

A Place for Art ¹

By Jaine Toth

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In former ages art played an important role in all cultures, traditions and religions. Art permeated most every aspect of their rituals and sometimes their daily lives, as well. Its place was so central that it needed no discussion or explanation. Their written and oral traditions may not have mentioned the arts, but the arts were used to convey them, through song, dance, and other forms, visual and physical, including architecture. Arthur Lyon Dahl wrote in *The Fragrance of Spirituality, An Appreciation*:

“Art has long been one of the highest expressions of human culture, and particularly of its religious and spiritual dimensions. The cave paintings of early man, the temples and tombs of the Egyptians, Greeks, Hindus and Buddhists, the churches, cathedrals and mosques of more modern times, are so often the greatest examples of a culture’s artistic heritage, and still communicate their spirit to us today.”

Unfortunately, after a number of years, often due to schisms in the culture or religion, traditions change. They become more rigid. And art becomes threatening.

Regimes that wish to wield heavy control over their people, who want to order and direct their thinking and their values, restrict the types of art people are allowed to produce or practice. Amiel Schotz, author of books on the performing arts, explains:

¹ See online, with related works, at https://bahai-library.com/toth_four_talks

“Creative thought seems to threaten society since it leads to a questioning of the status quo and, thus, to demands for change.”

Some Christian sects forbid dancing and watching movies lest they lead to unsacred thoughts and actions. The Taliban in Afghanistan destroyed ancient Buddhist statues because they were objects of worship of another faith and they viewed them as false idols. The Nazis burned books. The list could go on and on.

Some leaders manipulate artists for propaganda purposes. During the Cultural Revolution in China, the government successfully utilized various art forms to indoctrinate the masses. Artwork, music, and theater proved very effective in achievement of their goals. This is a potent example of the power of the arts. As the Bahá'í Writings explain:

“Art can better awaken...noble sentiments than cold rationalizing, especially among the mass of the people.”

Unfortunately, those whose art did not conform to Communist ideals were severely repressed.

In 1896, Leo Tolstoy warned against tampering with art's place in society:

“Art is one of two organs of human progress. By words man interchanges thoughts, by the forms of art he interchanges feelings... It is natural to human beings to employ both these organs of intercommunication and therefore the perversion of either of them must cause evil results to the society in which it occurs.”

Art isn't repressed by government in Western culture; however, it has been relegated, especially in America, to an insignificant place in society. When schools have to tighten their budgets, the first subjects to be cut are the arts. Suddenly there are no more music lessons, the school band disappears. Even in the best of times, when the art classes exist, only interested students take them. Art and music appreciation are not required subjects. Talented youngsters who wish to pursue art are often advised to do so as a hobby, but to get a "real job."

Such a sad mistake. Art not only helps balance our emotional and spiritual needs, but studies are beginning to prove that it also enhances our learning ability. The 1997 book *The Mozart Effect*, written by Don Campbell asserts that listening to Mozart's music can make us smarter.

Let's take another look at the relationship between art and science. I quote from physicist Robert Root-Bernstein's article, *Hobbled Arts Limit Our Future*

"Scientists and engineers need much more than the objective languages of logic and mathematics to be creative. They must learn to observe as acutely as artists and to visualize things in their minds as concretely. They must learn to recognize and invent patterns like composers or poets, to make models of their visions like sculptors and to manipulate the tools of their trade and "play" their high-tech instruments with the same virtuosity as musical performers..."

Participation in the arts fosters professional scientific success....recently...a study... demonstrated a significant correlation between artistic hobbies, specific forms of thinking (visual, kinesthetic, verbal, etc.) and success as a scientist. The Nobel Prize winners and most of the members of the National Academy of Sciences in our study were universally artistic and/or musical, most had several arts-related hobbies as adults and they utilized a wide range of arts-associated mental thinking tools such as three-dimensional mental imagery, kinesthetic feelings and pattern formation. Their less successful colleagues did not share either their arts interest or their arts-related thinking skills..."

But I do not want to advocate art simply for utilitarian purposes. I also encourage art for art's sake. Artists, too, do research. Their research is into perception, structure, design and communication. Thus, art for art's sake often is in advance of science and technology. Modern examples are legion. Abbot H. Thayer...invented the concept of camouflage, relating its importance in evolution to the protection of soldiers and their equipment on the battlefield. Similarly, the geodesic domes invented by Buckminster Fuller revolutionized our understanding of the structures of viruses and of carbon compounds called "fullerenes." "Tensegrity," another fundamental structural motif co-invented by Fuller and fellow artist Kenneth Snelson, now is being considered as a means of constructing low-mass space platforms. Harvard biologists have suggested that it is the principle controlling the shapes of human cells.

Some studies have suggested a correlation between dance exercises and improved mathematics capacity as well as other physical benefits. The University of Maryland at College Park offers a Creative Dance Lab designed to enhance the balanced development of physical, emotional, cognitive and social skills of children and teens.

Here again, I could cite other examples, but these suffice to make the point that important data back the premise that arts must be taught, must be appreciated, must be practiced, must be encouraged, must be welcomed in all societies in all part of the world. Art should once again take its rightful place in the community.

A friend of mine mentioned that when he wants to really understand what went on during a certain period in history, wants to be able to feel the sense of the people who lived then, he doesn't go to history books. Prose is easily biased, whether intentionally or unintentionally. He goes instead to the art of that period. The music. The paintings. The poetry. Art cannot lie. It cannot deceive.

An art instructor confided that when he showed his students an old self-portrait he'd painted, they remarked at how sad he looked in the picture. The teacher was surprised. He noticed for the first time that his likeness bore a rather melancholy expression. When he thought back, he realized he'd painted it during a time when he had been unhappy.

Our art expresses whatever is within us. And this is healthy. It is cathartic. In her book *The Right to Write*, Julia Cameron tells us:

“Writing is alchemy....moving out of the cramped and cerebral space of bitterness into the capacious heart, I am no longer a victim, an enemy, an injured party...I have metabolized the injury into art....Writing is medicine. It is an appropriate antidote to injury. Because writing is a practice of observation as much as invention, we can become curious as much as frightened in the face of change. Writing about the change, we can help it along, lean into it, cooperate. Writing allows us to rewrite our lives.”

The same can be accomplished through other art forms, as well. The philosopher Rollo May asserts:

“Art is an antidote for violence. 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.”

Being an antidote moves art into the realm of healer. Art heals in more ways than one. It is cathartic for the artist. It can be so for the viewer. It can also hold up a mirror to society which says “This is what we’re like. It isn’t good, is it?” This can awaken the people and move them to improve their condition.

One field in psychology is Art Therapy. Setting a patient free with pencil or paintbrush allows him or her to release pent up negative energies and tells the therapist more than the patient might have been able to do verbally. Music has been used for healing both emotional and physical illness since at least the time of Socrates, probably longer. Today scientific studies are being done to prove that music can actually heal. All art forms have a healing aspect.

In the March - April 1999 issue of *Utne Reader*, Nina Utne offered “15 Ideas That Could Shake the World” among them were ‘Singing and Dancing,’” She wrote:

“Singer, songwriter and voice coach Barbara McAfee says her teaching practice is burgeoning simply because people are recognizing that singing leads to happiness. ‘We are beginning to reclaim a part of us that has atrophied,’ she says, ‘to recognize that singing and dancing are an essential part of being human. Our culture is parched from lack of participation. Singing with others, vibrating in sync together, gives us something we need.’

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....

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.”

I invite all of you to make a place in your lives for art. How many of you think you are artistic? How many think you haven't an artistic bone in your body? Okay let's get more specific. I'm going to ask you some questions. You don't need to answer aloud. Just think about them. Take your silent answers home and ponder them.
Okay:

For those of you who think you can't draw a straight line—do you doodle when you are listening to a lecture or speaking to someone over the telephone?

Those of you who think you can't dance—do you find your feet tapping, your body bouncing or swaying when you listen to music?

Likewise, do you think you have no musical ability yet snap your fingers or tap out the beat with your hands when music is played?

Are you one of those people who think they can't sing, yet belt out a great tune when you're alone in the shower, or sing along with the radio when you are alone driving in the car?

If you fit into any of the above categories, you probably have a hidden talent that just needs to be coaxed out of its hiding place and be given a prominent place in your life.

Give art its rightful place in your life. Promote it in the schools. And in the community. Let it become integral to life as it was, and still is, in some indigenous cultures. I believe that once we all take a stand on the arts, we will see great healing within ourselves, within our families, our communities, our societies. Art will bridge the gaps that divide.

The Bahá'í Sacred Writings admonish us

“Of all the arts and sciences, set the children to studying those which will result in advantage to man, will ensure his progress and elevate his rank. Thus the noisome odors of lawlessness will be dispelled...all will live cradled, secure and in peace.”

They also declare that the arts

“...will promote the well-being and harmony of all the kindreds of the earth.”

But it must be honest art. It must be sincere art. It cannot be the efforts some make simply for shock value. It should avoid offending for the sake of being offensive. We should have liberty, not license. Historian Will Durant's observation serves as a warning:

“When liberty becomes license, dictatorship is near.”

Shoghi Effendi lamented the

“moral license, increasingly staining...society”

and 'Abdu'l-Bahá said that:

“...managing art with propriety will become the means of sociability and affinity, and sociability and affinity themselves tend to guide others to the Truth.”

The poet, Roger White, summed it up:

“...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, reflect, cry, strive, persevere. It says: rejoice! Above all, it says to us: be! We cannot turn our backs on art. Art heals.”

Thank you, and remember to give art a place in your life.