

CAUX – RENEWAL ARTS FORUM
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OPENING TALK BY HUGH WILLIAMS

Let us consider for a moment the Mission statement of Renewal Arts:

To explore the arts as a catalyst for spiritual renewal

To enable individuals and society to explore arts transforming power

What exactly is art's transforming power?

And how do the arts act as a catalyst for spiritual renewal?

These are questions to which we shall be returning during the week ahead. So perhaps I can start the discussion going with some observations.

Here I must insert a personal note. I am British and a believing and practising Christian and so my references and illustrations tend inevitably to be drawn from the English-speaking world and from the Judeo-Christian experience. But what we are talking about here is not the exclusive preserve of Britons or Christians, but of all those who look further than the self, the material, the measurable, to something beyond – to the other – what Vaclav Havel has described as 'that which lies beyond the horizons of our being'. So when I use the word "God" please accept it as a form of shorthand.

In a published speech *Beyond Boundaries – the arts after the events of 2001* the Chief Executive of the Arts Council of England, Peter Hewitt, referring to the aftermath of the 11 September attacks on New York and Washington, writes:

"People seemed shocked into realising they wanted more in their lives than working and shopping, enjoyable and satisfying though both may be. They wanted a sense of meaning, explored in spaces protected from the intrusions and distractions of the 'always on' consumer culture. And I believe that in an increasingly secular Western world, art has a vital role to play to connect us to that sense of deeper meaning. Poems are a modern form of prayer. Art provides the setting for modern communion. It is no cliché to see Tate Modern, the Lowry and the Baltic (Britain's latest arts centres) as the new cathedrals.

Compare this with a motto of the Fuke sect of Zen Buddhism in 17th Century Japan, recently quoted in an article by the Scottish composer James Macmillan in *The Guardian* newspaper: "Religion is music. The breath of the flute is the path to enlightenment".

In Britain, Anthony Gormley, one of our best known sculptors has said of his art "that the work comes from the same source as the need for religion: wanting to face existence and discover meaning, attempting by starting with a real body in real time to face space and eternity". One is reminded of the poet William Blake:

'To see a world in a grain of sand
And a heaven in a wild flower,
To hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And eternity in an hour.'

Sir Simon Rattle, now conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic, perhaps the greatest orchestra in the world, was asked in a recent interview what the orchestra was meant to be in the 21st century. He replied “People are looking for spiritual things. We can help them find them. They need it more than ever.”

So in a way we are faced with a paradox: western society in pursuit of materialism, consumerism, hedonism, shunning formal religious practice – and yet at the same time aware of the spiritual and of one’s need of the spiritual. The poet and teacher Peter Abbs defines the difference between this and formal religion by examining the roots of both words. Spirit, he writes, comes from the Latin *spiritus*, a breathing out, whereas religion comes from *re-ligere*, to bind together. “And you cannot bind breath”, he adds.

Some fifteen years ago now, in his book *Real Presences* George Steiner, a Cambridge philosopher, confronted with the phenomenon of artistic creativity and examining its source, developed what he called his “wager on God”. “This essay argues a wager on transcendence”, he wrote. “It argues that there is in the art act and in its reception, that there is in the experience of meaningful form, a presumption of presence.” And by “presence” he makes it clear that he means a divine presence. And he also makes it clear that he does not just mean some art i.e. “religious” art, he means all art.

I think it is worth repeating; There is in the art act – in the artist’s work – and in its reception – I like that bit! – our ability to hear it, see it, experience it, which is also a gift - a presumption of presence. Steiner continues: “I know that this formulation will be unacceptable not only to most of those who will read a book such as this, but also to the prevailing climate of thought and feeling in our culture.”

And, as if to make his position abundantly clear, he makes a similar statement from the negative aspect, or the flip side, if you like. “What I affirm is the intuition that where God’s presence is no longer a tenable supposition and where His absence is no longer a felt, indeed overwhelming weight, certain dimensions of thought and creativity are no longer attainable.”

God, or the Transcendent, for Steiner is a *sine qua non* of the work of the artist and the appreciation of the art-lover. And I suppose there is a certain logic behind this view. If we speak of artistic talent as a “gift”, then one might reasonably ask – who is the giver?

In the Judeo-Christian tradition we can go right back to the beginning – to the creation story in the Book of Genesis. This is not history, still less is it science. It is myth in the deepest and truest meaning of that term, indeed you might call it one of Jung’s “archetypal myths”. It looks behind history, beyond science, to reveal a profound truth by telling a story. God creates the universe, the world, the creatures, and then finally He creates men and women “in his own image”. To my simple mind it follows that if the creator God made us in his own image, then he created us to be creative.

Through the pages of the Bible we also see God at work as Communicator – to Abraham, through Moses, through the prophets, until his ultimate act of communication with mankind by assuming human form – the incarnation. Beyond the

Gospel story we observe God communicating with the early Christians through the active agency of the Holy Spirit – a communication which continues down to the present day.

So if God is creator and communicator – and we are made in His image - we are programmed, so to speak, to create and to communicate. It is almost as natural as breathing.

Now that may answer, in a simplistic fashion, the question of why human beings create and communicate. But, I believe, it is only part of the answer. To find a more complete answer we have to take it one step further back and ask why does God create? Why does He communicate? After all, He doesn't have to. Or does He? Is there, at the very heart of the universe a creative imperative? If there is such a phenomenon as this "the creative imperative" – and I believe there is - what is its property, what is its root?

I think we can only answer that question with one word – one poor, misused word – but in English it is the only word we have – love. It is the compulsion of love that made God create. Throughout the creation story, when God created anything – light, sea, earth, the animals, "he saw that it was good". He loved his creation and enjoyed it.

A few years ago my wife and I went to see a production of *The Creation* – the first part of the medieval play cycle *The Mysteries* – performed by members of the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Other Place at Stratford-on-Avon. The scene opened with the actor who was playing God lying face down on the stage floor, obviously peering down at what was going on beneath him, and chuckling and laughing to himself as if he were fit to burst, rolling over onto his back and kicking his legs in the air in sheer delight. It was a revelation to me just how much God must enjoy creating, how he delights in it, how he loves it. Such are the insights that art can bring us when we are least expecting them.

There is a marvellous passage in a novel *The Turnaround* by Vladimir Volkoff, which I read in translation from the French. The French counter-espionage service have set a "honey trap" for Major Igor Popov of the KGB, a brute of a man who has more than once killed with his bare hands. Unknown to the luckless French agent, the girl he persuades to lure the KGB major back to her flat, has become a believer. She takes Popov not to her apartment but to a Russian Orthodox Church in Paris where a service is in progress. Popov has never been inside a church before and is intrigued. He finds an excuse to return a few days later on his own to talk to the Priest.

"Don't give me your agitprop", says Popov roughly to the Priest, "expound". The Priest replies: "Love created the world, because Love is creative, it is His property to create... Love created man. He created him immortal and free. In order to experience his freedom man turned away from Love. He became mortal. That is what we call the Fall. Then, instead of forcing man to obey him, Love decided to humiliate himself before man, to put himself at man's mercy, totally, in order to give him back his lost dignity. That is what we call the Cross."

“Clear enough. Go on”, says Popov.

Priest: All the rest is secondary, providing one has love.

Popov: I don’t.

Priest: You don’t know what you’re saying. Why would you be here otherwise?

And a little later:

Popov: So God is love?

Priest: And love is God.

Popov: But what is love?

Priest: This is what it is: to diminish oneself so that the other may grow, what we call the *kenosis* and which we symbolise by our poor rite of the washing of the feet. It is what the Lord lived through on the Cross, the Cross of Love.

Popov: So love is not to possess?

Priest: It is not to possess.

Popov: Is it to be possessed?

Priest: It is not quite that either. Love is to prefer the other to oneself. Not to sacrifice oneself, but to prefer.

Popov: That’s what I thought. I don’t care for love.

I don’t think I have read anywhere a better description of the nature of the God I believe in and try to serve— and this in a spy novel! When I was a young and very green playwright, just starting out, my mentor Alan Thornhill said to me, “If you want to write for the theatre, you have to learn to love your characters and love your audience”. I don’t think any young writer could be given better advice.

Some of you may remember that at Caux two years ago I had the privilege of interviewing the sculptor Stephen Broadbent. In reply to one of my questions, Stephen referred to his mentor the larger-than-life Merseyside sculptor Arthur Dooley. “When art is a gift to another person – I think that is what Arthur taught me, that the art work should be a gift – there needs to be a love of the material that you use – that’s fundamental – a love of the idea, the concept, the truth – and a love of the person that you are working for.”

I would like to suggest that love is the creative imperative. Love is the secret of art’s transforming power.

I heard the other day of a woman in New York who was appalled at the lifelessness of the inmates in the old people’s homes she visited. We are probably familiar with the scene. From breakfast to bed-time, they are sitting in a circle around the edge of a large room, the television blaring away in the corner, no-one watching it, no-one talking, everyone just staring ahead of them, waiting for the next meal tray or the next escorted visit to the bathroom. All day every day. This lady was determined to make a change. But how? One day she invited a young dancer to come with her. As the music played and the girl danced in the centre of the room, little by little the old people began to sway and to move and beat time with their hands. One man was seen to stare at his hand and was heard to exclaim “My God, it is ten years since I moved that hand!” And a 104 year old lady of German descent was heard to mutter “It reminds me of when I danced for the Tsar of Russia!”

We can all think of moments when listening to music, reading a poem, looking at a painting or sitting in a theatre, we have had a life-giving, life-enriching experience. In our discussions it might be an idea to share some of these experiences with each other. Here we find another clue to understanding our Mission Statement. For love and art are both life-giving. The love that is inherent in the creative process finds expression in serving people by helping them become truly alive, more whole, more human. Artists are people servers and life-givers. As a Christian I hear echoes of Jesus words "I come that you may have life and have it in abundance". The problem with materialism, consumerism and self-centredness is that they deaden. The role of the artist – the act of love of the artist - is to make us more alive.

At a conference some months ago I met the poet Peter Abbs, who is also Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Sussex. He has recently written a book called *Against the flow: the Arts, post-modern culture and education*. This is from a recent review of the book:

"His argument is that what education needs, especially in the arts, is a return to the metaphysical. By this he means....a deep attention to imagination and a striving for the transcendent. As he puts it 'We are still haunted by the three broken transcendentals: Truth, Beauty, Goodness. Poets and artists should be shocking people, not with unmade beds and vacuous conceptualism, but with questions and insights that "slip the bounds of earth". Their role is to be both Shamans, or prophet-healers, and subverters of the dominant, soulless culture..."

Here is another facet of the artists' transforming role – subverters of the soulless culture. The subversion of a Hamlet: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy". It is the subversion the composer James Macmillan finds in music: "What is music after all? he writes. "You can't see it, you can't touch it, you can't eat it. But its palpable presence always makes itself felt: not just in a physical way, but in a way that reaches down into the crevices of our souls... Music is fundamentally immaterial and cannot be consumed in the sense of being bought and owned. It is this numinous quality of music that issues such a direct counter-challenge to the values of our age."

So there are three ways in which the artist works to renew and to transform – loving, life-giving and subverting. Where Renewal Arts comes in is to recall artists and art-lovers to this high calling to transform a heartless, soulless culture of materialism, consumerism and hedonism. It is a very great responsibility.

Hugh Williams
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