

LOOKING BEHIND THE WORDS: SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE MISSION STATEMENT OF RENEWAL ARTS

Explore the arts as a catalyst for spiritual renewal

Enable individuals and society to experience art's transforming power

What exactly is art's transforming power? And how do the arts act as a catalyst for spiritual renewal?

These are big questions, serious questions, and I cannot hope to answer them adequately. But I have to try. Indeed, we all have to try. Because unless we fully understand what Renewal Arts is all about, in its deepest sense, we will not bring to it the commitment, the energy, the passion it needs and deserves. There is nothing so powerful as an idea that can engage and grip hearts and minds at their deepest level. There is nothing so weak as an idea that fails to do so.

Here I must insert a personal note. I am British and a believing and practising Christian and so my references and illustrations tend inevitably to be drawn from the English-speaking world and from the Judeo-Christian experience. But what we are talking about here is not the exclusive preserve of Britons or Christians, but of all those who look further than the self, the material, the measurable, to something beyond – to the other – what Vaclav Havel has described as that which lies beyond the horizons of our being. So when I use the word “God” please accept it as a form of shorthand for this wider concept.

It is common now to describe our age as not only “post-modern” but also “post religious”. This is a very Euro-centric view. It is certainly not true in Africa or throughout the Middle East or South East Asia. It is not even true in North America. And even in Europe it is only true if we limit our statistics to church going or membership of recognised religious denominations. In a recent UK census, quoted in the *Guardian* newspaper seventy percent said they were Christian although most had no formal affiliation.

Where it is true is among the educated, liberal, middle classes of Europe – the milieu that most of us inhabit. So how can such people experience art's transforming power? How can the arts be a catalyst for spiritual renewal in this environment?

In a published speech *Beyond Boundaries – the arts after the events of 2001* the Chief Executive of the Arts Council of England, Peter Hewitt, referring to the aftermath of the 11 September attacks on New York and Washington, writes:

“People seemed shocked into realising they wanted more in their lives than working and shopping, enjoyable and satisfying though both may be. They wanted a sense of meaning, explored in spaces protected from the intrusions and distractions of the ‘always on’ consumer culture. And I believe that in an increasingly secular Western world, art has a vital role to play to connect us to that sense of deeper meaning. Poems are a modern form of prayer. Art provides the setting for modern communion. It is no cliché to see Tate Modern, the Lowry and the Baltic as the new cathedrals.

Compare this with a motto of the Fuke sect of Zen Buddhism in 17th Century Japan, recently quoted in an article by the Scottish composer James Macmillan in *The Guardian*: “Religion is music. The breath of the flute is the path to enlightenment”.

In Britain, Anthony Gormley, one of our best known sculptors has said of his art “that the work comes from the same source as the need for religion: wanting to face existence and discover meaning, attempting by starting with a real body in real time to face space and eternity”. One is reminded of the poet William Blake:

To see a world in a grain of sand
And a heaven in a wild flower,
To hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And eternity in an hour.

Sir Simon Rattle, now conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic, perhaps the greatest orchestra in the world, was asked in a recent interview what the orchestra was meant to be in the 21st century. He replied “People are looking for spiritual things. We can help them find them. They need it more than ever.”

So in a way we are faced with a paradox: a society in pursuit of materialism, consumerism, hedonism, shunning formal religious practice – and yet at the same time aware of the spiritual and of one’s need of the spiritual. The poet and teacher Peter Abbs defines the difference between this and formal religion by examining the roots of both words. Spirit, he writes, comes from the Latin *spiritus*, a breathing out, whereas religion comes from *re-ligere*, to bind together. “And you cannot bind breath”, he adds.

Some fifteen years ago now, in his book *Real Presences* George Steiner, Jewish, agnostic, Cambridge philosopher, confronted with the phenomenon of artistic creativity and examining its source, developed what he called his “wager on God”. “This essay argues a wager on transcendence”, he wrote. “It argues that there is in the art act and in its reception, that there is in the experience of meaningful form, a presumption of presence.” And by “presence” he makes it clear that he means a divine presence. And he also makes it clear that he does not just mean some art i.e. “religious” art, he means all art.

I think it is worth repeating; There is in the art act – in the artist’s work – and in its reception – I like that bit! – our ability to hear it, see it, experience it, which is also a gift - a presumption of presence. Steiner continues: “I know that this formulation will be unacceptable not only to most of those who will read a book such as this, but also to the prevailing climate of thought and feeling in our culture.”

And, as if to make his position abundantly clear, he makes a similar statement from the negative aspect, or the flip side, if you like. “What I affirm is the intuition that where God’s presence is no longer a tenable supposition and where His absence is no longer a felt, indeed overwhelming weight, certain dimensions of thought and creativity are no longer attainable.”

God, or the Transcendent, for Steiner is a *sine qua non* of the work of the artist and the appreciation of the art-lover. And I suppose there is a certain logic behind this

view. If we speak of artistic talent as a “gift”, then one might reasonably ask – who is the giver?

In the Judeo-Christian tradition we go right back to the beginning – to the creation story in the Book of Genesis. This is not history, still less is it science. It is myth in the deepest and truest meaning of that term, indeed you might call it one of Jung’s “archetypal myths”. It looks behind history, beyond science, to reveal a profound truth by telling a story. God creates the universe, the world, the creatures, and then finally He creates men and women “in his own image”. To my simple mind it follows that if the creator God made us in his own image, then he created us to be creative.

Through the pages of the Bible we also see God at work as Communicator – to Abraham, through Moses, through the prophets, until his ultimate act of communication with mankind by assuming human form – the incarnation. Beyond the Gospel story we observe God communicating with the early Christians through the active agency of the Holy Spirit – a communication which continues down to the present day.

So if God is creator and communicator – and we are made in His image - we are programmed, so to speak, to create and to communicate. It is almost as natural as breathing.

Now that may answer, in a simplistic fashion, the question of why human beings create and communicate. But, I believe, it is only part of the answer. To find a more complete answer we have to take it one step further back and ask why does God create? Why does He communicate? Why, to put it bluntly, does He bother?

The English novelist and playwright Dorothy Sayers asked this question in an article in the *Sunday Times* back in 1938. Why should God create anything, at any time of any kind whatsoever? After all, He didn’t have to. Or did He? Is there, at the very heart of the universe a creative imperative?

If there is such a phenomenon as this “the creative imperative” – and I believe there is - what is its property, what is its root?

I think we can only answer that question with one word – one poor, misused word – but in English it is the only word we have – love. It is the compulsion of love that made God create. “God so loved the world..” My good friend, the late Monsignor George Leonard – a great communicator if ever there was one, and a great encourager of artists - reflecting on this passage in John 3 verse 16, calculated that if, as scientists believe, the earth is four billion years old and if *homo sapiens* is about four million years old (although I have to add here that recent discoveries in Africa now call this date into question!), then for three billion, nine hundred and ninety six million years God was loving the world before mankind appeared. And throughout the creation story, when God created anything – light, sea, earth, the animals, “he saw that it was good”. He loved his creation and enjoyed it.

A few years ago Dell and I went to see a production of *The Creation* – the first part of the medieval play cycle *The Mysteries* – performed by members of the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Other Place at Stratford-on-Avon. The scene opened

with the actor who was playing God lying face down on the stage floor, obviously peering down at what was going on beneath him, and chuckling and laughing to himself as if he were fit to burst, rolling over onto his back and kicking his legs in the air in sheer delight. It was a revelation to me just how much God must enjoy creating, how he delights in it, how he loves it. Such are the insights that art can bring us when we are least expecting them.

There is a marvellous passage in a novel *The Turnaround* by Vladimir Volkoff, translated from the French. The French counter-espionage service have set a “honey trap” for Major Igor Popov of the KGB, a brute of a man who has more than once killed with his bare hands. Unknown to the luckless French agent, the girl he persuades to lure the KGB major back to her flat, has become a believer. She takes Popov not to her apartment but to a Russian Orthodox Church in Paris where a service is in progress. Popov has never been inside a church before and is intrigued. He finds an excuse to return a few days later on his own to talk to the Priest.

“Don’t give me your agitprop”, says Popov roughly to the Priest, “expound”. The Priest replies: “Love created the world, because Love is creative, it is His property to create... Love created man. He created him immortal and free. In order to experience his freedom man turned away from Love. He became mortal. That is what we call the Fall. Then, instead of forcing man to obey him, Love decided to humiliate himself before man, to put himself at man’s mercy, totally, in order to give him back his lost dignity. That is what we call the Cross.”

“Clear enough. Go on”, says Popov.

Priest: All the rest is secondary, providing one has love.

Popov: I don’t.

Priest: You don’t know what you’re saying. Why would you be here otherwise?

And a little later:

Popov: So God is love?

Priest: And love is God.

Popov: But what is love?

Priest: This is what it is: to diminish oneself so that the other may grow, what we call the *kenosis* and which we symbolise by our poor rite of the washing of the feet. It is what the Lord lived through on the Cross, the Cross of Love.

Popov: So love is not to possess?

Priest: It is not to possess.

Popov: Is it to be possessed?

Priest: It is not quite that either. Love is to prefer the other to oneself. Not to sacrifice oneself, but to prefer.

Popov: That’s what I thought. I don’t care for love.

I don’t think I have read anywhere a better description of the nature of the God I believe in and try to serve— and this in a spy novel! When I was a young and very green playwright, just starting out, I had the privilege of having as my mentor Alan Thornhill, Oxford don, priest and playwright. After reading some of my early efforts Alan said to me, “If you want to write for the theatre, you have to learn to love your characters and love your audience”. I don’t think any young writer could be given better advice.

You will remember that at Caux last year I had the privilege of interviewing the sculptor Stephen Broadbent. In reply to one of my questions, Stephen referred to his mentor the larger-than-life Merseyside sculptor Arthur Dooley. “When art is a gift to another person – I think that is what Arthur taught me, that the art work should be a gift – there needs to be a love of the material that you use – that’s fundamental – a love of the idea, the concept, the truth – and a love of the person that you are working for.”

I would like to suggest that love is the creative imperative. Love is the secret of art’s transforming power.

I heard the other day of a woman in New York who was appalled at the lifelessness of the inmates in the old people’s homes she visited. We are probably familiar with the scene. From breakfast to bed-time, they are sitting in a circle around the edge of a large room, the television blaring away in the corner, no-one watching it, no-one talking, everyone just staring ahead of them, waiting for the next meal tray or the next escorted visit to the bathroom. All day every day. This lady was determined to make a change. But how? One day she invited a young dancer to come with her. As the music played and the girl danced in the centre of the room, little by little the old people began to sway and to move and beat time with their hands. One man was seen to stare at his hand and was heard to exclaim “My God, it is ten years since I moved that hand!” And a 104 year old lady of German descent was heard to mutter “It reminds me of when I danced for the Tsar of Russia!”

Three years ago our friend John Burrows wrote of an experience he had at the Mermaid Theatre in London where he was conducting the musical *Cole* based on the life of Cole Porter. “The performance was over...I closed the musical score. Behind me a small, elderly lady stood transfixed to the spot, seemingly unaware that tonight’s *Cole* was a thing of the past. ‘Did you enjoy the show?’ I asked. ‘Oh yes’, she said. And so did Edie.’ I saw no-one with her. Not a little nervously, I enquired, ‘Where is Edie?’ ‘She’s there’, she replied, pointing to a shadowy figure in the last row of seats. ‘She’s asked me to tell you something. She wants you to know that she can leave her house again. Her husband died a year ago. From that day to this Edie hasn’t been out. Not until tonight. Somehow I persuaded her to come with me to see *Cole*. And she wants you to know she can go out again.’

We can all think of moments when listening to music, reading a poem, looking at a painting or sitting in a theatre, we have had a life-giving, life-enriching experience. In our discussion afterwards it might be an idea to share some of these experiences with each other. Here we find another clue to understanding our Mission Statement. For love and art are both life-giving. The love that is inherent in the creative process finds expression in serving people by helping them become truly alive, more whole, more human. Artists are people servers and life-givers. As a Christian I hear echoes of Jesus words “I come that you may have life and have it in abundance”. And of Saint Paul “The letter (of the Law) deadens, but the spirit gives life” He understood the trap that religion can become without the spirit! The problem with materialism, consumerism and self-centredness is that they deaden. The role of the artist –the act of love of the artist - is to make us more alive.

A few weeks ago I met the poet Peter Abbs, who is also Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Sussex. He has recently written a book called *Against the flow: the Arts, post-modern culture and education*. This is from a recent review of the book: “His argument is that what education needs, especially in the arts, is a return to the metaphysical. By this he means...a deep attention to imagination and a striving for the transcendent. As he puts it ‘We are still haunted by the three broken transcendentials: Truth, Beauty, Goodness’. Poets and artists should be shocking people, not with unmade beds and vacuous conceptualism, but with questions and insights that “slip the bounds of earth”. Their role is to be both Shamans, or prophet-healers, and subverters of the dominant, soulless culture...”

Here is another facet of the artists’ transforming role – subverters of the soulless culture. The subversion of a Hamlet: “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy”. It is the subversion James Macmillan finds in music: “What is music after all? he writes. “You can’t see it, you can’t touch it, you can’t eat it. But its palpable presence always makes itself felt: not just in a physical way, but in a way that reaches down into the crevices of our souls... Music is fundamentally immaterial and cannot be consumed in the sense of being bought and owned. It is this numinous quality of music that issues such a direct counter-challenge to the values of our age.”

So there are three ways in which the artist works to renew and to transform – loving, life-giving and subverting. Where Renewal Arts comes in is to recall artists and art-lovers to this high calling. It is a very great responsibility.

In the 1970’s I was much influenced by a book by Jaques Barzun, a professor at Columbia University in New York. He courageously called into question the late Victorian, but still prevailing, notion of “Art for Art’s sake”, which had come to mean that artists were responsible to no-one but themselves. He held that it was ridiculous for artists to pretend that their work should be immune from the normal critical criteria of common sense, morality and social responsibility. And, even more controversially, he refuted the prevailing view that all art was beneficial *per se*. Much twentieth century art, he argued, had been a destructive element in society. He held out the appalling prospect, if this continued, of art ultimately destroying the conditions in which art could flourish and indeed survive. Art could end up by destroying art. One is here reminded of the George Steiner passage I quoted earlier. “...where God’s presence is no longer a tenable supposition and where His absence is no longer a felt, indeed overwhelming weight, certain dimensions of thought and creativity are no longer attainable”.

There are battle lines to be drawn. Renewal Arts will not appeal to everybody. There will, inevitably, be opposition and we must be prepared for that. We all know of work which is subversive, certainly, but we have to ask ourselves, is it also inspired by love and is it life-giving? And if it is not – then is it subversive enough? Or is it superficial?

But let me make one thing clear. What I do not mean is that art should only convey sweetness, harmony and light. It should be true, authentic. That is the real test. Let me develop this a little by looking at the employment of the ugly, the grotesque, and the dissonant in art. It is interesting that the first Protestant to be offered a chair in a

Spanish university was David Estrada, an Evangelical Christian who became Professor of Art History in Barcelona (now Emeritus). It may seem strange to some that his chosen field is the aesthetic of ugliness with special reference to the works of Goya. Yet his reasons are profoundly spiritual, or Christian, as he would say. It may be that because of our education system in our European schools and universities we have been too influenced by the classical Greek concept of beauty, of perfect wholeness and harmony. The Judeo-Christian aesthetic, I maintain, is more to do with glory – the glory emanating from Moses’s burnt face or from the agonised Christ on the cross. Indeed the concept of glory allows us to develop an aesthetic of the Cross. For it encompasses suffering, pain, vulnerability and brokenness as well as beauty and harmony. It keeps us – and art – rooted in real life experience. Glory allows us – indeed leads us - to consider questions of good and evil, discord and harmony, pain and healing, the meaning of suffering and of death as well as of life. And indeed, a deep enough reflection on what CS Lewis called “The Problem of Pain” leads us to the conclusion that pain is the necessary companion of love and that suffering and compassion, the ability to feel, are inextricably linked. Those that love the most almost invariably suffer the most – and none more than the Son of God upon the cross.

It is not surprising therefore that the art of the last century has reflected the widespread, almost universal, violence and pain of that century – the carnage of the First World War, the Holocaust, the Gulag. And let us not forget that that century ended, just when we had begun to think we had progressed beyond that sort of thing, with ethnic cleansing in central Africa and the Balkans. In painting one immediately thinks of Picasso’s *Guernica*, prompted by the horrors resulting from the first experiments in *blitzkrieg*. In music, one thinks of the symphonies and quartets of Dimitri Shostakovitch, who experienced the siege of Leningrad and the suffocating repression of Stalin. In these masterly works passages of violent and clashing dissonance are suddenly redeemed by phrases of sublime harmony and searing melody. Now you cannot try to separate them and say that the latter was beautiful but the former was not. The work has to be taken as a whole - glory, rather than beauty.

This is an unashamedly Christian perspective, yet I believe the truth in it is universal. Those from other faiths or belief systems will also arrive at an aesthetic based on their beliefs. I simply offer these reflections as a Christian who sees my place as working at the interface between art and faith and who has thought about them a great deal.

To summarise: I believe that the Mission Statement of Renewal Arts summons artists, through their work, to love, to serve, to give life and so to undermine and to transform a heartless, soulless culture of materialism, consumerism and hedonism. Artists who embrace this vision of their calling are truly Shamans, or as I would prefer to name them Priests, the highest calling known to man or woman.

Hugh Williams
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