

Art and Spirit
A Sermon by Beth Collins
January 31, 2004

Reading: Suzi Gablik, *The Reenchantment of Art*, p42

Reading: Ann Cushman, (*Utne Reader*, p52)

There are cultures in the world today that have no art. At least they have no concept of art. Art, like spirituality, is a part of their daily living. Utilitarian objects, such as bowls or clothing or walking sticks, are still hand-made with loving care. Perhaps they are decorated, or colored, or polished, to make them beautiful as well as useful.

In the civilized western world, however, such craft has given way to industry and technology. As a culture, we are drowning in a mass-produced sea of things, most of which hold no beauty or meaning for us. Mass-produced manufactured goods fill our homes and our landfills to overflowing. Mass media fills our heads with words and images. Some may wonder if we have become a culture with no art.

I would argue that art is still here. But I think that we, as a culture, have compartmentalized our art. To a great extent, we have assigned it to specialists who are the “best of the best”. We don’t sing or make music, because we have people who are really good at it performing for us at the touch of a button. Ann Cushman asks, “In fact, why make anything of our lives at all when we can watch one with much more interesting scripts on TV?”

Cushman goes on to answer her own question. “Why? Because creativity... is an essential part of being human, a vital force without which we can exist, but not truly live.”

What is art? I would define art as a manifestation of spirit and spiritual values. Art manifests beauty, truth, and reverence. Art can be fancy and humor, or it may manifest angst, outrage, and the pain of the soul. Art can manifest magic, ritual, and worship. By manifest, I mean to make it present in the material world.

Art has been around a long time. The book *Art & Fear*, by David Bayles & Ted Orland, emphasizes the obvious fact that art predates the art establishment. They write:

Through most of history, the people who made art never thought of themselves as making art. In fact it’s quite presumable that art was being made long before the rise of consciousness, long before the pronoun “I” was ever employed. The painters of caves, quite apart from not thinking of themselves as artists, probably never thought of themselves at all. What this suggests, among other things, is that the current view equating art with “self-expression” reveals more of a contemporary bias in our thinking than an underlying trait of the medium. Even the separation of art from craft is largely a post-Renaissance concept, and more recent still is the notion that art transcends what you do, and represents what you are. In the past few centuries Western art has moved from unsigned tableaus of orthodox religious scenes to one-person displays of personal

cosmologies. “Artist” has gradually become a form of identity which (as every artist knows) often carries with it as many drawbacks as benefits. Consider that if artist equals self, then when (inevitably) you make flawed art, you are a flawed person, and when (worse yet) you make no art, you are no person at all!

These same authors go on to suggest that the “wellsprings of art” are utility and ritual.

In very early times, these basic needs [utility and ritual] provided the cultural niche for art, while self-expression... served to integrate personal experience and skill with those larger goals. But ritual, which took form as painted bison on the cave wall and found its high flowering in the time of the great religions, has receded into secular fad and decoration. And utility, in whose service the early artist gave form to every object from obsidian arrowheads to fired clay pottery, has yielded to complexity and mass production.

If any of you have been to the Jarrell Plantation you have seen how artists and artisans were essential members of communities until fairly recently. Each farm, each community, each village was likely to have a blacksmith who made utilitarian and ornamental ironwork, in addition to horseshoes. There were potters, spinners and weavers, tailors and seamstresses, architects and carpenters. I remember an old man in Bonaire who made split oak baskets, the largest of which were used to pick and store corn from the fields. His art died with him. Now corn is picked by machines, dumped into trucks, grain elevators and trains without ever being touched by human hands. Baskets are therefore not needed.

Thus, we struggle against what Peter Halley describes as “an ethos of technology and bureaucracy... characterized by mechanicalness, reproducibility, and measurability” in which the human element has become another tool, another machine, rather than a soulful participant. We have lost our connection to the transcendent world of myth, magic, and symbol, perhaps even to our own divine selves.

A new movement is underway in the Western art world. As it follows Modernism, the predominant art and cultural movement of the early to mid-20th century, this new movement is called Postmodernism.

Suzi Gablik, author of *The Reenchantment of Art*, believes that while Modernism was thought to be about individual expression, Postmodernism is about art as a way to participate in society. Whereas Modernism was about the making of objects, postmodern art takes an ecological view, focusing on our relationships with one another, with nature, and with the divine. In redefining art in this way, we also redefine our culture.

I think that redefinition is one way we begin to restore art, and thus spirit, to our lives. Redefinition.

When I was young, even in elementary school, I was known as a talented artist. Many people consider talent a gift from God. That may be true to some extent, tho I think a lot of it is being in an environment where natural skills can be nurtured and explored. I believe that many so-called talented people become so by growing up in an environment where they have to be creative to entertain themselves. If they grow up somewhat isolated, as I did, they don't learn the symbols and standards that other children learn to

follow. Box houses, lollipop trees and flowers, stick people and animals. They observe nature and create their own symbols.

I was certainly encouraged in my artistic pursuits by friends and family, at least until I got to the point of having to make career choices, which touches on another issue. Even today when I meet former classmates or old family friends, the inevitable question is “What are you doing with your art?”

For a long time, I shamefully admitted, “Nothing.” After all, art is painting, drawing, or sculpting. Working and raising a family doesn’t leave a lot of time for such luxuries. (Art is also making music and song, of course, performance and theater, but those areas were impossibly beyond my ability.) Then, I began a redefinition of art, of my art. I began to answer, “I have been working in my yard.” I have built a goldfish pond, planted flowers. I designed and decorated my home. All of these are ways I create beauty as well as utility. Now I can add, I write sermons. I create rituals honoring the sacred within us and around us. I make bonsai, which combines gardening and sculpture. I create beauty. I express reverence and humor. I enhance my relationship with the world around me. I am a practicing postmodern artist.

There is a growing movement of transformational/visionary/sacred artists in this country. One such artist is performance artist Dominique Mazeaud. Her art is cleansing the Rio Grande River. Of her art she says, “As I was in the river, picking up one can after another, I saw people going into the church, and the bells rang. I realized that some people use the rosary to say prayers. My way is to pick up one can after another. It’s just as much a prayer doing Mother Earth’s maid service.”

In her book *The Artist’s Way*, Julia Cameron describes the creative process as letting god or spirit flow through us. She says, “Our creative dreams and yearnings come from a divine source. As we move toward our dreams, we move toward our divinity.

Piet Mondrian, an artist most well know for his paintings consisting of blocks of primary color, says that an artist is essentially a channel. I agree with this. In channeling divine spirit, the divine spirit within us is renewed.

Applying paint to canvas is one way to express this divine spirit, but there are many, many others. Here at High Street, we have accomplished potters and sculptors, and some not so accomplished who still enjoy the pleasure of creating. We have trained musicians, like LeNelle Boyd; some still in training, like Ian Underwood who performed for us this morning. Some of us just make a joyful noise. There are photographers, amateur and professional, among us. There are actors, painters, designers, sew-ers, weavers, composers, poets, and writers. Cathy Morris makes Ukrainian eggs. Dorner painted her house blue. My children and I built a pole house in the back yard, a kind of tree house without a tree. It certainly isn’t perfect, isn’t square, but we enjoyed the pleasure of creating together, and I still sometimes enjoy sitting in the pole house. It gives me a different perspective.

The forms and varieties of art are limitless. Jeff Reid asks “If genius is 1 percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration, does that explain why the most creative people are often the biggest stinkers? And if so, is body odor performance art a potential new artistic medium?” Well I don’t see why not.

I read an article in *Utne Reader* by W A Mathieu suggesting “performance walking” as an art form. Hum, whistle, sing, dance, slap your body. Make up a tune to the rhythm of your steps.

With so many possible ways to express our creativity, why doesn't everyone do it? I think one of the big reasons is fear. Fear of criticism, from others and from our critical self. Fear of being judged by our work.

Can you imagine actually "performance walking" through your neighborhood? What would the neighbors say!

We take ourselves much too seriously. We approach art with a vision that is much greater than our ability allows us to create. We want a perfect outcome, first time, every time. If we can't have that, we don't play.

We must remember that it always takes time to learn skills. In art making, it is the process rather than the outcome that is important. A degree of skill will come with time, with practice, but any potter can tell you that uncertainty will always be a part of the process. Our ability to overcome fear and tolerate uncertainty permits us to engage in the act of creating.

I heard a wonderful story on Public Radio about a young man in St. Louis. He was feeling down and depressed and was trying to think of something to make him feel better. He suddenly remembered his time as a drum major in high school and how much pleasure that gave him. He decided to try it again, and found it to be a creative act which allowed him to take his mind off his troubles and experience joy. He began to march around his neighborhood with his baton, strutting his stuff. Soon he began to enhance his performance by adding seasonal costumes, beginning with something festive for Christmas. I believe it was for New Years that he wore a black bustier and fishnet hose. For Valentines Day, it was a pink tutu, and for St. Patrick's Day he made a green weskit. Despite some trepidation, he has been well received by his community. People wait at local restaurants and coffee shops for him to make his daily rounds, cheering him on as he satisfies his own soul and adds to the spirit of the community. (It was noted that this was one of St. Louis's more liberal neighborhoods.)

Surely, this bold young man's story is a profile in artistic courage.

In his strange little book, *Invisible Cities*, Italo Calvino writes these words about hell:

"The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day... There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, giving them space."

I believe that often it is the artists who are not inferno, who nurture divine spirit in our communities. Likewise, the community must nurture them.

I think that we at High Street are doing a good job of that. We nurture creativity in children through our work at Bruce School. We are strong supporters of the arts, as evidenced by the number of UUs I see at local theater performances, musical events, and art shows. We nurture our own spirituality and that of others by our participation in the art of the community.

We nurture our artists by mentoring, by providing emotional support, and by paying them.

I do believe in paying the artists among us. Oscar Wilde wrote: “When bankers get together for dinner, they discuss Art. When artists get together for dinner, they discuss money.” Andy Warhol once said, “I don’t care how many you take, I need \$1400.” No matter how noble our pursuits, in this world it takes money to live.

We can support our artists financially by consuming consciously. You won’t find art at Wal-Mart. When you can, buy articles that are hand made rather than mass produced in a soulless factory. It may cost more, but perhaps you will find that you need less. Pay for your music. Downloading from the Internet is stealing, in my opinion. Better yet, go out and hear live music when possible. Be in relationship with the artists and the community. Finally, nurture the artistic soul of your community by nurturing your own artistic soul. Bales and Orland suggest that we can step out of that vicious spiral of ever increasing technology, complexity, and loss of spirit by accepting many paths to successful art making – from reclusive to flamboyant, intuitive to intellectual, folk art to fine art. One of those paths is yours.

BENEDICTION: What you can do, or dream you can, begin it, for boldness has magic and power in it. Go in Peace.