



Readings II in Faith & Science

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Truth For An Artist

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Truth For An Artist

[Mr. Leonard E. Buckley, retired foreman of Designers at the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, designed among other stamps the issue commemorating the Apollo 8 Flight as well as the mineral issues. Many of the Duck Stamps issued by the government are his design. He also played a large part in the new currency design. Many of his paintings grace the Smithsonian. He and his wife, Janet, have been longtime members of ITEST.]

Where is God in my life? How often do we pose this question in our busy routine of daily life, our time occupied with our working world, and the world in general? Sometimes we may pose this question just thinking about where we are and where we want to be. Sometimes we make the question part of what could be called a prayer. I can take the question further as a Catholic, and ask, "Where is Christ in my life." How does the "Good News" of His gospel work in my life? The answers come from a knowledge and an understanding, albeit imperfect, of our faith in God, what we truly believe as a part of our innermost person. This innermost person is not always what we show to others. There are times when our lives are caught up in this world and we can become more show than substance.

Each of us has aspects of our personality and intelligence that seem to come naturally. This is usually described as talent. In our education we develop these talents and skills and expand our knowledge toward our career. Where does this talent come from? Is it simply a random genetic trait passed from generation to generation? Is it only the genetic code, or possibly only the development of sensitivities within our culture? Or is it both?

Talent to me is a gift from God our Creator, one of the many gifts he provides for our human development and spiritual life in His divine plan. Each day God's gifts are present for us if we choose to accept and utilize them in our daily lives. This realization requires faith and its nourishment, a growing relationship with God. This leads me to ask myself: "What am I doing to find and nourish the truth of this relationship with the Creator of that genetic code developed into artistic talent?"

Art is one part of my life, one gift, that has given me a natural joy in its use while at the same time providing continuing questions and challenges. My talent is directed toward the visual arts. Some have talent in music, dramatic arts, literary arts, but each communicates, hopefully, the truth about the world around him or her through artistic expression. To grow in talent and knowledge requires a finely honed discipline. This is common to both the scientific and artistic search for the truth of our creation. I read an advertisement recently that stated, "Some say, Knowledge is Power, and others Knowledge is money, but who cares as long as you get it!" While this is a very contemporary viewpoint, it doesn't provide a full picture. Without the factor of a relationship with God, we will begin to lose the essence of who we really are, our innermost person, "our soul," to become manipulators of the "external" all the while ignoring the real person within.

In my experience, the critical years of learning come between 18 and 25. In my own life, this coincided with my seven-year apprenticeship in the security printing business. This experience not only provides career direction and education but also tests and confirms beliefs and values, expressed, hopefully, each day with a maturing self-discipline. More questions arise out of frustrations, conflicts, temptations as well as successes.

What is the role of truth and honesty, to others, to my work, to myself? What loyalty, what fidelity do I owe to the company and my co-workers with whom I spend more hours together than I do with my families? Our daily efforts are sometimes tested; but keeping on an even keel requires more help than we can muster in or by ourselves or indeed that we can gain much by talking with friends and colleagues. Even an artist, who depends on individual imagination and expression is not an island. In these critical years -- from 18 to 25 -- we begin to build respect for others, for ourselves in what we do and say. Sometimes it will appear that we walk two steps forward and one step back, moving ever so slowly to become who we want to be.

Learning never ends, and we must seek and be open to growth. As an artist I've learned in recent years, that the role of computer imaging has expanded, not replaced, the tools available to the artist. Yes, computers have their ever-present hype and ever-changing buzz words to patent new developments. Yes, as an artist, I have to work

with and through all of this, but I find that the artist's mission remains constant: to search for the truth about our world, express a viewpoint and hopefully communicate a true picture.

I compare this artistic mission, practiced today, to the efforts of the cave artist 10,000 years ago in Lascaux, France. That artist, or artists -- there were probably many over the course of years -- used talent, imagination and skill to express their perception of the world outside. The wild animals in motion, in three dimensions, were painted in a sense of the true world to the two dimensional surface of the cave wall. What is common between these artists of pre-history and the artists in today's technology? Both artists with sensitivity seek to describe the created world, beauty, color, tension, movement and form, some things that can be seen, others only sensed. The truth about each artist's world is discovered fresh, internalized and expressed realistically or abstractly, that artist taking the risk to communicate an authentic statement. Both sets of artists use their God-given gift, artistic talent and human imagination to provide a different perspective on reality, all the while seeking and projecting a true picture, not necessarily a realistic picture, but nonetheless a true picture for the viewer's understanding. We can see the artist of pre-history as well as artists over the years express their worlds successfully with sensitivity and an honest agenda, hiding nothing.

Accuracy and quality originate in and are conveyed by the artists' skills, presenting the idea not only to the immediate viewer but to future viewers as well. Artists are compelled internally to express their world for themselves, and for the community. We can see even in pre-history, that cave artist's respect for the animal world, the role of the hunt and the importance to the community. The cave painters taking and interpreting reality in the light of their beliefs, their "religion," bound the human intelligence to creation and to a sense of powerful forces or gods about them.

Human behavior is often compared to a pendulum swinging from one extremity to the other. Today, artistic extremes are pushed further not always to achieve a deeper understanding of truth, but also to create notoriety and sensationalism. The swings of the artistic pendulum have historically been subject to the hand of censorship that takes many forms of control from a society.

More questions for the artist! What is censorship? Whence does it derive its authority? What are the effects on creativity? Even recent history shows us many faces of censorship. The Nazi movement and Stalinist realism of the 1930's and 40's are extreme examples of dictatorial censorship over the arts in this century. Is censorship always an extreme hand holding back the creative search of the artist?

There is today a raging current of disrespect, not only in the visual expression of works, like the late Robert Mapplethorpe's photos and the "Piss Christ": a crucifix immersed in urine. I hear it in music that presents suicide, killing and disrespect for authority as a reflection of the worst in our society. Does disrespect, blasphemy and crude behavior always have to challenge and test the limits of authority? What balance is presented to these expressions of individual creative freedom? What right to individual privacy is part of today's rationale for extremes in art forms? What personal values and criteria do the artists have in their work, relative to the values and heritage of the society to which the art communicates?

There is a message, an idea to communicate whether I work as a fine artist, or as a commercial artist, expressing ideas in response to business and industrial clients. The message for me, for my talent, is to balance personal beliefs, client needs and the respectful sense I feel to the community, the people at large. I cannot please everyone, for "beauty is in the eye of the beholder," but I can work to gain an artistic respect for my efforts, remembering that "learning never ends" and neither does the search for a fuller understanding of the truth in our creation. God must be allowed to "grow" in us as he "grows" in creation. Our task, as I see it, is to respond to his offers.

Questions

Does the artist viewing the beauty of an oil painting, for example, differ from the scientist viewing the intricate patterns of life forms under a microscope? Why? Why not? In 20th century culture the artist and the technologist meet, often through the use of computers or even through use of technology-produced artistic materials. Is this meeting necessarily a hostile one or may it be mutually beneficial?

How can technology help the artist and how can the artist help to “humanize” technology? Human beings are constantly searching for “truth.” We speak of truth in advertising, in politics, and so on. How does the artist’s search for truth differ from the scientist’s search for truth? Does that search differ? Is searching for truth a basic human goal?

Scientists and artists are sometimes caricatured as “supreme egotists”. . . nurturing their egos instead of their talent. Does recognition of a higher power than oneself, God or Christ, inhibit creativity? Why? Why not?

How does the modern artist differ from the primitive artist who did the paintings at Lascaux? How?

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