

JOINING IN JOY

By

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In Deuteronomy 6, the commandment is to love the Lord with all one's heart, all one's soul and all one's strength. In Matthew, Jesus calls this the first and greatest commandment and reiterates this call to bring every human faculty into play in order to love one's God. At Manresa in the sixteenth century, Ignatius of Loyola experienced and codified an approach to God which enjoined the individual to apply all senses in a conscious effort to fully participate in meditating on aspects of God and the interplay between God and human history. This holistic approach became the basis of a system of decision-making as well as a goal for formal education. Even today, the goal of Jesuit higher education remains "the education of the whole person".

Thirty-five years ago Donald J. Monan, S.J., then academic dean of Le Moyne College in Syracuse, NY, offered me the opportunity to create a program in Fine Arts for Le Moyne. As a working artist and sculptor recently come to Syracuse from D.C. because of my husband's job, I had never entertained the idea of teaching. I am now somewhat embarrassed to report that my thoughts at that time were "those who can, do, and those who can't, teach". Prejudice is never a pretty thing, wherever it may be found.

But I had just been turned down for a show at the Whitney on the grounds that although I was a very fine artist, if I wanted to show at the Whitney, I would need a gimmick. At that time the art world was dominated by critics such as Clement Greenburg, who had been the great influence behind artists such as Pollack. So I was somewhat open to trying to develop other aspects of my profession. (And by the way, art is a profession. Only in this country do people who have taken a few art courses style themselves as artists. Medical or law students don't call themselves doctors or lawyers until they are out and practicing their profession. I wish the same would be true for art students. End of rant.)

Considering the needs of a small liberal arts college located just a few miles from the oldest degree-granting art school in the United States was the first task. There were neither personnel nor facilities to try to replicate in miniature what already existed. So I started to consider what were the methodologies of studio art and how could they contribute to the education of the whole person which was the goal of Jesuit education. I realized that our students were not art students with the goal of training for a career in the arts. Therefore primary focus had to be on the methodologies, and not the God-given talents and abilities which grace and drive budding artists.

Before work starts, before the clay is formed or the wood or stone is cut into, there needs to be a vision. Yes, I know all about performance art, and the art of the happening or accident, the throwing or dribbling of paint, as well as the art of monkeys and elephants or four year old children. But what I was concerned with was the work produced by human beings over the millenia which had a purpose other than the physical act involved in arranging a new form.

To arrive at that vision, an orderly series of steps or phases has to take place. When each phase appears completed, judgement must be exercised as to the readiness for procedure to the next step. So the ability to examine and critique one's own effort while still involved in the active process must be exercised. It is as if a part of oneself takes on the role of overseer while the rest of one's attention is working on particular aspects of the work. To help students better understand this procedure, I speak about the creation as described in the book of Genesis.

There are several aspects to the account which are pertinent to all creative efforts. The hierarchy of sizes comes into play...From chaos to order, the procedure starts with the largest areas such as light and dark, the earth from everything else, dry land and water. Note also that each phase or day ends with the phrase, "God looked at what He had done, and saw that it was good." For me this typifies the artist's assessment of his own efforts. The implication is that if all is not good or pleasing, it will be corrected before going on to the next step. Implicit also is a proper order for events to happen, ranging from the largest to the smallest details. This is essential for anything to work. Note that in English, when something mechanical is not working, such as an elevator, we say it is out of order.

Because we are attempting to identify parts of a whole, we cannot ignore the role of point of view or angle of vision. The same set of events or forms tells a different story depending upon whether we are viewing the selection from above, below, or laterally. This also applies to events, such as wars, or even civilizations. For example 1776 from the point of view of the colonists is one truth, from England another, and from France, yet another. In our times, think of the middle east, or Africa viewed from China. Fixated tunnel vision is a very real component of fanatic action.

One of the most fascinating set of instructions in the Spiritual Exercises really concerns itself with point of view. The individual is told to place himself at the foot of the cross, to stand at the edge of the cliff, to look out, to look up, to look down. Each change of angle provides an opportunity to view the universe and experience the different relationships which are thus revealed. The individual is also instructed to use all of the senses a human being possesses. Sight, sound, hearing, taste, and touch are evoked.

Finally, I have always thought that God created Adam in his own image as a creature capable of thought and communication, so that the final phase of any creative act could occur. Surely God's delight required an audience for his splendid universe. Let us move from the sublime to the mundane and the question of how to enable students to see, feel, and understand the joys of God's creation. The Dutch Catechism of the 1960's discusses various human professions and points out that the artist, like the priest, is interpreting God's handiwork to others; and this requires a similar honesty.

Traditionally the teaching studio has required that students have a thorough grounding in the physical realities before considering such grace notes as style or personal expression. Artists such as Mondrian or Picasso were thoroughly fluent in the skills needed to depict a realistic tree or human form. Gradually each abstracted, or took away, various forms from the actuality, seeking for what seemed most essential to express a personal vision. In other words, what is both necessary and sufficient. In my own drawing and sculpture classes, I note that students faced with a subject will seize on some surface aspect and attempt to draw or form a part. They then flit someplace else and deal with the next thing which catches their eye.

The result looks like the work of children aged five to about eight. Heads are big, legs are usually short, and great care will be lavished on details such as lettering or stitching. In other words, things are out of proportion, out of balance, out of perspective, out of order. The point of view is questionable and inconsistent, and the work presents a spotty or scattered message, incoherent because nothing seems to relate comfortably for the viewer.

These difficulties with holistic management of data appears to be a problem for today's students in virtually every discipline. In addition, possibly because of the growing use of smaller and smaller periods of uninterrupted content on commercial TV and the insertion of as many as 30 15 second ads into an attention flow, students have trouble concentrating and focusing with consistent acuity in many situations, including learning.

It is currently fashionable to speak of the need to see the "big picture". I presume this reflects a very deep human need for structure and order, a need to relate all components to the reality contained within the frame of a selected whole. However it seems to me that increasingly over the past twenty-five years students tend to habitually deal with data of any sort in a compartmentalized linear mode. Early exhortations to be neat, to do one thing at a time coupled with a fairly passive teaching mode in which chapters are studied and then tests are given, and grades assigned, does not aid the student in the formation of tools needed for active administration of effort. Rarely, even for the better students who might earn grades of 85 or 95, is the incorrect area dealt with and then corrected so that the ideal of 100 can be reached for all.

In the art studio we have an opportunity to enable the student to explore the methods by which one can analyze and administer unfamiliar data in order to “know” it. Starting with a vision of a selected whole, it is possible to guide the student into recognizing the three or four largest components of that whole and relating them one to the other using a consistent scale of measurement. This weighting also can occur in the metaphysical areas of problem solving, where the term “importance” is perhaps more useful. Externalizing this first phase of observation in the form of a sketch or a roughing out of the whole is essential for a structure which is sound.

Proceeding consistently through the various size forms from largest to smallest, while at all times considering the relationship of each to the whole, will result in a grasp of reality. The process also requires the “artist’s dance”, the frequent distancing from a work in progress so that the entire work can be viewed critically. In one semester, because all of our courses are electives, we have just one shot at introducing students to an enhanced understanding of our cohesively created universe. If I am forced to single out one truth, I expect it would be that nothing exists in a vacuum. All discovery, whether in the realm of the physical or the metaphysical, involves the realization of how something relates to something else in a larger scheme. Everything that is, already was.

If we think about the inventions or discoveries which have greatly affected the quality of our lives, we can discern that first something was noted and then that something was placed into contact with other somethings. For example, bread mold has been around for a very long time. But it wasn’t until the middle of last century

that the effect of mold on bacteria was systematically noted, codified, and replicated and we had access to the curative powers of penicillin.

Stars and planets, gravity and the horizon have been around since the beginning of time. But it took the human mind to consider systematically structuring intersections or coordinates using a consistent scale. Thus it became possible to map the earth and now move out into the infinite space surrounding the earth.

Individuals have different gifts or talents. But regardless of the particular delight, whether with words or objects, ideas or events, material or ephemeral, we can discern a plan and a cohesion. Causality permits invention or new combinations of existing reality in order to form not only new physical forms, but new ways for humans to organize societies and cultures. These don't always work. Then we do see civilizations pass or fall. But new ones do spring up as we have seen even in our own lifetimes.

You may have noticed that I have a fondness for the word "work". An artist judges a piece of art or an effort by saying "it works". The activities of the entrepreneur in the business world, the tactician in the military, and the diagnostician of medical or physical disorders all share a similar process of examining a selected whole and relating the parts to that whole using a consistent scale and a procedure which involves simultaneously supervising the whole and the parts in a descending scale of size or importance. This reality no doubt prompted the inclusion of the art of drawing in the original curriculum of the United States Academy at West Point. Although the specifics, the details, of each discipline vary, at the end the process is really the same. Large to small, gross to detail, the structure can be built.

I think that the job of the educator is to demonstrate and introduce students to the habitual joyous process of experiencing how it all fits together. As educators today we must explore ways to enable students to activate, enhance, and master the use of all their God-given faculties. In imitation of the steps of the creative process, we can guide others toward understanding the amazing wonder of the universe.