

“Art Is Useless Except To Make Us Whole”

Mission Day
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“When was the last time you got together?” I don’t mean “when was the last time you got together with others?” I mean more like “When was the last time you got together with yourself”? Or even “When was the last time you got all of yourself together”? and more exactly “when was the last time all of yourself was gotten together by something”?

That—though you may think I have lost part of myself, lost my marbles—is what today’s “Mission Day” is all about. “The Arts and Jesuit Education.” It is art that almost alone has the power to bring everything that each of us is—our mind, feeling, spirit, body, hope, imagination, sense of self, relationship to others, our love, our connection to the world and to life, our faith, our commitment, our solidarity with others and nature, our fear, our past/present/future—to bring all of this, all that is us, together. We live most of our lives as partial people—one part here, one part there, one part engaged, another idling—we are all the original multi-taskers, multiple parts of ourselves scattered, disparate, apart. But then there is that rare moment when everything that we are is brought together by something.

That something is art. Art has the power to bring all that we are into a unity, harmony, an experienced relatedness, wholeness, to make us fully present. Reality becomes dense and intense around art. Anything else that does this for a person whether the passion of the scientist or the beauty of the mathematical formula, or the satisfaction of lawyering, or the humanity of nursing, education, or business, or any true research, anything that brings the person together, means that it has risen to the level of art in her or him.

We say in our mission statement that we are about “professional formation and empowering leaders for a just and humane world”. These are quite partial, pragmatic, merely work unless they are saved by our being “dedicated to educating the whole person” which must include educating students into how they can experience themselves as whole. This is the role of art. Art is at the heart of our mission because at the end of the day we are dedicated to the whole person. Without art our education is but a set of instruction manuals.

I can still remember the moment and the place—because art stops time and makes you present and places you—when at the age of 17 I saw, really saw Salvador Dali’s “The Last Supper” in the National Gallery. Probably this was my first experience of art. I was suddenly all there, fully me, related to my past and future and confirmed in my vocation to be a Jesuit. Art made me whole.

Later when I was wondering how I was ever going to manage to live a celibate life as a Jesuit, I received the best advice I ever received from a Fr. Jim Gill. He said—and I can again see where I was when he said it—“The biggest help for living celibacy healthily is developing a rich imaginative life.” I guess he meant the imaginative, symbolic, artistic life helps make you whole when something natural and normal is missing, resources your soul, allows you to play. I

happen to think this is great advice for anyone who has to sacrifice any important human fulfillment—which is probably all of us.

I remember too where I was—all alone in a cabin on Lake Sammamish—when I got the call telling me I had just been named by our Father General to be the Provincial of the 350 Northwest Jesuits for the next six years. I stepped onto the deck overlooking the lake, shed a few tears that came from this “Oh oh!” place in me, and promptly went out to enjoy the high art form of the movie “Pretty Woman” with Julia Roberts. Art heals, man, let me tell you!

Then once when I was far too stretched in stressful leadership, carrying all responsibility perfectly, perfectionistically, I heard while driving along the Columbia Gorge the words—they came from within but as if not from me—“You lack a loving why”. I knew these words were asking me what was the warm, loving, personal, of the heart, of me, real why for all that I was killing myself doing so perfectly. And in that moment I saw that my soul was monochromatic, all blacks, whites, and grays. There were no colors: no reds, oranges, greens, yellows, purples, blues, lavenders, tans. I knew I could do something about this, let life flow, not be perfect and partial. The answer was in art, in useless, warm, colorful art, music, the movie “Enchanted April”, in novels, poetry, sculpture, drama, opera. Art flushes the soul and makes it whole.

The first full day I was in the Jesuit Novitiate at Sheridan, Oregon, at the age of 18 I heard a book read from the pulpit during our first silent meal—for that was the Jesuit custom in those days to feed the mind while feeding the body. The book was The Decline of Pleasure by Walter Kerr. Great title for the first day in the seminary which was indeed a drastic decline in pleasure! The point of the book, at least what I remember, is Aristotle’s point—at least I think it is Aristotle—that all that is useful is for the sake of the useless, all that is purposeful is for the sake of play, all work for rest, all action for contemplation, all partiality for fullness. Both the end of life in the sense of the goal of all our striving and labor, and the actual end of life in the sense of what is there at the end beyond life is the utterly useless: the not-for-something-else-but-for-itself. All else is, unfortunately, merely useful. Art is what it is and does what it does and brings us together and makes us whole because art is useless. That’s its power. That’s why we need it, why it has to be at the heart of our education of whole persons and at the heart of who we are, what we experience, and what we experience together in mission and, hence, this day.

I hope this day will be completely useless. I hope when you evaluate it, you’ll write, “It was a completely useless day, served no purpose, did not accomplish anything.” It is not about how to fulfill our mission, not about getting art into the curriculum or into my course, not even about taking pride in our students, faculty, and staff, whose art we will experience. It is just the experience of getting together—literally ourselves getting together—through art and seeing what happens to us and to us.

It’s a wonderful thing here in the university to be surrounded by our choir singing “There Is a River in Judea”, to be in the Casey Atrium at the presentation of Fragments and hear students read their writings with their own newfound voices, to experience light and shape in Steven Holl’s Chapel of St Ignatius, to wander through the Senior art exhibit, to catch a glimpse of Chuck Close in a million pixels in the Student Center with an oblivious student eating lunch below him, to show a visitor the art of Sullivan and Hunthausen Halls, to try to be anonymous and in mufti on a Saturday morning at the Seattle Art Museum yet greeted 75 times by Honors

Students on a field trip, or even to enjoy the OA's "Cabaret" with break dancing "Father Rog" helping homesick freshmen get here and forget their weeping moms and dads.

Art is everywhere but it does need to be useless; ie, needs to be art if I, or we, or our students are to be whole. How frequent for me to be checking the next-to-last page of the choir program to get the name of the young woman in the third row rather than letting the sound make me whole, or how often the case to spend most of my time looking at the labels next to the painting to learn whether it's a "somebody" and therefore that I should be enjoying it, or how easy to hope this drama is making generous the heart of a donor in the audience rather than letting it enliven my own, or even how easy to take pride in the artistic accomplishments of our students and faculty rather than let it accomplish what it wills in me.

I'm not going to tell you the point of this year's Mission Day, which would be like trying to tell you the point of our new Japanese Garden or our new American Indian Garden. The point is that they are there, and that we can be too. The point of today is that we are here, and have a chance of wasting the day wonderfully and—by the grace of art—finding ourselves surprisedly whole in the mission of educating whole persons. Have a useless day!