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 LARGE PRINT / Standard Print.Art for Hearts' Sake

Art for Hearts' Sake

Through the mere revelation of the word "Fashioner," issuing forth from His lips and proclaiming His attribute to mankind, such power is released as can generate, through successive ages, all the manifold arts which the hands of man can produce. No sooner is this resplendent word uttered, than its animating energies, stirring within all created things, give birth to the means and instruments whereby such arts can be produced and perfected.

(Bahá'u'lláh: **Gleanings**, LXXIV)



I HAVE IN my possession a CD called "Caught in Time. The memories of North West England captured in sound". The reason I have it is because track twenty-eight is the voice of my grandfather talking about his experiences in the Battle of the Somme. However, my favourite track is number 3. The blurb for this track says "LS Lowry, the celebrated northern artist is interviewed in his own home. In this classic interview Lowry expresses in no uncertain terms his reason for giving up painting. What he actually bellows in reply to the question, why have you given up painting is: "My age! What a question to ask!"

In this interview extract Lowry comes across as volatile and unable to suffer fools gladly. It is, dare I say it, a stereotypical image of the "great" artist in all spheres of art. Interviewers tread warily when they have to interview a precious prima dona of an art form and it is, I think, why we mere mortals are hesitant when we are encouraged to develop a more artsbased approach to our activities.

Only a few Bahá'ís have achieved a household-name level of fame in their chosen artistic field. Examples are Dizzy Gillespie in jazz, Norman Bailey in opera, Mark Tobey in painting and Bernard Leach in pottery. In 1966 I had the privilege of meeting Bernard Leach at a Nineteen-Day Feast in Cornwall. He reminded me of Mr. Pastry, an old man on children's television in the fifties and early sixties. Actor Richard Hearne would don a fluffy white moustache, a fluffy white mop of hair and dodder about in an outsize tweed jacket. At some point in the act he, or someone close by, would receive a custard pie in the face. It was heady, cultural stuff. However, predominant about the character of Mr Pastry was that he was the grandfather most children would have loved to have. So Bernard Leach did not just remind me of Mr Pastry because of his fluffy white moustache and mop of fluffy white hair or because he ambled in to the feast in an outsize tweed jacket, but more because of the kindness that shone in his eyes and the friendly and loving way he interacted with everyone at the feast.

I knew Norman Bailey well in the seventies and at a time when his picture, resplendent in the costume of a lead Wagnerian role, adorned the front cover of the Radio Times, he played a kindly, hospitable host for the Nineteen Day Feast. I know nothing of Mark Tobey, having never met him or seen film of him, and I also never met Dizzy Gillespie. However, in all the documentary film I have seen of Dizzy Gillespie the same qualities of love and kindness shine. Thus history would show that when great artistic skill and a love for

Bahá'u'lláh are combined the truly great can be very accessible and a joy to meet.

When the Universal House of Justice encourage us to imbue the three core activities of the Five Year Plan with the arts I do not believe that they are asking us just to find amongst us highly skilled artists to develop these activities. I believe that they are convinced that every single Bahá'í can contribute to this process. To a degree, if the dichotomy between the practical, administrative, organising side of the brain and the creative, artistic side exists then there is a level at which, by relying on the practical side we will never be happy. Life cannot be organised perfectly. It can be organised well, but no matter how much we manipulate and plan there will always be something to criticise in the outcome. How often do we hear, "it was OK, but..."? A reason for this is that the practical side of the brain measures. Over recent years those who rule education in England and Wales have become obsessed with measuring success. Many feel that as a result schools are becoming boring, stress ridden and narrow minded. It has been commented that because "they cannot measure what is valuable they are valuing what is measurable". But surprise, surprise, the results are never quite good enough. If everybody does well the test was too easy and if everyone does badly the teachers failed in their duties. It is a no win situation.

There is a Monty Python sketch in which a character proclaims, "what we need is more art critics!" The joke is that art is not up for criticism. All art is the result of a creative process that has meaning to the Creator. As beauty is in the eye of the beholder, it may attract some people and not others, which is totally irrelevant to the creative process. The creative process cannot be manipulated or forced and there is no expectation of perfection. Art is part of a growth process, which is infinite. At one level it is this psychology of uncriticised growth which needs to permeate our activities.

'Abdu'l-Bahá has encouraged parents and educators to let children, "*share in every new and rare and wondrous craft and art.*" (**Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá**, p.129) The implication is that everyone should have the opportunity to discover their capacity in any or many art and craft forms. A fear of art in some people may be because someone, probably a parent, teacher or cultural setting, stunted its growth at a critical time either by undervaluing it or simply banning it. There is a huge range of artistic activities that can contribute to and enhance Bahá'í activities. People tend to focus on music, singing, dance and drama but calligraphy, flower arranging, story telling, poetry, fabrics, painting and an infinite number of creative processes have their place.

There is a wonderful and amusing book by Hand of the Cause Bill Sears called "**God Loves Laughter**". Experience leads me to believe there could be a sequel called "*God Loves Irony*". In her song "*Ironic*", Alanis Morissette sings that raining on her wedding day is ironic. A comedian pointed out that would only be truly ironic if it was the wedding of two weather forecasters. God does seem to love the truly ironic. For example the Arts Academy is a great place for teaching the Faith and developing spirituality precisely because no one tries to teach the faith and everyone is self obsessed. Let me explain. People go to the arts academy to learn entirely new skills in the arts or improve existing skills and knowledge. There are only six days to achieve this so people are very focused. In being focused they became very detached, forget about the world outside and cares and worries, become aware of their shortcomings and limitations and develop admiration for the work of those around them. Because you have to practice new skills you also have to forget about what those around you think about you; another form of detachment. If you think everyone else's efforts are better than yours someone else must be thinking the same about you. It's a great leveller and deep bonds of love are formed. It easy to take friends there because it is an exciting opportunity to learn to paint, make pots, sing, dance and much more.

Many Bahá'ís take their friends and no one knows or asks if you are Bahá'í or not. Non-Bahá'ís comment that what they like best is that no one tries to force their religion on them and there is an air of unconditional acceptance. They see people who are focused and detached in the way I have described and they feel the bonds of love forming. Possibly more importantly they see people who are constantly remarking that what they are doing is opening their eyes, taking them higher and making them fall deeper in love with God's wondrous creation and creative power. This is an interesting experience for non-Bahá'ís because their assumption about interacting with devotees of another religion is that those

devotees will say, I know and I want you to know . whereas, what they experience in the Arts Academy is the devotees constantly saying “I am learning so much and I see the world in a completely new way”. The experience of the Arts Academy is to learn to see beauty everywhere, which ultimately leads us to the “Most Great Beauty”.

If all that I have said about the Academy is true then there may be some clues there as to why the Universal House of Justice has encouraged all of us to permeate our activities, particularly devotional meetings, study circles and children’s classes with the arts. It is becoming clear that imbuing the community with the arts is not about what you do but more about how you act and what you think.

Study Circles: Study Circles challenge us to form an understanding of Bahá’u’lláh’s Writings and translate that understanding into action. Many people find Bahá’u’lláh’s writings difficult because of the classical language. The practical side of the brain struggles to find the sense. Thus, it might be beneficial for the artistic side of the brain to intervene and simply look for the beauty. Bahá’u’lláh’s Writings, and particularly the magnificent English translations, have a beauty all of their own. Bahá’u’lláh encourages us to “immerse” ourselves in His Writings. The study circle has other opportunities for the arts – beautiful background music, devotional writings prepared in calligraphy on decorated paper and an encouragement of storytelling to illustrate points and understanding. Finally in the mindset, like the Arts Academy, the participants are focused and have no expectations of a measured outcome.

Children’s classes: The message of the Universal House of Justice is for the whole world and there may be places where children’s classes are not imbued with the arts. I certainly do not think that is the case in the UK. Indeed it is quite the reverse. The UK is now seen to be in the vanguard of the arts in the world Bahá’í community and its foundation is probably children’s classes. Bahá’ís in their twenties are the first generation to come through systematic children’s classes where their artistic talents were encouraged and found a loving audience and this is continuing through each succeeding generation. However, what has not yet been established is offering that opportunity to children from the wider community. The arts will play a major role in attracting non-Bahá’í children to attend Bahá’í classes.

Devotional meetings: We are constantly reminded that Tranquillity Zones are not the only form of devotional meeting. They just happen to be one, very beautiful form of devotional meeting. However, it is worth reflecting on what the Tranquillity Zone is set up to do. It looks to provide beauty for all the senses; to look, smell, sound and feel beautiful. (Taste comes afterwards!)

Could it be that in imbuing our activities with the arts we are giving our hearts an equal chance with our brains? With an artistic frame of mind we will be more detached, in search of beauty, less narrow about the outcomes, open to variety and more accessible to a wider group of people. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is reported to have said to an arms magnate that mankind should try peace for a while and if it didn’t like it, it could always go back to war.

To paraphrase that sentiment, we should give the arts a chance. If we don’t like it we can always go back!!

Kevin Beint

