

Usually when I'm working at the Union Project during volunteer days I get asked by passers by for money. "Hey, do you have a dollar for the bus?" or "can I get a quarter to make a phone call?" I've heard just about all the excuses I can think of. Usually I roll my eyes and say no. Generally, I'm annoyed.

The other day a very confident man wandered into the Union Project during a very busy workday. He came up to me seeking out the pastor of the church. When I told him there was no church, and definitely no pastor, he looked very disappointed, so I asked him if I could do anything to help him out.

He told me that he had recently spent several days in the hospital because he had a growth in his head. He had been informed that he was at a high risk of brain aneurisms and "you know what happens when blood clots in your brain, right?"

He had a handful of drug prescriptions, empty bottles, doctor's notes, and a welfare card. He offered to do volunteer work, but said he could only do deskwork because the doctor warned him of heavy physical strain. He needed \$20 to fill his prescription. He was scared he would die.

I told him that we're a small non-profit, and we're generally not in the business of giving handouts, as we are usually looking for them ourselves. But, I told him, "you seem like a good man, and I'm willing to help you out."

He responded with something like, "wow, I am so grateful, I think I might cry."

I've never second-guessed my decision to give him \$20. It could have been a wonderful con, but sometimes people just have a good look on their face and generate a positive feeling in your gut.

I'm telling you this story because it illustrates what for me is a very important part of being an artist and a person of faith. Risk, Taking chances, listening to your gut, or that little voice in your head. Being

an artist means stepping outside of your safety net and potentially getting conned, or being made a fool. But faith is believing that what you're doing is right.

To preface my qualifications on the subject of Art/Faith, let me quote Madelaine L'Engle from her book *Walking on Water*:

L 'Engle says

In a very real sense not one of us is qualified, but it seems that god continually chooses the most unqualified to do his work, to bear his glory. If we are qualified, we tend to think that we have done the job ourselves. If we are forced to accept our evident lack of qualification, then there's no danger that we will confuse God's work with our own, or God's glory with our own.

Well, Chad asked me to bring a body of my artwork and talk about it.(or something like that). I won't talk directly about these pieces of my ceramics, but I'll talk about how faith and art play a very important part of my daily life and some of the qualities that are important to me as an artist and a person of faith.

I've already talked about how risktaking is important to me. I'll also talk about the need for patience and asking questions, I'll touch on the importance of hard work and repetition, and lastly about the importance of history.

I'd also like you to know that these are things that I'm continually processing, and I'll bring up some questions that I'm struggling with.

So, last Sunday Brooke and I went to the Carnegie International, one of the premier modern art exhibits in the world, and its here in Pittsburgh. Imagine that. It has all types of art, including typically paintings and sculptures, to ceramics, photography, performance art, drawing, etc. The first sentence in the program of the brochure states:

When philosopher and social critic Theodor Adorno wrote, "In order for a work of art to be purely and fully a work of art, it must be more than a work of art," he implied that art is capable of engaging ideas central to philosophy, religion, political ideology, and science."

For me being a person of faith and an artist are inseparable. Someone said “the principle part of faith is patience” and I feel that this is a central theme for me as an artist as well. It is important to me to work hard and have faith that what I’m working on is the right thing, or will become the right thing.

Patience for me means listening to other people, being willing to try new things even when I think they’re wrong, or making hundreds and hundreds of mugs knowing that at least one of them will be what I’m actually trying to make.

But patience doesn’t mean waiting around for things to happen. It means listening to that little voice and acting when the time is right.

Like I said, I’ve been reading a book by Madeleine L’Engle called *Walking on Water, reflections on faith and art*. I’ll quote her a lot today because I feel she has really tackled this theme well. L’Engle says

generally what is more important than getting watertight answers is learning to ask the right questions.

For me the process of even talking to you tonight is the act of asking a question. I’m in the process of figuring out where I’m at as an artist and as a believer. However I don’t think this process will ever end. I’m a curious guy; most people who know me well will back me up on this. In fact, sometimes I ask more questions than people can deal with. But I *have* to do this, and I think that this is part of my desire to learn and reflect, and grasp the process.

Each piece of artwork that I make is a question and a process. I wrote in my journal several weeks ago...*I can never make the perfect piece because then I couldn’t make anything else.*

I believe that flaws make us human, and the wrong answers teach us, so I’m not striving for the perfect piece, but more for the perfect work in progress.

L’Engle says:

We write, we make music; we draw pictures, because we are listening for meaning, feeling for healing. And during the writing of the story, or the painting, or the composing or singing or playing, we are returned to that open creativity which was ours when we were children. We cannot be mature artists if we have lost the ability to believe which we had as children. An artist at work is in a condition of complete and total faith.

I believe that we need to practice our faith in everything we do. Eberhard Arnold, founder of the Bruderhof, said:

Jesus challenged us to work while we still can. (John 9:4) He compared his kingdom to labor in a vineyard, the investment of entrusted money, the good use of every talent. If God's kingdom is to transform this vale of tears into a place of joy, it has to be a realm of work. Work, and work alone, befits the destiny of the human spirit. By our nature as human beings we are called to a life of creativity. Healthy joy in life will be ours only through unclouded, loving fellowship in work.

Throughout college my friends joked with me that being an art major was taking the easy road through academia, that I didn't have to work for my grades. But I would argue that (in the words of George W. Bush) "It's awfully hard work...we're working hard".

But seriously...I like the work. For me making art is work, but part of work is collaboration, is meeting new people, and is taking on challenges together. The creativity is often a necessity in work.

Yesterday we had a workday at the Union Project. I had 4 people pulling nails from boards. This is not fun work. But they created a game out of it, and made it fun. I would argue that the simple creativity here is a display of god's presence in our work.

L'Engle says *an artist is a nourisher and a creator who knows that during the act of creation there is collaboration. We do not create alone.*

Part of work is discipline. Getting into the studio every day or week, Praying everyday, drawing or sketching everyday, on the job: work days every week.

I am artist because clay, sculpture, carpentry, drawing, writing, is a way for me to record my personal history. I can remember stories when I pick up one of my pots. Restoration carpentry is a way for me to preserve a part of my own past and the history of others as well. As I create works of art, I read other people's notes. What worked for them? What tools did they use? And as I read their notes, I learn their history, and what they were going through as they created.

LEngle says:

To work on a book is for me very much the same thing as to pray. Both involve discipline. If the artist works only when he feels like it, he's no apt to build up much of a body of work. Inspiration far more often comes during the work than before it, because the largest part of the job of the artist is to listen to the work, and to goes where it tells him to go. Ultimately, when you are writing, you stop thinking and write what you hear.

To pray is to listen also, to move through my own chattering to God, to that place where I can be silent and listen to what god may have to say. But, if I pray only when I feel like it, god may choose not to speak. The greatest moments of prayer come in the midst of fumbling and faltering prayer, rather than the odd moment when one decides to turn to god.

If I don't work I don't create, or I lose track of my faith, or people lose their trust in me. Repetition keeps me honest, makes me better at what I do, and helps me to grow.

As well, the artwork that I create, and the artwork of all the other artists out there are very important perspectives of human culture. Through art we remember our history, we learn how people worshipped, how people lived in the past.(think about King Tut's tomb, or the works of Picasso, or ancient Chinese pottery, all of these

are commentaries about beliefs and cultures at that time) Mark DeVecchio, author of Post Modern Ceramics says:

...no artist works without connections to his or her past, nor without inspiration from the history of art...

Brooke and I spent 2 weeks in Vancouver and Victoria and Seattle in September. One of the things that fascinated me the most was the “First Nations” artwork that we saw. This is the work of the native people of the Pacific Northwest. This includes things like totem poles, drums, carvings, and architecture. At the museum of anthropology we saw a contemporary exhibit of First Nations artist Robert Davidson. Davidson says:

My passion is reconnecting with my ancestor’s knowledge. The philosophy is what bred the art, and now the art has become the catalyst for us to explore the philosophy. I feel that, for Haida people, it’s art that has helped us to reclaim our place-to reclaim our beliefs, mythology and spirituality.

It is difficult for me to be Mennonite. There is no, or very little, artistic philosophy or even artworks. I often question what my role in Mennonite culture can be if I am a full time artist, especially one who isn’t making functional art.

Mennonites have historically valued simplicity and plainness. Where is art in this?

Recently I’ve been moving away from functional ceramics. It has been difficult. How do I explain it, how do I talk about it, and what is its purpose? These are struggles I continue to deal with.

Clive Bell, an art critic from the early 1900’s says:

I have no right to consider anything a work of art to which I cannot react emotionally; and I have no right to look for the essential quality in anything that I have not felt to be a work of art.

It is my goal as an artist to be part of a conversation. I want people to see my work, and I want to hear what they think about it.

Conversation is an important part of spirituality for me as well. Hearing what other people are working through, both now and in the past, helps me.

Again LEngle says:

Even when one denies God, to serve music, painting, or words is a religious activity, whether or not the conscious mind is willing to accept the fact. Basically there can be no categories such as "religious" art and "secular" art, because all true art is incarnational, and therefore "religious".

Simply meaning that creativity itself is a religious activity.

Let me come back to the story of the prescription drug man.

He came back to the Union Project several weeks later. Ultimately he came back because he need bus fare to get to the hospital again. But he also came back to say thank you. And I noticed on his arm he had several hospital ID tags. I didn't give him bus fare, and I'll never know if he used my \$20 to buy prescription drugs that he needed, but he's still alive, and he remembers my kindness, and that's good enough for me. It satisfies my gut feeling.

So to summarize:

I feel that my art/faith are inseperable. It is through taking chances that I am able to create art and recognize my faith. It is through patience and asking questions that I grow as an artist and allow my faith to grow. It is through hard work that I better myself and display to others my values and beliefs, and it is through history that I learn, but also through history that I begin to see value in the work that I am trying to do as an artist.

Let me end with a poem and a quote:

One of my ceramic influences is a guy named Jack Troy. He teaches at Juniata College in PA, and he's in his 70s I think. He literally and figuratively wrote the book on wood firing. He's a poet too.

Voting

*Years ago, on an impulse,
I wrote a short letter containing two lies
to Leon Gorman, the president of L.L. Bean.
Dear Mr. Gorman, my wife and I
are Black and wonder whether it is okay
for us to wear L.L. Bean clothing.
We have never seen Black people
modeling clothes in an L.L. Bean catalogue.*

*Being neither married nor Black
Didn't keep me from voting
in my imaginary election*

*Dear Mr. Troy, Mr. Gorman wrote back,
We at L.L. Bean use only our employees
as models and at present we employ
no Black people, but that may change.
Of course we welcome everyone,
Irrespective of race, to wear our clothing.*

*Just a few months later Black and Asian models
Appeared for the first time in an L.L. Bean catalogue.
I feel my vote was counted.*

Please remember that asking questions sometimes does get things done. It's not always how you ask the question, but if you ask it.

I will end with a last quote from L'Engle, which seems to sum up for me the connection of art, faith, and our daily lives. She says:

Creativity is a way of living life, no matter what our vocation, or how we earn our living.