

Using Creativity with Moral Responsibility

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Over the years I've occasionally been asked if, as a composer and producer, I'm influenced by the environment around me, or do I attempt to change my environment through my creative endeavors. The answer is: "Both." Like any individual, I am affected by the happenings in my life and those experiences will undoubtedly affect my creative endeavors. It's also true that those of us who are blessed with creative abilities do not create in a vacuum, and as such, that which we create and put before the public has consequences.



The more essential issue is how we use our creativity in the context of creating a culture of peace. As a composer I'm always asking myself if my music will take people to a higher, better place — or not. My responsibility as an artist to my community is something I take very seriously.

American painter, Jack Beal, recently opined: "The Platonic ideal of truth, beauty and goodness is not a bad set of ideals to live by. But where has that gone? For thousands of years art was seen as a source of responsible moral and ethical leadership. Today taking that stance is almost seen as being comic."

When I read this it got me thinking about Divine Principle, specifically the Principle of Creation and the truth, beauty and goodness paradigm (the "big three" as American philosopher Ken Wilber calls them.) As Beal asserts, in contemporary culture these attributes are no longer given much credence, especially the moral and ethical aspects of art and its influence, and I believe we are socially and culturally poorer as a result. Assessing art from the perspective of the "big three" is not a new concept. The metaphysical aspect of music and art, as well as the moral and ethical dimensions (axiology) has fascinated philosophers and artists going back a few millennia.

The ancient cultures of Sumeria, China and Greece all believed that music had divine origins and were based on modes with distinct mathematical proportions, some of which were not unlike the diatonic pitch sets (melodies) that we find in Western tonality. The Chinese of Confucius' time believed that music could assist in providing order in society and they placed a great deal of importance of the ennobling and/or corrupting potential of music as well as its therapeutic properties. Like the Chinese, the Greeks emphasized the moral and ethical power of the tonal art and its effect on self and society.

During the Renaissance, science and religion were not seen as being mutually exclusive, but rather

correlative aspects that when conjoined and integrated could produce art of great meaning and beauty. Martin Luther and Johann Sebastian Bach believed that music was “a sermon in sound” and the most efficacious way to “praise and glorify God.” Johannes Brahms, another good Lutheran (and one of my favorite composers), read scripture on a daily basis and considered his relationship with God to be essential in his endeavors “to compose something that will uplift and benefit humanity — something of permanent value.”

Exposition of the Divine Principle cites the importance of the attributes of truth, beauty and goodness in the process of the development of a higher self and an ethical society:

When the body responds to the mind’s emotion, intellect and will, its actions pursue the values of beauty, truth and goodness respectively. God is the subject partner to the human mind; hence He is the subject partner to human emotions, intellect and will. Desiring to realize his original value, a person responds to the perfect emotion, perfect intellect and perfect will of God through his mind, and acts accordingly through his body. Thus, he manifests the values of original beauty, original truth and original goodness. (Ch. 1, Sec. 4.2)

In this context it can be easily concluded that truth and intellect (knowing) should be harmonized with beauty and emotion (feeling) in such a way that goodness and will (doing) becomes the foundation for a moral and ethical society. Science, art and religion thus become interconnected, and in so doing provide the basis for building a culture of peace as well as artistic expressions that reflect and/or embrace that vision—“three branches of the same tree,” as Einstein asserted.

Obviously, creating music, or writing or painting or creating choreography is the act of “doing.” But “doing” something (anything) should be predicated on an understanding of what is morally and ethically beneficial to the quality of life that we want to experience. In a TIME magazine interview in 2002, U2’s Bono, stated that music has the ability to make people vulnerable to change. He said that singing made him vulnerable to change. Echoing Gandhi, he added, “but in the end you must become the change we want to see in the world.” In other words, it’s not enough to just talk the talk (or sing the song!). But later in the interview, he said, “I’m actually not a very good example of that — I’m too selfish, and the right to be ridiculous is something I hold too dear — but still, I know it’s true.”

Well, that’s the rub, isn’t it? To actually bring change one must change on the individual level before one can pontificate to others about the need to change. If everyone is “selfish” and holds “the right to be ridiculous” as something “too dear,” to give up, there is really no hope of transforming the human condition. A central tenet of Divine Principle as explained in the section of the Three Blessings, is the idea that each of us needs to mature by establishing mind and body unity centered on God — our Heavenly Parent. That’s the starting point and basis of creating a culture of peace. For an artist, this means taking into account the effect that a particular artwork will have on those who experience it. Unification Thought considers this to be a significant aspect of the creative process and the development of a moral and ethical society.

It’s interesting to note that in the final two decades of the 20th century artists of all disciplines were reawakened to the efficacy in the truth, beauty and goodness paradigm and the spiritual and religious underpinnings of its rationale. A number of contemporary composers, such as Eric Whitacre, Morton Lauridsen, Jennifer Higdon and Arvo Part, placed a great deal of importance on the spiritual aspects of music and its transformational effect on our souls — individually and collectively. In this regard they are in accord with German composer Paul Hindemith (1895-1963) whose vexatious relationship with Nazi officialdom landed him in the United States after World War II. Hindemith understood that the assertions of Confucius and the Greeks with regard to music and ethics made it essential for artists to use their creativity “with the severest sense of moral responsibility.”

Taking responsibility for our creative endeavors is no small matter. The artist’s role in creating a better world starts with each of us trying to become a better person and then using our talent and craft in an altruistic way. That’s our portion of responsibility. If we believe that our talent is “God-given,” then using that talent in accordance with God’s will becomes supremely important. One might ask, “How does anyone really know what God’s will is?” There are many ways to get that answer and it’s been my experience that God provides answers based on my sincere willingness to listen. It’s been said that God works in mysterious ways and that’s probably true. But it’s no mystery that if we use our talent for noble and godly purposes then we can have a positive influence on our social reality.

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