

Letter to a young artist

Previously published in Michael Card's *Scribbling in the Sand: Christ and Creativity*

Dear young artist,

Let me be as practical as Christ who said we are to love God above all and love the neighbour as we respect ourselves (Matthew 22:31-39). The Bible tells us further that if we bear the burdens of our neighbour we will be fulfilling the law of Christ (Galatians 5:25-6:2).

This word of God for us as artists is not any easier than it is for a politician or an economist in our complicated secularized day. But this biblical injunction is a guideline for blessing, because it extricates you from the moil of serving yourself, of doing what is right just in your own eyes, and from thinking you need to jump into the swim of whatever elite or pop art scene is current.

I could put what I believe is wise counsel for those who would be artists in God's world another way. Make your paintings, poetry, sculptures, songs, photography, stories, theatre pieces, music, or whatever artistry: craft it as a psalm before the face and ear of the Lord and let your neighbour listen in. Join the progeny of David, Asaph, Bezalel and Oholiab (Exodus 31:1-11), even the descendents of Korah (Psalms 42-49), and make merry before the LORD God, God's people, and even one's antagonists (Psalm 23:5). Also be as free as the biblical psalmists to cry out to God from the pits of despair in your need, to STOP THE PERSECUTION, Lord, suffered by Christ's followers nearby or faraway (Psalms 69,109,137).

And make these psalms for settings outside the worshipping church door. Let them be heard on the radio, appear in art galleries, come across the boards in a theatre, and be printed in books.

To become an artist means you become a professional imaginator in order to help your handicapped unimaginative neighbour. Our artistic profession is meant to give voice, eyes, ears, and tactile sense to those who are underdeveloped toward such rich nuances of meaning in God's creation.

Only God could make a tree and fashion a walrus, conceive precious stones that glint mysteriously in the dark depths of the earth. Only God could grace the loving, awkward union of faithful erotic intimacy between a man and a woman with such satisfying pleasure, and provide the hug of a family, schooling, neighbourhoods and country for us humans to thrive within.

But artists have the calling to make such treasures known to those who walk past such creatural riches without experiencing them. We artists disclose such creational blessings by fashioning a necklace of words (a poem) or the jewel of a melody (a song) for our neighbour about these great deeds of the LORD.

A christian artist should also treat sin as the Bible does and not look the other way as the Pharisees did (Luke 10:25-37). But it will be important for you and me not to be self-righteous when we as christian artists treat evil. The waste that sin brings into God's good world and the addiction of us sinners who can't break out of the habit of being deceptive, smug or violent, should bring sadness into the theatre pieces we write, not angry coldness. Sorrow must define our sculptures about war rather than let them become monuments to idealized heroics.

Because respectable-looking church goers often have terrible problems in the hidden recesses of their lives, I think we need "lament teams" along with the trend for "praise choruses." Artists need to serve their neighbour who is hurting with more than escape and must weep in art with those who are weeping (Romans 12:14-15). To write elegies, memorials, and sad songs that are authentic we as artists will need to crawl compassionately inside the very skin of those who are starving, displaced, depressed, victimized, or fanatic with hatred, so the grace we artistically bring is not cheap.

Maybe 11 September 2001 can give us North Americans new horizons for understanding the suffering that has been going on and is immense and poignant right now as you read this letter, throughout God's world far from our shores, where real people, women and children are being slowly terrorized by famine and cruelty. We Christians have neighbours and enemies, and we know what the LORD requires: art that cries out at our sin and promises the mercy of the Lord for those who plead for help (Micah 6:6-8, Luke 6:17-38).

I assume you will train to become a skilled artisan in the art of your choice (Ps 33:3). You do not have to aspire to be a "star" in the eyes of world society, like a comet shooting across the media sky. If you are faithful in providing nuanced manna in small venues, the LORD will prepare you for service in larger settings (Matthew 25:14-30).

The key thing is to be a reliable craftsman or woman in the imaginative task you perform. God loves amateur artists too, if they do not show off. But the Lord asks each one of us to hone our gifts with disciplined respect for the task at hand so the fruit of our imaginative hands be wholesome food for those who receive it. Find a talented mentor in your artform whom you can trust, and become a craftsmith worthy of hire.

Your redemptive task as artist is not to convert people or to be apologetic about your following Jesus Christ. A christian artist simply needs to giveaway your imaginative insights to whoever crosses your path, and the Holy Spirit will take it from there.

And when a disbeliever in the Christ experiences in your short story a wrestling with God as Jacob did with the angel (Genesis 32:22-32) or as the poetic Psalmist of #39 did with the LORD God self; or if a stranger is caught by your painting and finds that your trusting God to come through somehow (as in Alan Paton's novels) to be winsome; if your song of passionate love for a friend through thick and thin sounds unusual to a hard-hearted listener, making the listener jealous (as Paul says in Romans 11:13-14) for love that lasts beyond a sensual four-letter trick: then you as artist have been a faithful imaginative trustee of God's gift to you (Matthew 24:36-51). It is always important for us as artists not to be so heavenly minded we are no earthly good, but to be earthy with our redemptive cheer, down in the muck of life too, so that the imaginative grit we offer gives the resilience of hope to the neighbours who are dispirited.

The Holy Spirit is the true source of the wisdom an artist needs to find his or her long-range place in society. Because artistry in Western culture has been either wrongly estranged from ordinary workaday life or has often been forced to become commercialized and formulaic to be acceptable by the masses, young artists with integrity have often needed to find non-artistic work related to their art in order to put bread on the kitchen table.

Christian artists have a responsibility to help overcome this sense of artistic alienation and displacement in society by making their art speak for neighbours. Give the neighbours what they imaginatively need, not just what they want, and wait patiently upon the Lord for blessing.

A good artistic photograph or song about human love and about human tragedy that breathes a sense of God's hovering presence, which bespeaks obliquely that God's got the whole damaged world in God's hands, is a worthy living sacrifice of obedience in response to Christ's command, "Follow me, young artists."

Artists have the glorious calling to intercede imaginatively for others, to increase perseverance and dispense a simple joy and peace that surpasses understanding (Philippians 4:4-7).

A good way not to feel lonely as an artist who would serve the Lord in deed is to realize you are a member of a community. You must not pity yourself as Elijah did and think you are the only displaced artist left faithful to the Lord (I Kings 19:1-8). You are not only a member of a church community--which sometimes has little place for artists unless they do "church art"-- but a person in the numberless throng and communion of artistic saints who have existed since Adam's poem for Eve before our fall into sin (Genesis 2:23).

So go find a tradition of christian artistry in history--Ravenna mosaics, Reformation portraiture, German chorales, Puritan diaries, Russian novels, Afro-American rural blues or gospel, any particularly strong figure in your artform who breathes the mind of Christ: distill their contribution in disciplined fashion, update it, make it new through your own lived history, and then throw it like bread out upon the waters around you. God helping you it will not get lost but bring healing sustenance to those who are hungry and thirsty (Ecclesiastes 11:1-6).

No matter how difficult your own life may become as an artist, those who giveaway their artistry for the imaginative support of their neighbour, as an obedient thank you to the LORD, will be given the staying power of shalom until the Lord returns in glory. I pray that the church of Jesus Christ will grow the vision to support you in this preparation for the Rule of the LORD God over all aspects of God's world which is coming.

May God rest you merry at times, weary one. God keeps all your tears in God's bottle (Psalm 56:8).

Calvin Seerveld, Toronto
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