

Art, Spirit, and Power

In Mao's China, art was an incredibly powerful tool in an immense propaganda machine. It was not only powerful, but essential to the success of the regime through its ability to inspire an almost religious fervor and create figures larger than life. It continues to be just as powerful a tool in the West, not by any central power, but more subtle forces. Think about the powerful influences – the good, the bad and the ugly – of modern art forms such as movies, video games and advertising. They're more driven by economics than agendas. Yet, intended or not, their consequences can be highly destructive.

There's no doubt that religion, like art, can have a huge negative impact. Just as the ideologies of Mao's China and Stalin's Russia resulted in outrageously inhuman behavior, the desperate clinging to religious dogma has resulted in similar outrages. Both religion and art possess an equal and opposite force for good, when connected to the world of the spirit. This may be more obvious with religion: the birth of a religion is often accompanied by the rise of an entirely new level of social organization, as civilization surges ahead and moral behavior is cyclically renewed.

Where is the parallel power for enormous good in the arts?

The universality of symbolism and the templates of myth are what make us human. Their expression is paradoxically what makes us truly unique. Recently, in a Bahá'í study course, we were asked to interpret one of the passages artistically, in whatever way we chose. And here's my admission of guilt: even with a degree in art education, I had a hard time seeing the value in this at first. It was the amazing diversity of people's responses – through music, computer art, poetry, drawing – that reminded me that the capacity to tap into our individual creativity, that inspiration that arrives unbidden, is universal. This is the nature of art. It filters through us in a way that's as unique as an iris scan, producing a result different from any other being – alive, dead or unborn. It's the handwriting of the soul.

Author Brene Brown talks about "low grade disconnection" as one of the great ills of our times. Dr. Lissa Rankin refers to reconnection with the creative, intuitive, foundational part of our selves as our inner pilot light. All forms of art – visual, musical, kinesthetic, dramatic – call upon that innate light. It's the part of us that can recognize beauty. It's Creation conversing with itself, effortlessly, as mother and child, which is the nature of connection with the spirit. We connect with it when we stop trying to talk over it, second guess it, overthink it, doubt it.

The function of the arts in society and our individual lives goes far beyond design, entertainment and possible career choices. There is no doubt that professional artists should be recognized, valued, and remunerated to a degree that reflects their contribution. I don't think this should resemble the current winner-take-all style of remuneration in the arts, but still, some things go beyond money and become their own reward.

Art has the power to increase our connection with our true selves. Essential human activities can't be done by proxy, and creativity is one of them. It's a gift that's a birthright. So ask your heart what it wants to do – sing, blog, build a tree house with power tools, arrange flowers...? It doesn't matter. Trust your instincts and have fun!

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