

The Dance Dilemma

The dance is another form of creativity whose goal is to communicate. In practically every grouping of people, ancient and modern, the dance was originally a way of communicating with deity. All of us have watched as small children instinctively start to move their bodies when music is played. Even Christian parents smile and nod approvingly — as long as the child is really young! Why is it that dance is approved at a young age but attacked as from the devil at an older age?

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In the Judeo-Christian tradition, dance was accepted as a normal part of worship. Unfortunately, the ancient heresy of Gnosticism regularly intrudes in the life of the Church, teaching that all things having to do with physical bodies are sinful. Generally speaking, modern day evangelicalism has been seduced by spiritual-sounding heresy. One result is that all dance has been designated as sinful — unless you happen to be two years old!

A couple of years ago, I was visiting the YWAM base in Cambridge, Ontario. It was during the Christmas season, and a number of the staff had prepared a night of creative performances in celebration. Four dancers did a 20-minute medley of Christmas carols that moved the audience to laughter in some places and to tears in the more worshipful parts. I was deeply touched and wanted to meet the dance team.

The leader of the team was a young man with a degree in dance and professional experience in New York City. I told him how edified I had been by the wonderful combination of anointing and professionalism which the team exhibited. In the course of our conversation, he explained that he had been dancing as full time ministry for several years. But sadly, he also related that he and his wife would be leaving shortly because, as a family, they had not been able to raise support for their ministry. I understood his dilemma.

A person can raise support for his ministry if he's a preacher, but a dancer? How unfortunate! Here's a man and his wife who have the ability to reach people, some of whom will never enter a church door, but no one will support them as ministers.

Unopened Gifts and Wounded Givers

Over the last few years, I have had occasion to meet with quite a number of musicians, actors, painters, writers, and dancers. In talking with those who are Christians, I hear a lot of frustration voiced over the fact that they have a gift to give but the Church doesn't appreciate their gift. So, they end up sacrificing the gift God has placed within them in order to fit into more conventional modes of ministry.

On the other hand, those who stick with their giftings often cannot find ways of financially supporting themselves. In both cases, the Church is being robbed of the creative people she so desperately needs. Further, the Church has lost her power to speak to the world about the arts because she discourages, and in some cases brutalizes, the artist.

I have also had the tragic experience of talking to artists who are not followers of Jesus...at least not now. Some of these are now the biggest enemies of the Church. They attack with anger that to which they once belonged. How sad and unnecessary. We in the Church must be honest and humble enough to admit that we are partly responsible. We've often been more concerned with projecting a non-threatening image of middle-class respectability than with exploring the realities of God's world. Convention has taken precedence over truth and we are the more impoverished for it.

We Need Our Artists

My purpose in saying these things is two fold. First, if you are attracted to the creative arts, it's probably because God has placed that calling upon you. Pursue, cultivate, and incessantly practice your chosen art form. Profound artistic expression requires work, work, and more work.



Also, please don't give up on the Church just because she doesn't understand you. We, the Church, need you!

Secondly, if you are not an artist, please become an advocate for those who are. Encourage them, support them, and most of all, pray for them. Rather than stifling these creative voices we must listen for the voice of God in their cries

and in their art. It is also imperative that we not require that they put a Bible verse on everything they do in a misguided attempt to give their expressions legitimacy. Give the artist room and time to mature and hone his or her skill. Lovingly and patiently allow them the freedom to make mistakes. I firmly believe that God, the supreme Creator-Artist, would like to see His Body, the Church, lead the way in creative excellence. Who better to demonstrate purity and originality of expression? Don't you agree with me that it is time for a modern-day renaissance led by artists who love God?

Denny Gunderson has been a leader with YWAM for more than 25 years. He serves as regional director over YWAM North America.

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The Plight of the CHRISTIAN Artist

By Denny Gunderson



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One of the most tragic stories in history is that of Dutch artist Vincent Van Gogh. Van Gogh was a "preacher's kid" whose greatest desire was to follow his father into the ministry.

As a youngster, Van Gogh was very sensitive and compassionate. He lived in the world of the Church. Some of those who knew him, however, considered Van Gogh a bit odd. He didn't seem particularly interested in physical appearance or neatness. His sloppy dress was a source of embarrassment to his father, and he spent a lot of idle time sketching images on paper. Yet, in spite of his idiosyncrasies, Van Gogh was thought of as a nice, if somewhat unpolished, young man.

Van Gogh's one major area of struggle was school. It seemed that his aptitude for scholastic studies was minimal. This became a critical dilemma as it would prohibit him from entering seminary. The lack of a seminary degree automatically disqualified him as a pastor in his denomination. The sad reality is that today's experts, who have studied Van Gogh's life and letters, conclude that he probably had dyslexia, a rather common learning disability.

Van Gogh: The Minister

Undeterred by the lack of formal training, however, Van Gogh became a lay minister and was assigned to the poverty-stricken Belgian coal mining region. With great enthusiasm and passion, he plunged into ministry. Van Gogh quickly identified with the miners and the almost unbearable conditions they endured. Actually, he became so much a part of them in his unselfish service that he began to look like a miner.

At the end of his first year in Belgium some

denominational officials passing through decided to visit Van Gogh. Upon seeing him, they proclaimed with strong displeasure that he looked more like a coal miner than a "dignified minister." They decided on the spot that he was not capable of properly representing their denomination even though he was effective in ministry. Van Gogh was dismissed and sent home. As you can imagine, he was devastated. In fact, he never recovered from his disappointment.

Van Gogh: The Artist

Thus, Van Gogh followed his natural inclination as an artist and began to study art. His development took him from Holland, to Brussels, back to Holland and then to Paris. He painted his heart out but few buyers were found. Just before moving to Paris, Van Gogh tried to lay his bitter past to rest with a painting entitled, *Still Life with Open Bible, Candlestick, and Novel*. The Bible in the painting is open, but the candle next to the Bible is snuffed out.

A few years later, in a small village outside of Paris, Vincent Van Gogh, age 37, pulled the trigger on a revolver aimed at his heart and committed suicide. The young man who wanted to be a pastor died penniless and in deep depression. It was only after his death that Van Gogh became famous as an artist and was recognized as an innovator of Expressionism, the idea of emotional spontaneity in painting.

While Van Gogh must be held responsible for his own actions, is it possible that the Church might also be partly to blame? If Van Gogh's story was an exceptional fluke, the answer might be "no."

Unfortunately, I have personally met many artists who have felt as abandoned by the Body of Christ as Van Gogh. For a variety of reasons and in various ways, a recurring message was thrown their way: "You don't fit. You don't look like us. You don't act like us." Rather than encourage, train, and properly channel these individuals, we've discarded them.

Shallow Substitutes

As tragic as contemporary Christianity's effort to cultivate artistic talent is, there is an additional tragedy with long-term implications. To be blunt, the Church has sold its artistic soul for a shallow brew of overly spiritualized sentimentality. Where the Church used to compose concertos, she now throws together ditties with three chords. Great art has been relegated to dusty museums and replaced by commercialized "Jesus junk." And literature exploring the great mysteries of man's relationship to creation and Creator has been

supplanted by trivial testimonies about how you can follow Jesus and become a millionaire at the same time.

The result has been that we, the Church, have lost our ability to speak into the arts. Instead, we have in many ways become a laughing stock. Further, the prophetic edge of insight inherent in the soul of the artist is painfully lacking in moral content. That should not surprise us because the Church is absent from the arts — and has little influence in the creative realms of our culture. When "salt and light" are taken away, the residue left behind will putrefy.

Can this regrettable state of affairs be God's will? Should the Church whose Head is the King of creation be the least creative group of people on His planet? Something deep in the heart of every follower of Jesus should instinctively recoil at such nonsense.

God's Creative Nature

Think with me for a moment about the nature of the God we serve. The first five words of the Bible declare, "In the beginning, God created..." What a revealing introductory statement God makes about Himself. He creates. In Isaiah 43:19 God says, "See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up." This verse tells us that God still creates new things. He is not a one-time Creator. Creativity is His nature — therefore, He can't not create. In fact, the ultimate foundation for creative acts is love. Read through the Psalms and you'll see just how clear this link of love is with creative expression.

Have you ever been in love? If so, my guess is that you found new creative juices bubbling up inside that burst forth in glorious, if somewhat corny, expression. My wife has in her collection of treasured things a poem and a song which I gave her when our romance began to bloom. She still thinks they're "deep." I think they're kind of embarrassing! But, they were at least an expression, stated in a unique way, of my deepest feelings for my wife. Our ability to create unique declarations of love should be the norm for loving people created in the image of a loving Creator God.

Creativity Brings Change

Whenever love and creativity link up, however, a third element is always introduced that often causes discomfort. That element is change. Think of it this way: When a man and woman join together in holy matrimony, initially, they just enjoy one another. At some point in the marriage, though, they may decide it is time to have children. The union of their love produces offspring. And

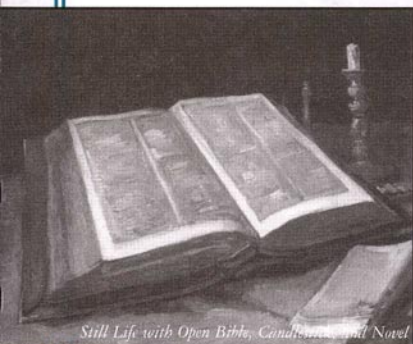
with that child, great change comes into the family unit.

All creative acts give birth to change of some type, and change requires response to new realities. Change will be viewed by most people as either a threat or an opportunity. That is because the new realities brought about by change often challenge our comfort zones and literally forces us to deal with a new set of circumstances. When it comes to the creative arts, therefore, it is probably the compelling nature of the changes that creative arts cause, which produces discomfort. True artists have the somewhat irritating compulsion to challenge the status quo. They often want to see change take place.

Poetic Reality

Creative people are, by their nature and giftedness, born to explore. The creative artist uses the arts as his medium for exploration. And, if he is an honest artist, the goal of his search is truth. Take the poet, for example. True poets are not just interested in making words rhyme. Their intent is to express the reality of things by getting behind mere surface issues. Therefore, when reading poetry, it's not enough to take the words at face value. Hidden between the lines and behind the words there lies an expression of reality as viewed from the poet's perspective. The true poet is really a prophet. His gaze looks for things that others miss. It's no accident that in the original manuscripts, the words of the Old Testament prophets were written in poetic form. The ministry of the poet needs to find acceptance in the Church today because he or she has a way of looking at truth that some of the rest of us do not clearly see.

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Still Life with Open Bible, Candlestick, and Novel