

'Might be the most inspiring book you'll read all year'

DANIEL PINK, author of *WHEN* and *DRIVE*

KENT NERBURN

DANCING

WITH

THE

GODS

REFLECTIONS ON
LIFE AND ART

1

Courting the Muse

Finding the place where time stands still

*'To this day I do not know whether the power
which has inspired my works is something related
to religion, or is indeed religion itself'*

Kathe Kollwitz

*' . . . when I am alone with my notes, my heart
pounds and the tears stream from my eyes, and my
emotion and my joys are too much to bear.'*

Giuseppe Verdi



I REMEMBER THE moment. It was ten o'clock on a warm August night in a small German town. I was alone in the workshop of an antique restorer who had generously allowed me to help in his shop so I could learn German for my American graduate school. Everyone else had gone home for the evening.

I was standing before an old, battered workbench. A string of electric lights flickered on a single cord above my head. With the streets outside dark and quiet, I was as alone as a man in a foreign country, with no friends or family or familiar language, can be.

On the bench in front of me lay a piece of maple – a slab about three feet long, two feet wide, and maybe six inches thick. It had been given to me by

the workshop owner when I had asked, tentatively, if I could perhaps use some of his chisels to try my hand at woodcarving.

I had taken to visiting the local churches and folk museums and had found myself transfixed by the old crucifixes carved by devout peasants and farmers, probably to while away the dark German nights of the Late Middle Ages. The carvings had been so filled with heart, so honest in their spiritual yearning. I, who was in graduate school for the study of religion, and deeply unfilled by the academic dissection of human faith, had found in them a spiritual presence that I experienced nowhere else. Nothing in my experience had prepared me for the effect these works had on my heart and imagination.

I did not know how to carve. I did not even know how to hold the chisels. But somewhere inside of me I had a vision born of those many visits to the museums and churches, and of the deep spiritual hunger and loneliness that was surrounding my life so far from home.

With a first stroke, I cut into the piece of maple.

The mallet in my hand made a hollow sound as it hit the butt of the chisel. The wood moved and a shaving curled up. I hit the chisel again, moving yet another chip of wood. Then another. I dug into that wood with no understanding of what I was doing. I only knew that something was alive and waiting to be released from inside the block of wood on the bench before me.

I hit the mallet again and again, seeking something I could apprehend but could not see. The wood moved, the block changed; inchoate forms took shape in my mind's eye.

When at last I was too tired to continue, I looked up. The clock on the wall said 5 a.m. I had been standing over that bench for seven hours and I had experienced no passage of time.

At that moment I understood, for the first time in my life, something about the magic of art. Each hour spent in my books in graduate school was difficult. Some were fascinating, filling me with new thoughts and ideas. But none had ever annihilated my sense of time.

This experience bordered on the mystical. I did not want to stop; I did not want to sleep. Only my weariness caused me to put down the chisels and make my way back to my garret room. I could hardly wait to return and begin again.

Since that time, as both a sculptor and a writer, this ecstatic annihilation has called to me, beckoning me with the promise of being taken out of myself and transported to a place where I am nothing more than a vehicle for a vision.

All artists know this experience. This, more than almost anything else, is why we do what we do. It is an occasion of grace, and, once experienced, it holds with a power that will not let go.

This is also the reason why artists often speak of their work in religious terms. To be lifted out of yourself – to be taken up and used for what feels like a higher purpose – is to feel, if only for a moment, that you are participating in the creative power of the universe. You are held in the hand of something greater than yourself.

All of us want this experience. It is what lifts our

work from craft to art, moves it into the realm of the spiritual and silences the critic who whispers constantly from our shoulder. It is the embrace of the incandescent present.

Artists have many ways of courting this embrace. Some have a ritual of preparation – from the simple way they lay out the work before them to a period of deep prayer or meditation. Some have physical spaces they have set aside where only their creative work can take place. Some work in silence; some surround themselves with music.

Japanese sword makers, seeking not ecstasy but clarity in their tradition of spiritual discernment, have a time-honoured and elaborate ritual of preparation and entry that becomes a portal to creative forces beyond themselves.

All of these have the same purpose: to put you inside the act of creation, so you are not making art, but art is being revealed through you.

If you would make a life in the arts, you must find a way to enter into this state. Chances are you have already experienced it, ever so slightly, while immersed

in the practice of your art. Very likely it is what has driven you to dream of the artistic life.

But understand – just as there are days when you live in the presence of the creative spirit, there will be days when all your efforts turn to dust. Your work will seem false, your inspiration clouded. Instead of walking into a garden of imaginative possibilities, you will find yourself plodding through dry places where nothing seems able to grow.

Do not let the dry stretches and arid days deter you. They will come and go at their whim, and there is little you can do to change their course except to push with discipline during those times when you cannot proceed with grace, and to prepare, through ritual and spiritual focus, for the moment when once again you can be taken up into the joyful immediacy of creation.

What you cannot do is let yourself fall under the sway of the romantic notion that you should work only when filled with inspiration. Inspiration is a cruel mistress and a wily deceiver, and waiting for it will turn you into a lazy artist. Sometimes you

must rely only on your own will to drive you forward.

Whether those times of working from sheer force of will produce good art or only prepare the ground for more inspired creation in the future is not for you to say. Yours is only to work, by such lights as you have, seeking the moment when once again you are not making art but art is speaking through you.

Remember this: if, in the act of creation, you find yourself, just for a moment, losing all sense of time and being lifted up into a great, all-embracing ‘Yes!’ where there is neither past nor future but only the magical and incandescent present, you have found the place where creation takes wing.

Honour this, seek this, court this. Do whatever you need to do to find that place where you inhabit your art and your art inhabits you. Then claim it and name it and find a way to call it forth – whether by establishing a space dedicated only to your work, or establishing a ritual of preparation and entry, or any other act that takes you away from the concerns of

daily life and opens the door to the place where the muse sits on your shoulder.

When you find it, cherish it. In its own distant fashion, it is perhaps the closest we can come to a touch with the divine.

2

Finding a Vision, Finding a Voice

The search for authentic
personal expression

*'There is a vitality, a life force, an energy,
a quickening that is translated through you
into action, and because there is only one of
you in all time, this expression is unique.
And if you block it, it will never exist through
any other medium and will be lost'*

Martha Graham



I ONCE HAD a dear friend, a painter, who had magic in his hands. I looked with envy upon the ease and grace with which he could craft an image on canvas. I dreamed of someday having the same ease and grace in my own work.

One night, after a long bout of drinking, he broke down and began to unburden himself to me. Painting, he said, came easily to him. His capacity to shape human forms was like a God-given gift. Seemingly without effort he produced images that could have stood next to the works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the pre-Raphaelites. But he was miserably unhappy.

‘How can you be unhappy?’ I asked. ‘You have such a talent.’

‘Oh, Kent,’ he said. ‘You don’t understand. If only I had something to say, I could say it so well.’

Those words have haunted me ever since.

It was as if he had some artistic mark of Cain upon his forehead, some perverse curse dreamed up by a vengeful god. He dreamed of being a great painter, but he felt he was nothing more than a masterful technician, and for him that was not enough.

Most of us don’t carry the burden of having too much talent for our artistic dreams. Usually we are driven to create by some great inner urge, hungry for external expression. Our struggle is not finding something to say, but finding the skill with which to say it.

For years, I felt sadness for my friend’s apparent lack of an artistic inner life. But as I’ve got older, I’ve come to realise that he did not lack an inner life, he merely had become tyrannised by what he thought his art ought to be. He did not see the genius in his hands as art enough and did not accept his artistic creations as reflective of a worthy artistic vision.

This happens to many of us. We study the work of those who have inspired us and try to imitate it.

We project a fantasy of what great art is, or how an artist should act, and try to replicate it. In the end, we become copyists, no matter how skilled, because our work does not have an authentic heart; it references the artistry of others. No matter how much those works we reference speak to our own creative vision, we do not own them. They did not come forth from our own creative experience. We have become creative plagiarists.

There is no shame in drawing on the works of others as we develop our own voice and vision. It is, in fact, a great compliment to those who have inspired us. The danger we face is that those works touched us in a fundamental way, but we do not have either the aesthetic range or depth of human understanding to transcend them, or that they are simply an ill-fitting suit of artistic clothes for the artistic talent or temperament that we possess. We do not become the students who surpass the master, just the students who imitate the master. At some point, we need to step forth from their shadow and find our own voice.

I have another friend, also a visual artist, who creates

beautiful pencil drawings that evoke images of cities and landscapes as seen from far above the earth. They are both lyrical and meditative, at once abstract and realistic. They engage the mind and enchant the eye.

One day I asked him how he had developed such an amazing artistic vision.

‘I don’t really have any artistic vision,’ he said. ‘I just draw the reflections I see in the subway windows when I’m riding.’

I appreciated his humility but could not believe there was not more to his work than that. I told him how his drawings awakened images in me of a landscape seen from high above the earth.

‘Maybe,’ he shrugged, ‘but that’s not what I make. I just draw the reflections I see in the subway windows.’

For him, grand meaning or significant metaphor was not a necessary purpose of his art. His was the art of close inspection, the art of simple observation. It was not the art of great ideas. He was a translator. He took the world as he saw it and gave it back to us. And that, for him, was enough.

How I wish my first friend had been so at peace

with his creative talents. But he was not at peace with his art because he was not at peace with himself as an artist. Beneath that magical talent was a man in search of his place in the world.

There is no law that says art must express grand human themes or point beyond itself to larger meanings. For many artists the simple gestures of life, closely observed, are sufficient. I have heard it said that there are actors whose entire method of character development is to figure out how their character talks and moves, and then try to inhabit those mannerisms. When they get them right, they are done. They just walk the walk, talk the talk, say the lines. They have no feeling for the inner life of their characters and no wish to have any. The objective reality, and what it expresses, is enough.

For others, it is only by entering into the mind and soul of the character and having that knowledge illuminate each gesture and action that they can create authentic expression.

I am sure the same is true also for dancers. I know it is true for singers.

It is important to remind ourselves that what is central in any art form is not the scale or intent of our vision but the authenticity of that vision.

I remember a time twenty years ago when I was teaching a class on creativity in the arts and I asked a young woman to find an experience of grief or love in her life, then to find a painting or piece of music that gave voice to that emotion.

She was a weaver and I wanted her to experience an expressive kinship with the work of other artists in other fields. But she was having none of it.

‘I don’t care about that,’ she said. ‘My art isn’t about deep feelings, it’s about making things people like.’

For her, creating beauty through sensitive use of colour and texture and form and line was sufficient. She had no need – indeed, no desire – to place deep meaning in her work. Deep meaning, if there was to be any, was to be found in the way her work enhanced the lives of others by making them happy and enriching their visual environment. Her work had no more inherent significance than an inviting hearth fire, and she was proud to claim that humble simplicity.

It took me a long time to understand that gentle, almost domestic approach to the arts. As a creator myself, I, like so many, laboured under the belief that my art should have profound significance. It was not enough to be good; I had to be great. But through people like my student I eventually came to realise that though greatness may be a worthy dream, it is not a valid measure. Greatness is an idea, a status conferred by others. It is not something you can seek. If you fit inside the shape of your art and work with a committed heart, that is enough.

I wish my friend with the magic in his hands had known this. But he was still in thrall to the vision of others. He had not taken his magnificent talent and fit it into an aesthetic vessel that he could claim as his own.

Not all art has to address eternal questions. Art, any art, can live by touching some common human sentiment in us as surely as it can live by touching some deep emotional taproot. To inspire, to console, to reveal, to calm, or simply to entertain – these, and so many others, are worthy artistic purposes. The

genius of art is that it can meet us where we live, and the joy of creation is that we can choose the place where we want our art to touch those who experience it.

My friend was a gentle soul with a gentle outlook on life. He should have been satisfied to express that gentleness through his amazing talent. It was not that he had nothing to say, he just hadn't realised that what he had to say was enough.

What he had not grasped is that art is ultimately about giving authentic expression to what lives in your heart. People sense authenticity, even if they can't quantify it or articulate how they recognise its presence. But they know it, and they relate to it, because authenticity has a spiritual resonance that we all understand.

If you can find what it is that you can say through your art that no one else can say in quite the same way, you are getting close to finding your authentic artistic voice.

Perhaps you feel the need to address the whole of the human condition. Perhaps you only want to

decorate space or add warmth to the life of a family or put a smile on people's faces. Perhaps you wish to do nothing more than transcribe what you see in a subway window. What matters is the quality of heart in your work, and the authenticity of the voice in which you speak.

If you are able to find that authentic voice and you have the courage to believe in it, you will never have to lament that you have nothing to say. Even if your voice is small and your intentions humble, what you say will be heard.

Too many artists, in trying to mimic another's voice, find in the end that they have merely rendered themselves mute.