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The Artist and the Community



by **Stuart Scadron-Wattles**

My story begins, like every artist's, with a gift. Joseph received a many-colored coat. My father gave me the gift of being born Jewish.

When my very White Anglo-Saxon Protestant stepfather adopted me, I learned all about a new world of behavior and culture. Thereafter, I became

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more comfortable shuttling between two worlds. In Vienna, I was an American in Austrian culture. At prep school, a secret Jew amongst the Connecticut WASP's. At theatre school, a radical among the musical mavens. In the evangelical charismatic circles of church, a secret sacramentalist. In Canada, I am a U.S. citizen creating culture for Canadians. In the professional arts world, I am a professing Christian. In church, I am a professional artist. I've learned to be out of place.

This sense of displacement is part of the artist's vocation. One learns to cope with it. It's not anyone's fault. A colored coat tends to set one apart, and not always for praise or applause. It is this sense of displacement that gives the artist the ability to see her community as an outsider. From this perspective we can see to challenge assumptions, celebrate that which is taken for granted, and encourage the forgotten.

The artist must accept that sense of displacement as a gift which is as precious as that which occasions the distance between ourselves and community. We should not give in to the temptation to extend that sense of displacement to our relationship with God. On the contrary, we must use the opportunity to press into the very center of God's heart without relying on the cultural props of access.

The artist is further distanced from community by the vocational imperative of self centeredness. The artist is rewarded for being true to his deepest and most true convictions, for her sensitivity to the slightest nuances of appetite and sensuality. How much red is too much red? We are expected to know.

Here we must understand that this sensitivity and

self-centeredness are vocational tools. Like all tools, they can be misused and misapplied destructively. If we apply these tools to family or covenant relationships, we are likely to have poor results. Christians interested in discipleship mistrust these tools, the way fire marshals mistrust open-flamed appliances.

As a way of keeping these tools in their proper place vis-à-vis community, I propose the virtue of patience which Henri Nouwen has described as "the willingness to stay where we are and live the situation out to the fullest in the belief that something hidden there will manifest itself to us."

The artist is a prophet to her community in the most vulnerable way possible. It is often painful for a prophet to remain with a faithless community, the way Hosea remained married to a prostitute. It is painful for an artist to be repeatedly misunderstood, as was Joseph, whose dreams of salvation were interpreted as uppity dreams of power from the first son of the second wife. It is painful to have one's life work despised—burned paragraph by paragraph by a scornful monarch, as was Jeremiah's entire œuvre.

Patience implies trust in some value beyond the community itself, in God himself. The Messiah tells us prophetically in Isaiah 50:

The Sovereign Lord has given me an instructed tongue. . . . He wakens my ear to listen as one being taught. . . . I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard. . . . I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting. . . . Because the Sovereign Lord helps me, I will not be disgraced. . . . Therefore I have set my face like a flint and I know I will not be put to shame. It is the Sovereign Lord who helps me. (Isaiah 50:5-9, various)

The artist looks beyond community to the Lord himself. Opposition, humiliation, disgrace, contempt—all can be borne if there is trust in the presence of Father God and in His purposes.

Because, if we are truthful, we will admit that the very existence of the artist is a conundrum to his community. We tend to ask the artist the same question we ask of the historical Jesus: What do you do for a living, exactly?

The patient artist is exposed to the passion of her position. Often more acted upon than acting, prone to being thrown into the pit of despair by one's brothers who prize usefulness above the recounting of dreams. Sold to passing traders and passed off as a victim of one's own folly.

When Linda Bush, my wife and fellow artist for over twenty-five years, announced that she was leaving the theatre company she had helped me to found, many were perplexed. Her announcement came in the wake of our learning that we would have to run the season with 75% of our usual staff. Her departure would be a further reduction. Few in the company were able to support her move, which I knew to be passionately motivated but difficult for her. The grounds of our marriage and my willingness to support my wife at my own cost were tested. Yet the move was vital to her further discovery of herself as an artist. To her

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credit, she made the move and is still learning from the experience.

Despite all of these examples of the artist as displaced from community, there is a vital need for the believing artist to have an authentic church community. Artists, like all people, need a local expression of the Body of Christ, a place where we are known and where we know others. We need a place where we can be accountable for the growing nature of our relationship with the Triune God. We need to be able to worship with the family of God, to express our love corporately. This is especially important for those of us who gather the glory of God in the marketplace. We must have a place to bring that glory, to lay it at his feet in celebration.

At Theatre & Company, we ask that members of the company be in a local church and that they have spiritual direction, or its equivalent in their own Christian tradition. I myself have sought out a local expression where my vocational gifts are unlikely to be in demand.

Too often, the church community seeks to "bond" with the artist through the use of her gifts in church expression of some sort. While the church is a valid sphere of endeavor for some professional artists, and other professionals may sometimes enjoy serving the church with their craft, professional artists have other, more pressing needs for church community than confirmation of their gifts. Fellowship with non-artists, accountability for their spiritual lives,

and healthy worship are more appropriate places of involvement.

How should the artist relate to the larger community? The most important first step is to know what it is. To know the sphere of one's vocation is an essential part of understanding the nature of the vocation. It is good to understand that that sphere is likely to change over one's lifetime. We often imagine that the sphere enlarges until one has attained one's pinnacle of success, but this is the invention of a society which confuses enlargement with success.

I know the artistic director (AD) of a theatre company whose primary vocational gift was that of teaching. When the theatre's staff had matured and was ready to employ its gifts on its own, the AD frustrated the staff by refusing to fully delegate. At the same time, that director was doing a brilliantly satisfying job of leading the theatre's apprentice class. The AD could not see his way clear to changing the sphere of his activities for two reasons: because the AD could not envision a theatre which did not have his teaching gifts at the center of its need, and because the day-to-day running of the theater had more apparent prestige than the teaching of the apprenticeship class. Most of the staff finally quit, and the AD had to teach a new staff how to run the theatre. Vocational sphere can change for all sorts of excellent reasons.

The nature of the society in which we live is such that here is a literal famine for community. Predictably preceded by a thirst for family, this famine leads us to accept substitutes for the true nourishment of community. Community is not formed by a group of people with shared interests: around an appreciation for a particular television show, to name one instance. While shared interest can be a point of gathering, a point of gathering does not make for true community.

The workplace is often proffered as a locus of community, and it is a tempting offer, given the amount of time we spend here. The workplace combines perceived shared interest with frequency of contact. Contemporary television often posits this solution in its fictional worlds. (Does *Ally McBeal* have a friend who is not connected with or a client of the legal system? Do the staff of *ER* have friends who are not in some way connected to the medical care delivery system?)

Without exhaustively defining true community, allow me to posit one simple test: True community exists where there are people with a stake in one another's growth.

The artist who finds himself in community must use his gifts as Joseph did in prison, listening deeply to the dreams and nightmares of the community. Not long after we established Theatre & Company, we found out why we were the first resident professional company in a town that boasts a national-class symphony orchestra and a world-class concert hall.

The town in which we are located was founded by its German immigrant inhabitants as Berlin. During the First World War, however, English Ontario began to wonder why that town was not generating its share of draftees. Pressure was applied. German events were prohibited or discouraged. It became unlawful to worship in German. As one local historian put it, "A people who cannot worship God in their own language loses all sense of self." Finally, the name of Berlin was changed—to Kitchener, and Kitchener became a town that had lost its self-expressive voice.

To remedy that wrong, Theatre & Company had to coax that voice back into existence. One way of doing that is to listen to the dreams and nightmares that are the genesis of a people's voice and cry. To listen in that way is to listen very deeply, to hear beyond the words, to create a space where the inchoate is a welcome guest.

The artist will often seek out the disenfranchised. Joseph had little choice of companions in prison—all of them were disenfranchised, after all. But the artist understands and is attracted to the marginal in society. The privileged, the advantaged, and the powerful are poor companions to the artist—they do not have the necessary perspective. And everyone can hear them talk. One of the gifts of the artist is to give voice to those who are not heard, to enrich society with the memory and understanding of its forgotten ones.

What does the community have to give to the artist? First, its participation in the art process. Art is not consumed, it is experienced. (At Theatre & Company, we tell our patrons that they aren't purchasing a ticket, they are renting a space/time experience.) And community should expect to pay for art. I am amazed at the difference between the pay-what-you-can performance of the professional

community and the freewill offering of the church community. Both allow the participant to determine how much they will give for the experience. In the professional world, however, the cost is paid in advance. In the church world, we pay after the experience. The relative placement of valuation speaks volumes about the place of the artist in both cultures.

The community should offer dialogue to its artists, through patrons and critics. It should encourage as well as criticize. It should seek qualified critics who can mediate and provide context, so that the artist does not have to do all of the educating herself. The cultural stakeholders in any community are those who participate in the cultural life of the community. Despite my respect for Christian leadership, I will prefer the counsel of one person who subscribes to Theatre & Company's season, to that of a group of pastors whose experience of our work is limited to rumor, conjecture, and hearsay.

In the theatre arts, we have the privilege of working in creative community. In the early days of our existence, I asked our staff to dedicate a retreat to the question: "What is a theatre ensemble, and how can we best become one?" At the end of the retreat, we had the answer: If we will do our work as the Body of Christ, we will be an ensemble. The hand has a stake in the health of the eye. After years of work, we still sacrifice for one another. Our guest artists see the behavior and emulate it, even though they reap only temporary benefits from such behavior. When we audition for guest actors, we are looking for talented people who understand that dynamic. Our compensation structure reflects a common desire to see everyone rewarded for success.

We also consciously form community with our audience. At its most basic level, theatre forms temporary community, if only through shared metaphor. Reflecting further on how that community is formed and maintained over two-odd hours will lead you to conclude that insofar as everyone's history informs and shapes the performance experience, the community can be very deep, albeit temporary.

We are committed to our audience's growth, and we consciously reward an audience which is committed to our growth. We tend to treat subscribers better than single-ticket buyers in our theatre, because they have given us more of their time and

have supported productions before knowing the outcome. And everyone is given an opportunity to understand. One of the most valuable pieces of advice I received when I was still in theatre school was, "Always explain." The artist who wishes his audience to grow must give them reasons for doing so.

What I am describing is simply a relationship of trust. There are many reasons for mistrust to develop. There are many ways by which the relationship can become dysfunctional. These can be overcome, but the solutions require time, patience, and a willingness to persevere.

True community exists where there are people with a stake in one another's growth.

Above all, they can be overcome if the community recognizes its need for the artist and vice-versa. The artist is indeed set apart from community by her gift. But each needs the other. Art is the sign of a healthy community.

All that I have described here is the potential of the relationship, and I have posited a few examples of how artists can be healthily set in community.

Against those examples, however, stand two great trends in our society which are anti-community and anti-art. They reduce all of life to the paradigm of an economic transaction and the reduction of all of art to the paradigm of communication. These reductions, encouraged by our consumer democracy, are destroying the very possibility of artist in community. It is no accident that there are no viable resident biblical worldview theatres in New York and Los Angeles, the largest cities of the United States which contribute most to that country's culture. It is virtually impossible to form community in those cities.

Under those two reductions, artists become employees, hired to create entertainment conceived of by marketers whose focus is the cupidity of the audience. We become Pharaoh's slaves, creating artifacts in someone else's image. A departure for the desert may become the only hope for new community.