

## **The Art of Meaning**

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I want to begin by sharing some stories.

About seven years ago, two young adults, Alie and Emma, traveled from our congregation in Saratoga Springs to Central America on a mission trip to a poor community in San Salvador. They were excited to get their hands dirty, doing some serious work in the community. When they arrived at the mission, the priest in charge explained their task: paint a mural. At the time, they reported being surprised and disappointed – until they began painting.

They were soon surrounded by children in the neighborhood, who were fascinated and who began painting themselves. At night, the people of the community – out of their poverty – pulled enough food together to feed the visitors from El Norte. There was singing, dancing, and much merriment.

Alie and Emma – now both working for AmeriCorps, reflected that this experience shattered the way they perceived the world, their place in it, and their ability to help others, and compelled them to lives of service.

Alie and Emma were transformed by the power of art.

One of the most famous and most reproduced paintings in western culture is “Starry Night,” by Vincent Van Gogh, which hangs in the permanent collection at the Museum of Modern Art. While there are thousands of other famous paintings at MoMA, this one garners constant crowds – though what I notice is that the typical patron pauses for less than 30 seconds.

Timothy was anything but typical. He had just arrived from Tennessee, and he was eager to check out New York’s museums. I led him to MoMA, and to this painting, and he gasped. He took a photo or two... and kept looking. I wandered out of that crowd – and about five minutes later, I returned. Timothy was still staring at the Van Gogh, tears rolling down his face.

A few minutes later, he connected with me, and told me about his grandmother – suffering from dementia, but who would wax poetic and in great detail about “Starry Night”... Timothy found it odd and sometimes annoying ... until he laid eyes on the

original. Suddenly, he understood his grandmother's obsession, felt the pain of her illness as well as Van Gogh's... and began to heal.

Timothy was transformed by the power of art.

Yvonne loves dance. From ballet to modern dance, and even big Broadway musical dance numbers, she inhales dance the way others inhale air.

Yvonne is disabled, and can't dance herself. She told me that watching dance allows her, for a while, to forget that her body doesn't work like others' do, and her spirit catches flight as she watches live dance, and even *Dancing with the Stars*.

So when she heard about a nearby disabled dance company, she got involved with them. Inspired, Yvonne has begun learning how to move in ways that are graceful and which don't hurt her body, and her bravery inspires others to move too.

Yvonne is transformed by the power of art.

A few years ago, New York's Working Theater created a show called *La Ruta*. The play tells the story of people trying to cross into the US out of the watchful eyes of the border patrol. The entire play is set in a tractor trailer – and the audience sits in this space with the actors. We see firsthand the violence, desolation, and desperation. The play was disturbing...it was so close, so real.

One of my friends, Emerald, went because it was a class assignment. But by the time the show ended, she was in tears – from horror and anger.

She didn't let it go. Weeks later, she was still talking about the performance, and absorbing articles and going to lectures on immigration. Her Facebook feed was suddenly full of information. Emerald – who had never considered immigration justice before – was now consumed by it.

After she graduated, Emerald went to work for a non-profit that focuses on immigration justice, providing assistance to those who get lost in the system.

Emerald was transformed by the power of art.

Each of these stories speak deeply about art – how it connects us to ... something. We all have stories of a song or a film, a play or a painting, that touches our souls. It might be the song our fathers sang to us when we were scared, or the scene of a movie that speaks our truth, or a sculpture in a favorite museum that is permanently etched into our memory.

If I were to ask each of you to describe a moment in worship that has stuck with you, chances are it will be a piece of music, or a story that was acted out, or some object that we used to illustrate a point.

When we think about art that way, they stop being simply objects – a painting, a song, a play – and as musician Brian Eno suggests – they become triggers for experiences that transport us to a time of joy, or comfort, or ease. Suddenly, it is well with our souls. Because of art's power.

Which... is mysterious.

We can't know for sure what moves us when we see a famous play or painting or dance, but we know the one that captures our attention, and makes us wonder, and lets us consider our humanness and our connection to the divine, and our profound dance with life and our interconnectedness with the world.

In fact, we are so moved by the arts, we create artistic places to house and engage them – from the Guggenheim to the Sydney Opera House.

We are so moved by the arts, that despite our austere Puritan forebears, we cannot help but put art in our places of worship, from stained glass in the windows to paintings on the walls.

We are so moved by art, we write songs about art – like “Mona Lisa” and artists – like “Vincent” and even entire musicals about art – like “Sunday in the Park with George.”

So what IS it about art?

First, I would argue that art helps us see and speak of our humanity – to tell our human stories. Even the most abstract painting is telling some sort of story. And story is what moves us... as Jonathan Gottschall, author of *The Storytelling Animal*, writes,

“When we read nonfiction, we read with our shields up. We are critical and skeptical. But when we are absorbed in a story, we drop our intellectual guard. We are moved emotionally.

"Story, in other words, continues to fulfill its ancient function of binding society by reinforcing a set of common values and strengthening the ties of common culture. Story enculturates the youth. It defines the people. It tells us what is laudable and what is contemptible. It subtly and constantly encourages us to be decent instead of decadent. Story is the grease and glue of society: by encouraging us to behave well, story reduces social friction while uniting people around common values. Story ... makes us one. This is part of what Marshall McLuhan had in mind with his idea of the global village.

Technology has saturated widely dispersed people with the same media and made them into citizens of a village that spans the world.”

Technology has saturated people with the same media. He’s talking about records, and films, and television.

Let’s consider television for a moment – this box, although now it’s really just a panel. And on it, comes noise, maybe, or distraction, but really, on TV, human stories are played out, and cultural metaphors are established: Norm on his barstool. Archie in his chair. Fonzie at the bathroom mirror. A three hour tour. MacGyvering a solution.

Yes, there is noise too, and plenty to make us turn the set off. But for all of the noise of reality tv and sensationalist news, we continue to crave story to help us make sense of the world, and in fact have entered an incredible time for television storytelling – *Mad Men*, *Breaking Bad*, *Better Call Saul*, *Queen Sugar*, *Sherlock*, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *The West Wing*, *Broadchurch*, *Game of Thrones* and many more – shows wrestling with the big questions we all wrestle with, in fictional form.

Gottschall points out that “There is a paradox in fiction that was first noticed by Aristotle in the *Poetics*. We are drawn to fiction because fiction gives us pleasure. But most of what is actually in fiction is deeply unpleasant: threat, death, despair, anxiety, *Sturm und Drang*.”

But it isn’t just that we like these stories, we need them. As Gottschall says, “the human mind was shaped for story, so that it could be shaped by story.” Science has shown us that when we hear or watch or read stories, not only are the language or visual processing parts in our brain activated, but any other area in our brain that we would use when experiencing the events of the story are too. As science writer Leo Widrich notes, “Whenever we hear a story, we want to relate it to one of our existing experiences. That’s why metaphors work so well with us. While we are busy searching for a similar experience in our brains, we activate a part called insula, which helps us relate to that same experience of pain, joy, or disgust.”

In safety.

Storytelling happens throughout the arts – whether television, film, books, dance, sculpture, stand-up comedy, or painting – stories emerge. Our stories. Human stories. Sometimes joyful stories, but often times hard, tragic stories.

New Testament scholar Hal Taussig suggests that the arts help us tell the hard human stories in ways that address the untenable without our knowing it; art brings us up against things we have a hard time facing in real time, but it never says explicitly “here’s the scary part.” Rather, art provides a structure that allows us to peel off layers and go just a little deeper each time we engage it.

This is especially important as we encounter the stories of those who are not like us – stories from people of color, or queer people, or immigrants, or the disabled, or the

impoverished. These stories are often difficult to understand because they describe experiences we have never and can never have. But artistic structures help make space so we can approach the difficult sideways. Art creates a shared experience through which we can connect and understand in relative safety; as George Bernard Shaw quipped, “Without art, the crudeness of reality would make the world unbearable.” Or the words of acting teacher Stella Adler, “Life beats down and crushes the soul ...and art reminds you that you have one.”

That sense of soul is what artists are trying to bring back.

In Los Angeles, a graffiti artist who calls himself Skid Robot brings a meal and creates art on the streets with unhoused people on Skid Row; he talks to them, then creates in paint a scene on the wall or fence behind them that reflects their stories, their hopes, their dreams. One might show the food of her dreams; the other, a big comfy chair; a third, the family he left behind. Through drawings, conversations, and simple assistance, he feels their bodies and souls.

At New York’s Judson Memorial Church, my friend Micah Bucey runs Bailout Theatre, which serves a free meal and a free show. It doesn’t matter who you are – you are welcome to eat and experience a staged reading, or a new dance, or some comedy, or music – to feed your soul as well as your body. Micah is always charmed, and surprised, and moved – at how important Bailout is to the community. He regularly sees people who are largely ignored connect to others. He watches as those in need tear up at being spiritually and emotionally fed even as they enjoy a well-prepared meal.

And sometimes those very people approach Micah with their own projects – singers who can’t find a decent gig, dancers whose age or disability keep them from joining companies, writers who can’t catch a break, actors who are just never the right type. And Micah gives them, too, a place to shine, to share their gifts, and to help others.

Imagine if we were all given a chance to shine? Or – more importantly, told we could create art that would move others?

The truth is: we are ALL artists. Process theology suggests that just as God is both creator and creating, we too are both a part of creation and are creators – and the moments of creation are the true reality.

As writer Arthur Graham notes, “Each of us is an artist whose task it is to shape life into some semblance of the pattern we dream about. The molding is not of self alone, but of shared tomorrows and times we shall never see.”

Now I suspect some of you are thinking “I’m not an artist.”

Perhaps you could never coordinate your feet properly in dance class and gave up, thinking you are a klutz.

Perhaps you had a music teacher who suggested it would be best if you just mouthed the words.

Perhaps you had an art teacher who fussed because you used the wrong colors.

Perhaps you had an English teacher who said your story was uninteresting or didn't fit in.

Perhaps, like me, you had a director who told you that you ruined the play because you couldn't act.

We get these horrible messages – often in our childhood – that keep us from creating, that keep us from breathing in the smell of paint and makeup and sweat and graphite – that keep us from entering the world and telling our stories through the act of creation.

As my colleague Jim Keat says, “Creativity is not a thing. It's the way you approach and engage everything. Creativity is not a product that can be bottled and sold. It's simultaneously the fuel and subversion of capitalism. Creativity is not an activity that you start and stop. It's a mindset, a filter, a way on which you see the world.”

I encourage you – I implore you – to create. It doesn't have to be good. It doesn't have to be for public consumption. Write bad poetry that you burn in the Hibachi. Draw awkward pictures on the margins of your notepads. Sing off key in the shower. As the famous quote says, dance as if no one is watching.

Engaging in the creation of art – whatever form it takes – gets our creative selves energized to tackle other tasks, whether it be caring for an aging parent, or volunteering for a service organization, or teaching young minds, or dismantling racism, or resisting hate, or reversing the effects of climate change.

And maybe ... as you allow yourself to be a little artistic, the things you create will be better than you thought they could be. Even the most accomplished artist painfully experiences the chasm between an inner vision and its ultimate expression. So relax.

Maybe you will discover a new connection to a part of yourself that reminds us we are incredibly human – and deeply connected to the divine and to each other.

Art, as author John Updike notes, offers some space – a certain breathing room for the spirit. So breathe – let doing art alone or together be your way to enter the world, to explore the messiness of life, to approach the difficult sideways, to compel you to action, to let your spirit dance.