

# The Role of Art in Spiritual Formation

## By Steven Stuckey

Artists are a curious breed. They come in all shapes and sizes. Many are extroverts but more are introverts finding the pleasure of their own company more tolerable than that of other human beings. In the case of Vincent Van Gogh, when the thin line between logic and lunacy blurred, even their own presence was unbearable. Most are propelled by an inner desire to be special, different, and unique. Though if asked, some would say their drive is towards authenticity. They stand out from the rest of humanity in part because they tend to position themselves at the edge of the crowd. It is from that vantage point that they can watch and reflect on what they see. Some become revolutionaries, a few become martyrs, and almost all of them are interesting.

Their goal in life is to create an original work of beauty. Now beauty is not synonymous with pretty. Beauty is deeper and heavier. It is more akin to the Hebrew word for glory, which means beauty, splendor, radiance, or magnificence. The root idea behind the word is that of weightiness, heaviness, or worthiness. A work of beauty may embrace that which is sad, ugly, and painful. Death, the ultimate ugliness on the planet, may be an act of beauty if the purposes of virtue, truth, goodness, or redemption are served in the act of dying.

Whether they realize it or not, I think every artist who seeks to create a work of beauty has a hunger for heaven. King David, whose 3000-year-old songs and poems have touched countless lives, put it this way. "This is what I seek: That I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord."<sup>1</sup> The thesis of the Bible is that all humans are created in God's image and are made for relationship with Him. His radiant beauty is a magnetic force drawing us to Him. Artists, those searching for truth and beauty, are especially susceptible to the pull of His glory.

It is the artist's preoccupation with beauty that makes them a special ally to those who are called to care for the souls of their fellow humans. In the fourteenth century, those people were called curates, from the Latin word for "care." They were given responsibility for the care of the people in their parish. In later times, curate also became someone who cared for precious works of art. Might it be said that a soul is the most precious work of art known to mankind?

The soul is that component of the person that coordinates all the capacities and dimensions of the human being. It is the source and unity of our lives. It is the deepest part of the self. The message of the Scriptures is that the soul of each person is somehow tragically broken, scared, or corrupted. Only man's maker can reverse the damage. Using symbolism, which is the language of art, Jesus compares the reformation process to being spiritually reborn.<sup>2</sup> Evangelical Christians tend to see this spiritual birthing as a one-time action. There are certainly significant transition markers along the way, but the truth is that the process of spiritual formation is a life long project.

Vincent Van Gogh saw the process as an artistic one and he described Jesus as "the supreme artist, more of an artist than all others, disdaining marble and clay and color, working in living flesh."<sup>3</sup> Stories in the Bible and case studies throughout history proclaim that Jesus is still at work crafting, molding, and shaping men and women to be like himself.

### Parallels Between Art and Spiritual Care

There are important parallels between the creative activities of the artist and the actions of the spiritual care giver. For both, the world of the invisible is their starting place. The artist begins with an idea or intuition that no one else can see. From there they begin to create and make visible what was in their mind. For the spiritual caregiver, the invisible reality is God himself. He exists, but He is hidden in blinding light. The spiritual mentor's job is to help their client name the spiritual experiences they are having thereby make visible the longings and hunches of life.

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 27:4

<sup>2</sup> John 3:1-8

<sup>3</sup> Erickson, Kathleen Powers, *At Eternity's Gate, The Spiritual Vision of Vincent Van Gogh*, Eerdmans Publishing, 1998, page 95

Both artists and spiritual directors use the language of symbolism to communicate. They learn the language of the culture and then find ways to express their truth using the symbols of the age. Mexican artist Diego Rivera painted scenes of the least valuable in his society, poor Indian peasants, working in the flower markets to show the dignity and beauty of all human beings. The juxtaposition of flowers and peasants sends a powerful message. Jesus used phrases loaded with cultural meaning. By describing himself as the good shepherd, the door, the light, the way, truth and life, the bread of life, the vine, and the Lamb of God, people could not help but pay attention.

Both artists and spiritual directors spend a lot of time waiting, watching, and listening. Their demeanor may seem passive but internally they are living out the Hebrew root of the word 'wait.' It means to gather or collect. Like squirrels storing up acorns for winter, the artist and director must gather up impressions, ideas, and thoughts for the right moment. For both, a moment of inspiration eventually comes from somewhere outside or beyond their normal cognitive experience. An instinct or hunch surfaces and the artist or spiritual director knows she must follow the thread of creative insight to its conclusion. Both professions have a serendipitous quality to them as a result. They require blind faith on the part of their practitioners to keep moving towards an unknown destination.

Art and spiritual formation are messy enterprises. There is a lot of trial and error ambiguity that artists and spiritual directors must endure. Learning by doing is the name of the game. I have a drawer of watercolors that will never get framed. The color, balance or proportion is off in some way. They have become practice paintings where I was learning mundane, tedious lessons that will hopefully serve some project in the future. The same goes for spiritual formation. Eugene Peterson puts it well when he says: Spiritual formation "means taking seriously, and in faith, the dull routines, the empty boredom, and the unattractive responsibilities that make up most people's lives. It means witnessing to the transcendent in the fog and rain. It means living hopefully among people who from time to time get flickering glimpses of the Glory but then live through stretches, sometimes long ones, of unaccountable grayness. Most pastoral work takes place in obscurity: deciphering grace in the shadows, searching out meaning in a difficult text, blowing on the embers of a hard-used life. This is hard work and not conspicuously glamorous."<sup>4</sup>

Finally, those who practice art or pastoral care must learn to withstand the internal and external voices that tell them that what they are doing is an extravagant waste of time and talent. People who meet needs, solve problems and address practical concerns run this world. But art and spiritual formation involve an illusive search for meaning. The immediate value of their pursuit is easily displaced by the pragmatic and useful. Artists and spiritual caregivers must remember their call to be creators of beauty. They must believe that the most important person in the universe values their contribution despite what lesser beings might think.

### **The Role of Art**

Biblical faith is meant to be a multi-sensory experience. God himself became a man and walked the earth. For a time he could be seen, heard, touched, and smelled. Jesus told unforgettable stories filled with action, images, and surprise. He cooked meals for his guests, drew pictures in the sand, and made mud pies to heal a blind man. He engaged his followers in ways that captivated their attention and spoke to their souls. Jesus knew that people learn in different ways. For some, the philosophic arguments of the apostle Paul grab them. For others, the symbolic images in the Gospel of John or the poetic words of the psalms speak deeply.

Art, whether it is a painting, sculpture, music, poem, drama, or a landscaped garden, has the capacity to capture our attention and speak to us. If those who seek to communicate biblical truth use a diversity of artistic expressions, they increase the number of souls they speak to. For example, I rarely remember the words from a lecture or sermon but I never forget a picture or painting.

Secondly, art is able to get beyond people's defenses. A big problem that we face in organized religion these days is that it is big and organized. People see us coming with all of our programs and proposals for their life. Their fences automatically go up. Art is often able to get behind the fences to surprise people. Rembrandt's painting of the Prodigal Son hangs in a museum in Russia. Though the country was closed to the gospel for decades, thousands of people would visit the museum each year, gaze at the painting and embrace the truth of God's love for them. Or think of all the people who might never go to a religious service but paid good money to see *Les Misérables*, the musical based on the book by Victor Hugo. It is the story of a man changed by the gospel.

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<sup>4</sup> Peterson, Eugene H., *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, Eerdmans Publishing, 1992, page 86

Thirdly, the soul of the artist is enriched as they offer their art to the world. An artist creates a treasure and then gives it away. The work of art is a gift of grace to others. In their heart of hearts, the true artist creates for the sake of beauty not for money. For many, selling their art feels like an act of prostitution. When our creations are given to others, we immediately identify with the artist of the universe who gave his creation to us.

### **Conclusion**

Vincent Van Gogh spent the first part of his career as a missionary, ministering to poor coal miners in Belgium. The second part of his career was spent as an artist until his death at the age of thirty-seven. His painting, *The Potato Eaters*, merged his two worlds. It is the portrait of a miner family seated around a dinner table eating a meal of potatoes they had dug with their own hands. Above the family is a gas lamp illuminating the table. Van Gogh said that the light was a symbol for the presence of Christ. Van Gogh the artist and spiritual director were saying the same thing. Christ's presence with us transforms all of life, even the most mundane moments. May the Lord raise up a tribe of artists and spiritual care givers who will speak as eloquently to this generation of seekers.

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