometimes we each need a gentle reminder that the creation of any piece of art is a form of meditation, much of it probably done unconsciously, and most of it certainly dealing less with physical conditions and more with a level of consciousness that could be called spiritual. As a piece of work progresses, the artist's awareness reaches new levels, taking each person and his or her work onto a different platform from anyone else's. It is a very private experience.

The meaning of the word "art" according to Webster's dictionary is the conscious use of creative imagination and skill especially in the production of aesthetic objects. On any given school day, how well art teachers understand this as they pass by as many levels of energy and creativity as they have students. There is magic in an art room—the people who are there are apparently busy at work, but they are also somewhere else at the same time. There is a spiritual consciousness present, and often a respectful participation in one another's dreams. Teachers empower students to be the artists that they are and encourage the fitting together of things in new ways. They continuously remind their students of the immense power to change things, of a need for that sense of wonder. The dance continues.

Creative energy can uplift, unify, and harmonize. The artist-maker relates parts to make a new whole, but the mystery of the process always remains

within the artist. No one should kill the song of another. It is always the song of the imagination that gives a small taste of that larger art—the new world that many dream of—that world where each person and each country can find a harmonious relationship with each other person and country. A work of art, when done to the artist's satisfaction, usually gives cause to a rising above feelings of separateness, competition, and divisiveness. From moment to moment the mystery of creative energy flows, forming a magnificent dance pattern. When the eyes and mind are open, art is never separate from life.

A student of the late American teacher Corita Kent once told me that Corita taught her art classes with the pull of a strong tide, that she pushed her students into an awareness of the pulse and beauty of life around them, and encouraged them to put it all together to make their own life song. They were taught not to think of themselves as artists. Painted on a wall of the art department at Immaculate Heart College was a phrase from the Balinese culture whose language does not include the noun art—"We have no art, we do everything as well as we can." This is who we are and this directs the future of the dance.

WHERE ARE WE GOING?

Until we accept the fact that life
itself is founded in mystery, we
shall learn nothing.

Henry Miller

I learn by going where I have to go.

Theodore Roethke

The work performed in Catholic education and the arts should only be the byproduct of all that deserves to be sought and loved for its own sake. It should be a way of working that is so true and basic that the essence can be extracted and applied to any task before us or our students.

Artists have a lonely task. The artist's finished product may well have changed direction many times from the initial concept to the final reality. The frustrations that Michelangelo faced with marble, paint, and plaster come readily to mind. Changes are made, adaptations to the materials are required, and the artist is forced to alter and adjust. We can never understand the fullness of everything, nor anything. Everything constantly changes. It takes courage to look at something in a new way. During a flight in the late years of her life, Georgia O'Keefe was amazed to watch white cotton ball clouds against a Virgin Mary blue sky from her window seat. The rest is history. When she returned home to New Mexico, she ordered the largest canvases that she had ever worked on stretched for her; she climbed a ladder; and she

painted the cloud-filled sky she had seen. It was a courageous undertaking and an act of faith. The flight had allowed Georgia a vision of the clouds that she could not have seen otherwise and probably a perception of unlimited space and freedom.

But as educators we cannot be as totally free as O'Keefe. We live in a world of structure. The word *structure* is defined as an arrangement of parts, something built, something constructed—the thesaurus adds alternative words such as framework and understructure. A Catholic school is indeed a structure, as are the specific classes, assignments, goals, and projects. These make up the firm, supporting framework within which a teacher's life is led and where learning occurs. The educational structure is there for both students and teachers, each one shaping it through his or her own individual gifts. Structures provide a scaffolding that stands high enough to allow us to paint those parts that we want to paint, and yet does not restrict how we should paint.

A number of years ago an Italian immigrant, Simon Rodia, built what is called the Watts Towers because of their location. The towers were a set of soaring spires next to unused railroad tracks in southeast Los Angeles. He used anything that he could find—old plates, broken glass shards, beer bottles, tiles, all the pieces of refuse from our modern American civilization—to adorn them. They are some of the most outrageously beautiful things I have ever seen. Simon was asked why he had built them; he said he did so because he wanted “to make something big on the landscape.” He didn't say he wanted to be considered a great sculptor. When he stopped working on them, he simply went away and completely disappeared from public sight.

The work of every artist is expressed in different and personal ways from generation to generation, and from culture to culture. If we remain open to new experiences, we allow ourselves to move into a different spot. The journey can be a profoundly emotional experience, elusive of all generalizations which can lead to aesthetic wonder at the mystery of our own existence. From this platform we can observe forms, investigate ideas and feelings, and as artists combine them into a final version to which we sign our name and for which we assume responsibility. These connections define and make possible creativity; yet this process eludes the rational, conscious mind. We all become experts in the synthesis of creativity and connections, but never seem to find the right words to explain our expertise. How is the mystery called creativity explained?

Creativity is oxygen for the soul. Creating is a spiritual practice which is never perfected, finished, or set aside. When we reach plateaus of creative attainment, a certain restlessness sets in. We have made it; but, just when we get there, there disappears. This restless need for further exploration tests us. The stringent requirements of a sustained creative life demand the humility to begin anew. What has been done is done, and still it is not enough; we must

keep moving. Can we find the courage in our lives to do this? Can we help our students to do the same?

Teaching requires an act of faith, and faith requires that we relinquish total control. Once we, as teachers, have given some structure to our students, we must have the faith to trust that each of them has an inner dream that they can unfold if we only give them a chance and space. Relinquishing control is frightening, and we resist it many times. Our job is to trigger a commitment to sustaining a creative life which, like human life, begins in darkness. A great mystery is at the heart of teaching any creative subject. Our imaginations become stimulated, our minds are drawn into a place filled with expectation, excitement, wonder, and pleasure. It is here that we learn to play. We explore the possible; we make possible what we never thought would be. To be an artist, to allow others to find their own artistic way, is the journey. It is a dance that circles back on the same views, over and over, but at a slightly different angle. The dance is never done in a straight line; it is like the act of creating, a spiral process, doubling back upon itself, reassessing and regrouping, proceeding one step at a time. We can only attempt to keep our souls open and alert for the vision, or the hunch, of the unexpected yet somehow already known.

As educators we deal with people's dreams—their individual and personal visions—and because of this, every day we are in the realm of the sacred. We are involved with forces and energies larger than our own. We are engaged in a sacred transaction of which we know only a little: we see the shadow, never the shape. For all these reasons, it is essential that any gathering of young artists be conducted in the spirit of a sacred trust.

As artists and teachers we belong to an ancient and holy group. We are the carriers of the truth that moves through us all. When we support our students' efforts we are dealing not merely with their human personalities, but also with their unseen throng of ideas, visions, stories, sculptures, paintings, and drawings that await their turn to be born. Envy, ill tempers, and negative criticism can have no place in our midst. Let us be gentle and compassionate in our nourishment of others. Let us be there, always, creating a place in our classrooms for trying, for faltering, for failing, and for trying again. We do not always know who among us will teach us best. Let us, teacher and student, cherish and serve one another as we share this journey.

No matter how old we are, we must all start at the beginning. There is never a creative solution that can be established once and for all. We each seek the experience of feeling alive, of living life at a good level, of being connected to another source which gives life value, of being caught by a subject so that it speaks to us and takes our attention to our own interior world. We exist on two planes: what is and what ought to be. We wonder. We are forced to ask the same questions that Gauguin asked, albeit in a different form: *Where do we come from?* Is this the last hour of civilization as we know it,

or a transformation of the human spirit? *Who are we?* Are we the last people on earth or the progenitors of hope? *Where are we going?* Are we destroying the very planet we must depend upon, or are we learning to celebrate responsible stewardship?

It is not the going out of port,
but the coming in, that determines
the success of a voyage.
Henry Ward Beecher

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