

In What Soil Does Genius Grow?

A teacher conference address by Scott Shepherd

Introduction

Art teachers and artists: we are in the INSPIRATION business.

If a laborer works with one's hands, a craftsperson with one's head and hands, and an artist with one's heart, head and hands, then if we are not educating the heart, then we are merely training craftspersons.

The purpose of education is to help the individual to find and develop his/her vocation; and by vocation I don't mean just a job, it's much more than that. A vocation is an activity for which the individual has an ardent and exclusive passion regardless of how little or how much it pays. It is an activity the individual is aware of having a superior ability at doing, but it is also an activity the individual loves doing more than anything else. A vocation connects that which is most real and passionate in us to the world and other people. It is our love of life, because it says YES to life by meeting it with everything one has within oneself.

Those who have a vocation know what I am talking about. Those who don't have a vocation, also know what I'm talking about - they feel the emptiness here. For those who don't have a vocation, whenever they are working, they are constantly watching the clock. For those who do have a vocation, time doesn't exist - they work until the job is done. For those who don't have a vocation, they say, "oh, yes, this is what I want to do when I retire" - if they are lucky enough to live that long and still be healthy. Those who have a vocation never really retire: they may work for someone else or for themselves - but they never stop doing what they love doing most.

To find one's vocation is not always easy, it may be a lifelong search, but if you give up you will have to settle for a job, and for those of us with talents, that would be a crushing defeat in the game of life. To find our vocation, in or out of school, is an ACTIVE, PRACTICAL AND PERSONALLY MEANINGFUL search. You can't just let education wash over you and hope that something valuable will end up in your bucket. If you do that, the only thing you will end up with, if you are lucky, is merely a job.

Leonardo says, "Just as eating something you don't want to eat is bad for your health; so study without desire spoils the memory, and it retains nothing that it takes in. Love alone makes me remember, it alone makes me alert."

Therefore we teach more with our love than with our hands or our words.

Soil Chart

	Michelangelo	Renoir	Vincent	Leonardo	Rodin	Monet
<i>Where vocation found</i>	Nursed by stonecutter's wife	On the floor (with father's tailor's chalk)	Preaching in Borinage	Out of school, born out of wedlock	Under the kitchen table, wrong art room	Killing time in school (charicatures), on the cliff
<i>Key people early in career</i>	Adopted by Lorenzo de Medici	Sister Lisa	Brother Theo	Uncle Francesco	Sister Maria, Father Eymard	Mentor Eugene Boudin
<i>Where real education found</i>	Bertoldi di Giovanni & Medici tutors	Playing hooky with Monet	Self-taught in countryside with peasants	Verrochio or self-taught	Petit Ecole, Louvre, Barye, Carriere-Belleuse, reading	Resistant to all forms of education, mentors
<i>Influence of other artists</i>	Ghiberti, Massacio, Leonardo, Laocoon	Rococo, Impressionists, Monet, Titian	Millet/Breton, Rembrandt, Impressionists, Japanese, Gauguin	Giotto, Massacio, Donatello, Brunelleschi, Michelangelo	Michelangelo, Monet	Barbizon, Japanese, Rodin, Renoir
<i>Your challenges</i>	Bramante/Raphael/critics/death/Pope Julius' tomb	Blue collar, Salon rejects, Raphael fresco, Acute arthritis	Loneliness, no money, mental illness	Illegitimacy, Medici neglect, Experiments with paint, sleep	18th century education, rejections, rumors of life, casting, monuments	Fickle nature, academic school & salon, cataracts
<i>Contributions</i>	Attached	Attached	Attached	Attached	Attached	Attached
<i>Your artistic successes</i>	Roman pieta, David, Sistine ceiling, Last Judgement	Charpentier Children, Durand-Ruell, Luncheon, Bathers	Red Vinyard, A minor link, The portrait, Things not seen before	NOT ONE, Isabella of Aragon, Anghieri, Last Supper, Notebooks	Age of bronze, John the Baptist, Gates of Hell, BALZAC	Wheatstacks, With Rodin, Revenge on Academy, Waterlillies
<i>Your advice</i>	Draw, thrive on challenges, Eliminate the non-essential, Keep learning, Power to dare, Reveal God's reflection in human form	Work is its own reward, Work with hands, Cork in river, go with flow, Good joy	Love many things, work for & comfort you, Exaggerate the essential, Perseverance, Beauty from within artist	Look for metaphors in nature, grasp the present moment, serve others, long and well-spent life	Be truthful, link with past, good courage	Work, paint only what you see, translate nature, no doctrines, no half-measures, love nature, good love

Conclusion

So in what soil does genius grow?

First of all, great artists are NOT the childlike, confusedly-tortured raw nerves in the way Hollywood likes to portray them and the way that some young people like to imitate them. NO, they are powerful communication dynamos, determined to live their lives outloud (as Zola puts it) and to make the Invisible VISIBLE - in protest of the way that most of the world ignores the invisible. They communicate about themselves and the world they experience with multiple layers of meaning and a quality that overwhelms disagreement with the dual disintegrator rays of BEAUTY (founded on love) and TRUTH (universally recognized). The artist never entirely KNOWS the truth, but guesses with leap after leap in the dark (Agnes de Mille). They are models of VISION, PERSEVERANCE and HARD WORK.

How did they find their vocations?

By chance, by circumstance, by way of distractions. NOT by birth, genes or DNA. But when they found it, they were sufficiently alert to latch onto it and hold on for the whole

rough ride - because they RECOGNIZED THE OPPORTUNITY AND BELIEVED IN THEMSELVES.

Who were the key influences in their lives?

Not the parents or economic class or money. They were siblings, relatives and mentors who saw their potential, encouraged them to recognize their calling, and to never stop working at it.

What role did education play?

Unconventional and unpromising in every case, lacking academic pedigree and prestige. They had academically worthless educations and no scholarly credentials.
Influence of other artists

Many and varied, but chosen with a strong critical viewpoint and NO FEAR of being identified with outcasts or NOT being identified with outcasts. Unlike today's artistic chic, who snobbishly ignore all but the recent history of art, these artists valued their predecessors. Degas says "Art grows out of art. The secret of art is to follow the advice that the Great Masters give you in their works, while doing something different from them."

Contributions

They had in common a determination to realize their vision. They championed new avenues of expression, new techniques and new exaggerations of their personal view of reality.

Greatest Successes

Career and monetary success did not equate with artistic success. What WE regard as their masterpieces were often distractions for them, such as the Sistine chapel. What THEY regard as their masterpieces were often rejected, ridiculed, unfinished or met with disaster.

What about challenges?

Many and crushing, but to these artists they were catalysts, not to be feared. EASY was a four-letter word to these men. They sought out the difficult in art, since that's the only place where valuable treasure can be found. If great art's father is DISCONTENT, then it's mother is DILIGENCE (so said Lajos Kassak).

Perseverance was their unifying battle cry. Hardwork was central to their lives. They called themselves: a workman painter, a peasant painter, a laborer. Degas said "I am working away like a galley slave, I am a ballet dancer who hides the effort behind her form, I am a race horse: after I have won the race, I am content with my ration of oats."

Not concerned with wealth or glory, hard work was their way of life. A philosopher once said, "if you want to stay healthy, work your body like HELL." The same is true for your artistic ability - work it like HELL, and it will grow stronger. Ain't no pain, ain't no gain.

IN CONCLUSION, IT IS DETERMINATION TO REALIZE ONE'S VISION THAT GROWS GENIUS - determination to communicate with quality, with multiple layers of meaning, and a degree of personal investment that makes these works autobiographical regardless of the subject matter.

Our greatest effectiveness as teachers is not in teaching skill acquisition and understanding how to see - but in inspiring our students with OUR love for art and with OTHER's love for art.

In that capacity we may help the few in our classes, whose calling is art, to find it there. Just like parents, we can attempt to influence young artists, but genius they bring TO class and is deeply rooted in their determination to be understood wholly and clearly. In the artist's studio "is it good enough?" is never asked and "whatever" is a swear, a pair of 4-letter words anathema to art.

Art is, afterall, fundamentally quality communication preceded by quality seeing and learning to love what you see. Receiving this aesthetic communication, viewers are forced to work to organize and understand their feelings and confirm what they too have now seen, wholly and clearly.

Degas says, "Art is not about what we see, but what we can get others to see." To see with their heads? No, to see with their hearts.

So both teachers and artists, we are all in the inspiration business.