

ART AS A FORCE FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

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A friend and I once made a short movie for our college film class. We were both novice Buddhists and were proud of our loose haiku-like narrative accompanying images of peace and serenity. Our teacher, however, was less pleased— “There’s no conflict. No conflict, no art.”

We were indignant and felt self-righteously misunderstood in only the ways that 19 year olds can. We privately accused our teacher of being so Cartesian in his need for opposition and shook our heads with pity that he failed to grasp the peaceful principles of Buddhism. Little did we realize that Buddha’s very story is a classic tale of conflict. A privileged prince is raised to continue the royal line, sheltered from all unpleasant things. He convinces his chariot driver to sneak out of the palace and encounters a sick person, a hungry person, an old person and a corpse. Confronted for the first time with injustice, suffering and death, he is filled with self-doubt and eventually leaves his wife and family to seek the truth. After traveling down several false paths, he finds his moment under the Bo tree and begins a teaching that will influence the life of most of Asia for the next 2500 years. One story of conflict— big results.

As my friend and I matured in our Buddhist practice, we also came to realize how many conflicts raged within our own breasts as we faced our inner demons in meditation retreats. There may be a “peace that passeth all understanding” at the end of the spiritual rainbow, but the path is filled with unending bumps and rough places. Transformation seems to require that we stumble and fall repeatedly and pay our dues with bruised knees and broken bones.

Whether it be the art of living or the art of art, our film teacher was right—no conflict, no worthy art. Art begins with a conflict that demands to be heard and moves through various levels of transformation in accordance with our strength and courage to face it. It often begins with the refusal to accept that which is handed down to us. Had Huck Finn meekly submitted to Aunt Polly’s attempt to civilize him and sat in his assigned seat obediently doing his schoolwork, there would have been no story. Had Tita (from Like Water For Chocolate) resigned herself to Mama Elena’s dictum that the youngest sacrifice marriage to care for her, there would be no mouth-watering conflict to drive the story forward and enliven both the dinner table and the bedroom. Like water for chocolate, things need be brought to a boil before we taste the sweetness.

Society in all its many faces—from Dickens’ London to Hussein’s Kabul to Achebe’s Nigeria—asks for compliance with convention. Without this implicit agreement, the mail couldn’t be delivered nor the trains run on time. But what is efficient for the machinery of society can sometimes be troublesome to the soul. And this is where art begins.

Take marriage, that most necessary and universal of custom to continue both the family line and species’ survival. For most of human history, the arranged marriage is the preferred mode— a mere matter of convenience, economics and ethnic purity. Enter love,

that troublesome emissary of Soul and suddenly Tristan and Isolde, Romeo and Juliet, Tony and Maria, are sneaking around in defiance of all accepted protocol—and we, the reader/viewer are cheering them on. They remind us of our own deferred dreams, our own secret loves and our own crazy ideas that we keep wrapped up tightly away from society's gaze. That's what art can do for us—speak our deep longings that would be ridiculed at the pub, ignored in the workplace, or considered dangerous by Homeland Security.

Schools, parents and therapists keep working to make sure we're normal, but most people who have made a difference in this world have had raging conflicts lighting the fire of their passion. It's hard to imagine as we listen to Mozart's pleasant harmonies to reduce stress during rush hour, balance our biofeedback, make our children smarter, or set the mood for romance that such beauty came forth from inner turmoil. As his biographer Maynard Solomon reminds us, Mozart came "to disturb the slumber of the world." Where the day to day world prefers things at a mild intensity, the dial set to background, Mozart and indeed, every artist worth his or her salt, asks for something different—listen, stretch, attend, feel. Don't sleepwalk through this life with the comfort of easily learned routine.

The artist committed to creation can never rest. No sooner is one painting finished or novel signed off than the next one begins. An advertising man can invent one clever slogan and live off the fat of his paycheck for the rest of his life. The composer can write an entire symphony and still have to get up the next morning and write the opening theme for the next one. The creator is driven to observe the world and respond in perpetually new ways.

Art and Social Change

As the title suggests, art is a force for social change without necessarily intending to be so. The artist by nature is not content to wholly accept things as they are, be they a social convention or a way of seeing. He or she develops a habit of thinking, responding, imagining, creating and re-creating. A person who is constantly thinking, constantly responding from the heart and seeing with the soul is a person who does not easily obey orders and accept whitewashed propaganda. He or she may care more about art than politics and choose not to get involved in group action— any group, no matter how good its intention or honorable its values, is vulnerable to creating its own type of stifling conformity and mass mindedness and the artist by temperament may be inclined to resist this. But the role of the artist is to provoke, to question, to prod and that slows down the manufacturing of consent that much politics depends on.

Mass culture depends upon statistics, stereotypes, averages, both making people too much alike and too much different. The soul as revealed by art is always both one of a kind in its particulars and universal in its qualities. To take but one example—a good novel explodes the convenient lie that the people not living in our neighborhood are strange and wholly other. By hearing their story, we cannot dismiss them as less than human, an exotic tribe or collateral damage. When a Richard Wright or Arundhati Roy or John Steinbeck present characters that live and breathe, exult and grieve, rise above

human foibles or fall from grace—in short, people like us—they offer a powerful antidote to the 6 o’clock news.

Poets can do the same. Anyone who has read Rumi or Basho or Lorca and paused to wonder how people so distant in time, place, temperament and upbringing can speak so eloquently to our own feelings and experience knows that there is indeed a universal human spirit beneath our constant squabbling and it is worth our attention to cultivate dialogues that bridge differences instead of wave our flags of divisive self-righteousness around.

I believe it was C.S. Lewis who once said that art is the reminder that we are not alone. What is worth noting here is the diversity of the company we keep. The town of the imagination that I live in has young black women, dead white men, Sufi mystics, beat Zen Buddhists, state senators, revolutionaries, insurance salesmen and itinerant vagabonds all living together on the same block. My library and recording collection is an international marketplace crossing borders of space and time. Hafiz sits down to dine with Gary Snyder, Thoreau and Mary Oliver have a little chat, Dickens writes letters to Zora Neale Hurston, Schubert and Ravi Shanker trade tunes with each other.

Such exchanges don’t only exist on an imaginative level, but in real time as well. Louis Armstrong, who grew up a poor black person, never got past 5th grade and began his career in a reform school, sang the songs of Cole Porter, that upper class privileged white man who attended Harvard and Yale. When we hear Satchmo transform the tune “You’re the Top” from a clever song to a soul-stirring performance or hear Billie Holiday take Porter’s “Love for Sale” and tell us the story of her life, we witness a mingling on the artistic level historically prohibited on a social level. Without Porter—or Gershwin, Rodgers, Berlin and dozens of other songwriters outside their social group— Louis and Billie surely would have found something else to sing, but it might not have touched the nerve in American culture the way that these songs did. Without Louis and Billie, that repertoire would have remained a footnote in American musical history, the novelty acts of Fred Waring and his Pennsylvanians. When society’s restrictive lines are crossed in art, something wonderful often happens. And for the alert listener, it is not too far a leap to consider that maybe those lines can be crossed in life as well.

A case in point. In Ken Burns’ documentary “Jazz,” he tells the story of a young 19 year old law student named Charlie Black who happened to attend a concert by Louis Armstrong. He was mesmerized by the music, moved in a way that he had never experienced before. As his insides began to stir in the way that only art can stir them, he was struck that such power and beauty was coming out of a horn played by a black man. His notion that blacks were inferior, fed to him by his upbringing, met the inescapable truth of the man in front of his eyes. Years later, he found himself one of the team of lawyers who ruled against segregation in the famous Brown vs. Board of Education. Had he not stumbled into Louis Armstrong that fateful night, that decision may have turned out differently.

The Value of Genuine Arts Education

Art can often serve as the antennae of society, tuned into the next social change that needs to be made. A mark of a healthy society is one that encourages arts as a means to keep it honest. If practicality and economics are to own most of the seats in the Senate, it seems important to at least reserve a few seats for Soul to have its voice. When decisions are made, the aesthetic, artistic or spiritual cost should be factored in and for that, they need the voice of art.

If we are to take this possibility seriously, we need to begin the process in those training grounds for future citizens, the schools. As they exist, these institutions are mostly obedience schools for children to learn to beg, heal, roll over and play dead, Where it is allowed in the door at all, arts education is often just another tedious attempt to learn the proper techniques, duplicate the established canons, perform to please parents or gain prestige or provide entertainment at the football games.

A genuine arts education begins by challenging the passivity of rote learning and inviting the children to dig down past the right answers to the unanswerable questions that fuel the engine of creativity. Good arts programs help children develop habits of astute observation, imaginative interaction and skillful wrestling of imagination into form. Arts in the schools can be the place where children see the stories the mainstream media doesn't show on the news, hear the tales kept out of the newspapers and history books, meet the characters whose skin, face, sex or upbringing are so radically different, but whose thoughts and dreams are so astonishingly the same.

The democracy yet to be not only requires informed citizens, but experienced citizens, people who have had their assumptions challenged by a novel, their breath interrupted by a dance gesture, their world stopped by a painting or their life turned upside down by a piece of music. Following Neruda and Yeats and Václav Havel, we can use actual poets and artists in positions of power, but perhaps more important, we need the arts to take their seat in the Senate of our imaginative life. We need to lift art out of its second class role as entertainment, diversion, hobby and raise it to a force of powerful transformation. Mozart's once radical music is now muzak for a less stressful commute, John Coltrane's tumultuous saxophone probings have been reduced to Kenny G's smooth jazz. Before one can fully experience the comforting arms of art, one must fall down and skin a few knees. And that means risk, questioning, doubt, not only learning the arts themselves, but the forms of artistic investigation.

„As I told my students yesterday at the Martin Luther King Day celebration, a community event that delivered its message through songs, hip-hop dancing and poetry, “Your job is to go out in the world and cause trouble. Not an aimless, selfish, indulgent kind of trouble, but the right kind of trouble.”

Maybe that's one definition of art— a way to guide you to the right kind of trouble.