

Art & Spirituality¹

Jaine Toth

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Art

The quality, production, expression, or realm, according to *aesthetic* principles, of what is beautiful, appealing, or of more than ordinary significance. [click]

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Spirituality

The state, quality, manner, or fact of being spiritual. [click]

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Spiritual

- S of or pertaining to the spirit or soul, as distinguished from the physical nature

- S of or pertaining to the spirit as the seat of the moral or religious nature.

- S of or pertaining to the mind or intellect

The relationship between art and spirituality is symbiotic. [click]

¹ See online with related materials at https://bahai-library.com/toth_art_spirituality_presentation

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Art Affects Spirituality

Alexander Pope wrote:

To wake the soul by tender strokes of art,
To raise the genius, and to mend the heart;
To make mankind, in conscious virtue bold,

Live o'er each scene, and be what they behold,
For this the Tragic Muse first trod the stage. [\[click\]](#)

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“Art is an antidote for violence,” explained Rollo May. “It gives the ecstasy, the self-transcendence that could otherwise take the form of drug addiction, or terrorism, or suicide or warfare. We have seen that both violence and art—and the beauty which is the center of art—yield the experience of ecstasy and self-transcendence. But art and violence are directly opposite in their effects.”² [And in his talk to a group of youth at the Bahá'í World Centre, which he so charmingly titled *Bring Chocolate*, Roger White said \[\\[click\\]\]\(#\)](#)

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“...art, has a message for us. It says: care, grow, develop, adapt, overcome, nurture, protect, foster, cherish. It says: your reality is spiritual. It says: achieve your full humanness. It invites us to laugh,

² Rollo May

reflect, cry, strive, persevere. It says: rejoice! Above all, it says to us: be! We cannot turn our backs on art. Art heals..."³ [click]

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Spirituality Affects Art

'Abdu'l-Bahá tells us, *"Meditation is the key for opening the doors of mysteries. In that state man abstracts himself; in that state man withdraws himself from all outside objects; in that subjective mood he is immersed in the ocean of spiritual life and can unfold the secrets of things-in-themselves. To illustrate this, think of man as endowed with two kinds of sight; when the power of insight is being used the outward power of vision does not see.*

This faculty of meditation frees man from the animal nature, discerns the reality of things, puts man in touch with God.

*This faculty brings forth from the invisible plane the sciences and arts. Through the meditative faculty inventions are made possible, colossal undertakings are carried out; through it governments can run smoothly. Through this faculty man enters into the very kingdom of God."*⁴ [click]

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And from Salman Rushdie, "Not even the visionary or mystical experience ever lasts very long. It is for art to capture that experience, to offer it to, in the case of literature, its readers; to be, for a secular, materialist culture, some sort of replacement for what the love of god offers in the world of faith."⁵ [click]

³ Roger White, *The Language of There*

⁴Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 175

⁵Salman Rushdie (b. 1947), Indian-born British author. *Is Nothing Sacred?* Herbert Reade Memorial Lecture, 6 Feb.

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“I paint not by sight but by faith. Faith gives you sight,”⁶ **posited**
Amos Ferguson. [click]

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Why this is important

Our purpose is twofold

To know and to love God, and

To create an ever-advancing civilization [click]

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How do art & spirituality help us achieve our purpose?

In this great dispensation, art (or a profession) is identical with an act of worship and this is a clear text of the Blessed Perfection. Therefore, extreme effort should be made in art and this will not prevent the teaching of the people in that region. Nay, rather, each should assist the other in art and guidance. For instance, when the studying of art is with the intention of obeying the command of God this study will certainly be done easily and great progress will be made therein; and when others discover this fragrance of spirituality in the action itself, this same will cause their awakening. Likewise, managing art with propriety will become the means of sociability and affinity, and sociability and affinity themselves tend to guide others to the Truth.⁷

⁶ Amos Ferguson, quoted in Julia Cameron, *The Artist's Way*, p. xiii

⁷ Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í World Faith*, p. 377

According to author Wendy Steiner⁸: [\[click\]](#)

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“Some art has the power to change you, to make you see things you didn’t see before. For those people in love with learning—which I think is everybody, ultimately—art is one of the great experiences.

We learn how to express ourselves by reading good literature, where language is well-used. In the visual world, the arts show us ways of looking that are complex and good.

In addition, storytelling forms of art, such as movies, plays and novels, allow us to identify with characters far different from ourselves. I think that’s terribly important. People have to live potential lives in order to know what real lives they want to live. You have to have models.

Perhaps most basically, the arts let us experience emotions vicariously, in a risk-free environment. This is “practice” for real life, and it explains why people traditionally go to a movie or play on dates. Sensing the other’s response to a drama is a good way of getting to know a person.

...The kind of experience you go through in art is much more all-inclusive. It’s not only intellectual; it can also be emotional and spiritual. It puts you through your paces as a person.” : [\[click\]](#)

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Music

...melodies, though they are material, are connected with the spiritual, therefore, they produce a great effect. A certain kind of

⁸Tom Jacobs, *Steiner Comes to the Defense of Art*, in the “Life” section of the October 6, 1998 edition of the “Santa Barbara News Press”

melody makes the spirit happy, another kind makes it sad, another excites it to action.

All these feelings can be caused by voice and music, for through the nerves it moves and stirs the spirit... Whatever is in the heart of man, melody moves and awakens. If a heart full of good feelings and a pure voice are joined together, a great effect is produced. For instance, if there be love in the heart, through melody, it will increase until its intensity can scarcely be borne; but if bad thoughts are in the heart, such as hatred, it will increase and multiply. For instance: the music used in war awakens the desire for bloodshed.¹⁰

Ask attendees for examples from their own experience.

In the past, some religions have forbidden music, dancing and/or singing. But in this Day, Bahá'u'lláh tells us:

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“We have made it lawful for you to listen to music and singing. Take heed, however, lest listening thereto should cause you to overstep the bounds of propriety and dignity. Let your joy be the joy born of My Most Great Name, a Name that bringeth rapture to the heart, and filleth with ecstasy the minds of all who have drawn nigh unto God. We, verily, have made music as a ladder for your souls, a means whereby they may be lifted up unto the realm on high; make it not, therefore, as wings to self and passion. Truly, We are loath to see you numbered with the foolish.”¹¹

¹⁰Abdu'l-Bahá, words to Mrs. Mary L. Lucas, as quoted in *A Brief Account of My Visit to Acca*, Chicago: Bahá'í Publishing Society, 1905, pp. 11-14 (reprinted in *Bahá'í Writings on Music*, pp. 9-10)

¹¹Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 38, ¶51

Therefore, we should endeavor to listen, as much as possible, to music that uplifts our spirits and inspires our souls. [\[click\]](#)

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*“A wondrous melody is wings for the spirit and maketh the soul to tremble for joy.”*¹² [Play *Rose of Love* by Erika Mahoney] [\[click\]](#)

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Drama

*“The drama is of the utmost importance. It has been a great educational power in the past; it will be so again.”*¹³

I could tell you that in Iran Bahá'ís have few civil rights: they are not allowed to marry, divorce, hold government jobs, attend university, etc., and that a “stealth” university was set up where Bahá'í professors who could no longer teach in the universities taught Bahá'í students who were ineligible to attend them. Some classes were conducted by correspondence and others took place in private homes. Then the authorities raided around 500 homes and arrested 36 teachers. All their educational materials and equipment were confiscated. As I would tell you this, intellectually you would find fault with the situation, but more than likely, you wouldn't be emotionally touched by it, at least not on a deep level. But if I share with you an excerpt from the play, *When the Moment Comes*, which is about the situation of the Bahá'ís in the years just following the revolution in

¹²Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 147

¹³Abdu'l-Bahá, *'Abdu'l-Bahá in London: Addresses and Notes of Conversations*, Oakham: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1987, p. 93

Iran, I believe it will affect your feelings as well as your mind, creating empathy rather than mere sympathy:

They wouldn't allow us to go to school.
So we started our *own* schools.
I suppose I was like a lot of other young people
before the Revolution.
I took education for granted.
In fact, I remember a lot of mornings
when I would have liked to stay in bed
rather than get up and go to school.
We thought it was boring;
we'd rather be spending time with our friends,
listening to music, talking...
It's funny how that all changed
as soon as they told us we weren't *allowed*
to go to school anymore.
I'd get together with some of my friends
and we'd find ourselves talking about math, chemistry,
even calculus!
We never talked much about those things outside class before!
Some of us began to teach the little children,
so they wouldn't fall too far behind.
It seems crazy to think that they arrested Mona
for teaching little five year olds
how to read and say prayers.
But of course, nothing that happened after the Revolution
made any real logical sense to anybody.

The same holds true for other art forms. Poetry for instance: [\[click\]](#)

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*What is poetry? It is a symmetrical collection of words. Therefore, they are pleasing through harmony and rhythm. Poetry is much more effective and complete than prose. It stirs more deeply, for it is of a finer composition.*¹⁴

I could tell you that being subjected to racist comments and actions is painful and leaves lasting scars on the psyche. Instead, I'll share a poem so you can experience the pain for yourselves: [\[click\]](#)

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Incident¹⁵ by Countee Cullen

Once riding in Old Baltimore
Heart-filled, head-filled with glee
I saw a Baltimorean
Keep looking straight at me
Now I was eight and very small
And he was no whit bigger,
And so I smiled, but he poked out
His tongue and called me "Nigger."
I saw the whole of Baltimore
From May until December
Of all the things that happened there
That's all that I remember.

¹⁴Ibid

¹⁵Countee Cullen

I could tell you about the ravages of the environment, or I could use Roger White's personification of the tree. Think first of the poem *Trees*, by Joyce Kilmer, where the Tree is venerated. Then think of what mankind is doing to the environment worldwide with the steady destruction of the forests on this planet, now listen to *The Tree Speaks*, and try to see/understand how our actions might be perceived from the tree's own point of view: [\[click\]](#)

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The Tree Speaks

A species I shall never see
More perverse than humanity
Ambulant, it boasts of mind,
Praises its God—and kills its kind.
And worse than that—if there be worse—
Lauds fools who put these facts in verse!
Who but God could love mankind?
I'm not the least that way inclined.
But, even as I speak, I see:
Man strikes with axe to silence me.¹⁶ [\[click\]](#)

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Dance

Albert Einstein declared that “Dancers are the athletes of God.” [\[click\]](#)

¹⁶Roger White, *The Language of There*

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In *Gifts of Unknown Things*, Lyall Watson wrote “Dancing is surely the most basic and relevant of all forms of expression. Nothing else can so effectively give outward form to an inner experience. Poetry and music exist in time. Painting and architecture are a part of space. But only the dance lives at once in both space and time. In it the creator and the thing created, the artist and the expression, are one. Each participates completely in the other. There could be no better metaphor for an understanding of the cosmos.”

The inseparable connection between dance and prayer is addressed in the poem, *Dance in the Mystic Fane* [\[click\]](#)

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Laughter, Joy, Exaltation.
Beseeching my Lord / In supplication,
Offering thanks / Bestowing praise
In such manner / Commence my days
In dance, in song / With music in my heart
Wafting along — My prayer impart
Intoning; chanting, all aglow —
Arms stretched high — Now bowing low.
As though in trance / On cosmic plane—
My dance is a prayer / In the mystic Fane.² [\[click\]](#)

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Painting

² Jaine Toth, *Dance in the Mystic Fane*

Pope Gregory the Great said, "Painting can do for the illiterate what writing does for those who can read."¹⁷ [\[click\]](#)

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Swiss painter Paul Klee explained, "Art does not reproduce the visible, rather it makes visible."¹⁸

And a fourth grade student from Main School in Carpinteria, California offered her understanding: [\[click\]](#)

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"Art is like words without letters."¹⁹

One of her classmates added, "Art is a free thing. There are no rules in art. If you "mess up" in art, it's still a piece of art."²⁰

I could tell you that prejudice is not innate, it is a learned trait. Think back to the song in the play South Pacific, that explains "...you have to be carefully taught." [Someone – or everyone can sing it [\[click\]](#)

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You've got to be taught
To hate and fear,

¹⁷ Pope Gregory the Great

¹⁸ Paul Klee, Swiss Painter

¹⁹ Sarah E. Bloom, Fourth grade, Main School, quoted in *Kid Talk*, March 19, 1998 edition of "The Coastal View," Carpinteria, CA

²⁰ Steven Brantingham, Fourth grade, Main School, quoted in *Kid Talk*, March 19, 1998 edition of "The Coastal View," Carpinteria, CA

You've got to be taught
From year to year,
It's got to be drummed
In your dear little ear
You've got to be carefully taught.

You've got to be taught to be afraid
Of people whose eyes are oddly made,
And people whose skin is a diff'rent shade,
You've got to be carefully taught.

You've got to be taught before it's too late,
Before you are six or seven or eight,
To hate all the people your relatives hate,
You've got to be carefully taught!

Or I could just show you this painting, which speaks for itself – no words necessary. [\[click\]](#)

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[Picture of babies]

Art Heals

We've already read several selections which indicate to us that the arts affect our inner selves, our spirits, our souls. Let me now share two of examples of the practical outcome of using art to heal: [\[click\]](#)

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[Lily Yeh's Magic Village](#)²¹

²¹Peter Michelmore, *Lily Yeh's Magic Village*, in "Reader's Digest," April 1998

Artist Lily Yeh devoted herself to improving life in a Philadelphia slum. Art [was] her force for change....

She had “exhibited her paintings and sculptures in galleries. Yet it troubled her that the art world served only a small, prestigious population. She wanted to create art that connected with more people, but didn’t know how.”

She was invited by Arthur Hall, who ran a dance troupe, to see a weed-choked vacant lot next door to the building where his dance troupe was headquartered. “It looks so ugly,” he said. “Do you think you could turn it into a sculpture park?” The lot was strewn with garbage and surrounded by abandoned houses, boarded-up factories and battered cars. It was in a crime-ridden neighborhood. To create art in such a place, she thought, was a challenge worthy of a true artist. Hall asked a local handyman to help with the project. At first he said, “No, I’m not helping any Chinese lady build a park.” But Lily was able to convince him to look beyond his own prejudices and think of the betterment of the neighborhood. Local youth and children joined in the project. One man, Maxton, who became an ardent participant was a drug addict who’d trafficked in drugs for 20 years. Lily brought out the latent artist within him and gave him a new lease on life. He was so moved that he went into rehab. [\[click\]](#)

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Lily didn’t stop with the park. She planned next to adopt the neighborhood around the park and turn it into a safe, art-filled village. Maxton returned, clean and drug-free, and volunteered to help. Of all the people involved, there were addicts and criminals. Several turned their lives around during the project. Yeh had never preached about cursing or drugs. After the successful completion of their endeavors, Lily Yeh explained, “They were part of an old life-style that we’ve

replaced. Art can have a magical effect on human nature—and that’s what happened here.”

A neighborhood woman told her, “We used to walk *around* this area. Now we walk *through* it.” It was the best tribute Lily could hope for. She moved into the neighborhood while working on the project and ended up staying. She’s begun a “Village of Arts and Humanities,” and many people who live in the area and neglected their property, now take pride in keeping them clean and adorning them with artistic elements. [\[click\]](#)

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Music of Hope²²

At the age of 16 violin student Catherine Geach was accepted to the Royal Academy of Music. Around that time she read about “The killing fields” of Cambodia. The danger faced by those people touched her heart and she went there to learn first hand how serious the situation was.

Catherine was deeply moved by the devastation she encountered. The dean of the music department at Cambodia’s University of Fine Arts advised that very few teachers had survived the Khmer Rouge and asked for her help. During her two month stay she taught at the university and developed friendships with some of the students....She bonded with the Cambodians on a spiritual level.

After returning home, she studied the Cambodian language and their traditional music. At 19, after graduation from the Royal Academy, she returned to Cambodia and began a music therapy program for people wounded in the war. Her traumatized students

²²Karen Emmons, *Music of Hope*, in “Reader’s Digest,” December 1998

were fearful, some were bitter, some angry, but as they progressed with the music their negative emotions seemed to melt away.

Her next effort was to open a school specifically for teaching the traditional instruments and music to disabled or orphaned children. She purposely chose an area that wasn't reached by foreign aid. Some of them could barely communicate, many were objects of ridicule and derision. And to add to the difficulties, raids by the Khmer Rouge were ongoing.

As they began to trust her and try to make music, their anxieties and self-doubts were shed and replaced with self-esteem. One example is Sim Sameth, one fourteen year old boy, who lost both his legs to a land mine. He survived by scooting around the parking lot of a bar in a crude, wooden wheel chair, looking after cars as their owners danced inside. He approached Catherine and asked if she could help him out of his miserable existence into a better life. She placed his hands to play then elegant, long-stemmed tro sau. He was terribly nervous. She reassured him, telling him this was important to his future. She put the bow into his right hand and his first attempts drew horrible screeches. She encouraged him to try and try again. Suddenly, a clear, sweet note vibrated through the room.

Like Catherine so many years before, Sim was transfixed. He wanted to make music like that. As his confidence grew, so did his expertise, and concurrently, he was shedding his fears and misgivings and building self-esteem.

Catherine was thrilled that the almost lost traditional Cambodian music, once silenced, was being reborn and with it, so were the Cambodian people.

In her article, *15 Ideas that Could Shake the World*, Nina Utne writes: [\[click\]](#)

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Marcela Lorca, creator of BreathDance, a body awareness technique, maintains that by using breath, voice, and movement, we can release negative emotional patterns without intellectual processing or even conscious understanding....‘Free movement of energy through the body is the definition of health,’ Lorca insists...

So shut the door, pull down the shades, and try a song-and-dance routine to a tune you love. There’s no telling where that freed-up energy might take you. You might feel foolish, but that’s rarely fatal; chances are that, at the very least, you’ll start having more fun. ³ [\[click\]](#)

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Healing Ourselves Through Art

We can all use the arts to heal ourselves and to lift ourselves to higher levels of spirituality. We can benefit from the art of others, but we can also, and to greater benefit, create our own art.

The following poem is about using poetry for this purpose, but you can substitute the art form of your choice to achieve the same effect: [\[click\]](#)

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Pen a Poem

Happy?	Pen a poem!	The elation will grow; in it’s warmth you will glow.
Sad?	Pen a poem!	The hurt will melt away; it will help you thru the day.

³ Nina Utne, “15 Ideas That Could Shake the World: ‘Singing and Dancing,’” *Utne Reader*, March - April 1999

Angry?	Pen a poem!	The fire will wane and calm you'll regain.
Confused?	Pen a poem!	It will help clear the air so you can see from here to there!
Smitten?	Pen a poem!	The jewels from your heart to your Beloved impart.

For every emotion that stirs – each want and desire,
pen a poem: soon equanimity you'll reacquire.⁴ [\[click\]](#)

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The Holy Books tell us we are made in the image of God. Bahá'u'lláh explains that this is not to be understood in anthropomorphic, or physical, terms but that we are all possessed with the ability to mirror forth the attributes of God, e.g. kindness, mercy, trustworthiness, benevolence, etc. One of the first attributes we think of when listing the Names of God, is *the Creator*. [\[click\]](#)

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Since we are made in God's image, and God is the Creator, it follows logically, then, that we are creative beings.

All sing this affirmation: *I am a creative being in the garden of humanity and the light shines within me.*

⁴ Jaine Toth, *Pen a Poem*