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OPENING DOORS AND WINDOWS

By JAMES ROOSE-EVANS

Asking questions does not always produce answers, but questions can clear a path through the brambles, so that we can then see the way forward or, sometimes, the way back. And so I want to begin with a question.

What is art? There was a time when it was created not just by gifted individuals but by whole communities: what is sometimes referred to as folk, or primitive art. Today, however, we tend to think of art as something belonging solely to the world of the professional, the more so when art is viewed primarily as product, as it is now, something to be sold for the highest sum, to catch the headlines, and turn the artist into a celebrity. Indeed, today we live increasingly in the age of the celebrity artefact in which some people are prepared to pay exorbitant sums for a work that often has not been made by the artist, but simply because it bears the artist's name, in the same way that people will pay inflated prices for garments with a brand name attached to them. Today, even, for four thousand dollars, or £1,972 you can buy a pair of Damien-Hirst-designed Levis!

Collecting has become all about money which turns collecting into an investment and art into merchandise. But all true art has a different value system. All true art is a gift, the artist does not own it. Gary Snyder, the American poet, has written: *You get a good poem and you don't know where it came from. 'Did I say that?' And so all you feel is humility and gratitude. And you'd feel a little uncomfortable, I think, if you capitalise too much on that without admitting at some point that you got it from the Muse, or whoever. Every poem I've written has been like a surprise.*

I recall sitting one summer afternoon with Robert Frost in his log cabin at Bread Loaf in Vermont when he told me how he came to write what is perhaps his most celebrated lyric: *Stopping By Woods On A Snowy Evening*. He had been up all night labouring over a long piece of blank verse that wasn't going anywhere. Then, as dawn broke, he put down his pen and stood at the window to watch the sun come up. And at that moment, entirely unlooked for, there came into his head this entire poem and all he had to do was write it down. *That*, he said, *is what I call the luck of the work. And perhaps, if I had not been labouring over that other poem, this might never have happened!*

Of course all artists work to acquire and perfect the tools of their craft. I recall the painter Keith Vaughan remarking how he had to be in his studio every morning at the same hour, whether he felt like it or not. And that when he had been away on holiday it always took him two or three

days to get back into the muscular handling of the brushes. But this mastery of craft is a secondary task to being open to the inspiration of the muse. A craftsman is not the same as an artist. A good craftsman can reproduce furniture in the style of Chippendale yet produce nothing original himself. Without the insight that an artist receives his work remains that of craft. One can be a craftsman without being an artist, but one cannot be an artist without being also a craftsman.

Art is a way of relating to the world. Each time an artist has a new and unique image of the world, the invisible is made visible, and that which is wordless is given expression. From the 1890s onwards, psychologists, painters, sculptors, writers, poets, dancers, were concerned to build a bridge between the known and the unknown, between the conscious world of the ego and the unconscious world that lies within. In her novel *The Voyage Out*, Virginia Woolf has a character ask a young writer what kind of books he wants to write, and he replies, *Books about silence, about the things people do not say.* And so it is, even if the poet is saying that sometimes human experience is beyond words, as when Shakespeare writes: *I were little happy if I could say how much. Silence is the perfect'st herald of joy.*

Although, our knowledge of the psyche is still extremely limited, our own experience, at least, should convince us all too easily how little we know ourselves; how we are possessed by moods, are troubled by strange dreams and nightmares; how we often become unreasonable and unpredictable in our behaviour. We have the impression, if we are honest, that at bottom we know ourselves scarcely at all. Increasingly we are aware of other selves behind our everyday self. As Emily Dickinson expressed it:

One need not be a chamber to be haunted.
One need not be a house;
The brain has corridors surpassing
Material place…..
Ourself, behind ourself concealed,
Should startle most.

But how to express this inner reality? How to express the seemingly inexpressible? How, for example, to express the reality of a dream? Julien Green, in his journals, remarks of one dream how it *was intensely real, far more so than everyday life. Words cannot express the length of time passed in a vision that lasts seconds.'* And of one recurring dream he says that it brought *a feeling of happiness such that human speech cannot give the faintest idea of.* Sometimes we awake from a dream of such intensity, as Julien Green describes, which seems more real than real, so that we long to go back into it.

Throughout the first half of the 20th century painters, in particular, understood this need to create a language that would, in the words of Franz Marc, *break the mirror of life so that we may look being in the face*. Marc, like Chagall, Kandinsky, and Klee, sought to give expression to the mystical content of art. *Therefore,* wrote Kandinsky, *the artist's eye should always be alert*

for the voice of inward necessity. In this way, and in this way alone, as Paul Klee observed, could *the secretly perceived be made visible.*

In the 1930s, in France, Antonin Artaud declared that *the theatre will never find itself again except by furnishing the spectator with the truthful precipitates of dreams. I say that there is a poetry of the senses as there is a poetry of language, and that this concrete physical language is truly theatrical only to the degree that the thoughts it expresses are beyond the reach of the spoken language.*

Artaud's concept of a non-verbal theatre was to be developed by such pioneers of the modern dance as Martha Graham who, single-handedly, created a whole new form of theatre. She, in turn, was followed by others such as *The Living Theatre*, *The Bread and Puppet Theatre*, *The Polish Laboratory Theatre,* Peter Brook, the *Theatre Complicite*, and many more, including that master of silence who has just died, the great mime, Marcel Marceau.

At the climax of Virginia Woolf's novel, *Between the Acts*, the actors in a village pageant who have been enacting the history of England, appear with bits of mirror in order to portray the 20th century, *and the audience saw themselves. The hands of the clock had stopped at the present moment. It was now. Ourselves.* For far too long in art the mirror had been held up to nature, but now the mirror was seeking to reflect something else. As the manager of *The Magic Theatre* in Herman Hesse's novel, *Steppenwolf*, says to the hero: *It is the world of your own soul that you seek. Only within yourself exists that other reality for which you long. I can give you nothing that has not already its being within yourself. I can throw open to you no picture gallery but your own soul. All I can give you is the opportunity, the impulse, the key. I help you to make your own world visible. That is all.*

But somewhere along the way, in the past century, art took a wrong turning, as that great and visionary Russian film maker, Tarkovsky, observed: *What purports to be art*, he went on to say, *begins to look like an eccentric occupation for those who maintain that any personalised action is of intrinsic value simply as a display of self-will. But in true artistic creation* – this is still Tarkovsky speaking, *the personality does not assert itself but serves another higher and communal idea. The artist is always a servant.* For Tarkovsky, art in the 20th century, and especially visual art, began to lose its way when it lost touch with the spiritual. Of course it can be argued that much modern art simply reflects the de-spiritualised and fragmented state of the world in which we live. To this extent, therefore, we can see how Tracy Emin's unmade bed can be seen as a metaphor for so many unmade lives today. But I would argue, as does Tardovsky, that all true art should nourish the soul, the inner being of each of us. Art should not merely observe, but also transcend, for it is part of the function of all true art to bring a spiritual vision to bear on reality. This is what Wordsworth does, for example, in these words:

Hence in a season of calm weather,
Though inland far we be,
Our souls have sight
Of that immortal sea which brought us hither-

Can in a moment travel thither
And see the children sport upon the shore
And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore.

Robert Frost once said: *Every poem that I write is one more stay against confusion.* It is the function of the artist to bring order out of chaos. The poet, the writer, in finding the exact words can help to make sense of what we find merely an emotional muddle. Let me give you a very simple example. We all know what it is at certain times in our lives when we are over-burdened with cares, worries, anxieties, fears, and feel that we are about to fall apart. It is at such times as Robert Frost remarked elsewhere that he learned the importance of taking what he called: *timeout for re-assembly*. Here, in his short poem, *The Armful,* he describes such a moment with his quiet New England humour.

For every parcel I stoop down to seize,
I lose some other off my arms and knees,
And the whole pile is slipping, bottles, buns,
Extremes too hard to comprehend at once,
Yet nothing I should care to leave behind.
With all I have to hold with, hand and mind
And heart, if need be, I will do my best
To keep their building balanced at my breast.
I crouch down to prevent them as they fall;
Then sit down in the middle of them all.
I had to drop the armful in the road
And try to stack them in a better load.

Again, to quote Frost, *if what I write about a heart-ache or a heart-break can help the reader to say, 'That is exactly what I feel, but I couldn't put it into those words' then the writer has truly touched the reader.* The greatest art does exactly this: it lights up the surrounding darkness. This is why certain works of art can extend one's boundaries. For myself there have been certain experiences of art that have been formative experiences in my life: from hearing Rosalyn Tureck play Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, to Robert Frost speaking his own poems, or watching *The Dance Company of Martha Graham* night after night, seeing each work several times, during the company's first visit to London. Or standing in front of the paintings of Paul Klee at the first major exhibition of this work in London, or seeing classical Indian dance performed by such exponents as Shanta Rao and Ram Gopal.

As Michael Mayne, the late Dean of Westminster Abbey, wrote in his last book, *An Enduring Melody*: *I have learned much more about human nature and, I believe, the transcendent, about good and evil, sin and grace, from the novelist and the poet than from the theologian where only rare writers combine the insights , the humanity, and sheer readability, that draws you back to them.*

All true art reflects a movement of the heart. Beethoven wrote at the head of his score for the *String Quartet No 16 in F Major*: *From the heart it must go to the heart.*

During the Second World War, thousands of people, including service men in their uniforms, would pack into the lunchtime concerts in the National Gallery in London to hear artists such as Dame Myra Hess. Sir Kenneth Clark, the creator of the famous TV series, *Civilisation*, describing listening to Myra Hess play Bach's *Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring*, wrote: *It was an assurance that all our sufferings were not in vain. I think the whole audience felt this for I have never known people listen so earnestly nor applaud with such pent-up emotion and gratitude.*

The performer, Joyce Grenfell, who used to help out in the canteen at these concerts, also wrote, *The more I hear music the more I know it is nearest to Spirit, to the essence of all things, of all the arts, the evidence of things not seen or heard, of that unchanging limitless life of spiritual being that no war or misery or uncertainty or fear can ever touch.*

Daniel Barenboim, in his Reith Lectures, corroborates this: *Music, of all the arts,* he says, *has a direct line to our emotions. Music is the most powerful of all the arts because it speaks to all parts of a human being: the animal, the emotional, the intellectual, and the spiritual.* As the contemporary composer John Rutter also says, *Music heals and brings people together. Music is not therapy or religion per se, but it has qualities which allow it to heal and contribute to our spiritual life.* And this is true of all the arts.

But I want now to pause and ask another question. How does our love of art, yours and mine, affect our attitude to other human beings? I have been reading Frederic Spotts' book, *Hitler and the Power of Aesthetics*, about Hitler's dream to create a German culture state where the arts would be supreme and where he could construct his buildings, hold art exhibitions, stage operas, encourage artists and promote the music, painting and sculpture that he loved. He saw culture as the supreme value in itself. Yet, as George Steiner has observed, we know of those in the bureaucracy of the torturers and of the ovens who cultivated a knowledge of Goethe, and a love of Rilke. Why, asks Steiner, should one labour to transmit culture if it did so little to stem the inhuman? After the Holocaust we can no longer take it for granted that the humanities humanise!

Listening to music, going to the theatre, looking at paintings and sculpture, reading poetry and novels, are meaningful activities only if – as Daniel Barenboim observed – they really penetrate one's innermost being, and <u>not</u> when art is simply something to hear or look at, without its having any effect on one as a human being. *If*, says Barenboim, *you only listen to music mechanically, or with the intellect, and don't let it touch you – then I have a problem with you.*

At its best therefore art, no less than religion, is about the need to search for the reality behind everyday life when *our souls have sight of that immortal sea which brought us hither*. In art, as in life, we have to learn how to look and look again, to look long and deep. We have to learn how to listen with the intensity of a thrush, its head cocked to the ground, listening.
When Ruskin set up his Working Men's College in London, he urged his students to learn how

to draw so that they might come to see each thing in its *is-ness*, to perceive the very essence of things. How rarely do we pause to gaze at Nature's own art, at a flower, a tree, an animal, even a blade of grass. As Eckhart Tolle writes, *The plant that you have in your home- have you ever truly looked at it? Have you allowed that familiar yet mysterious being called plant to teach you its secrets? Have you noticed that it is surrounded by a field of stillness? The moment you become aware of a plant's emanation of stillness and peace that plant becomes your teacher. See how it rests in Being. It is itself.*

Ultimately art is something over and above academism. The mind alone cannot comprehend art. You cannot lecture anyone into an appreciation of art any more than you can talk anyone into being in love. You can talk them into the ground, and many students are flattened in the process. All you can say is, *This is what Bach does for me. Try it for yourself.* It is the way someone lights up when they speak of the music of Mozart, the paintings of Paul Klee or Margaret Neve, the poetry of Mary Oliver or Emily Dickinson, that you sense something of what it has meant for them. In the end it is a matter of sharing one's life experiences and, in the process, something may be sparked off in the process, and they make their own discoveries. As Herman Hesse wrote, *Only the ideas that we actually live are of any value.*

Of course we cannot comprehend all the works of art in the world, all the books, all the paintings, all the music. We can only respond to those that speak directly to us. And in the same way that we have to work at our human relationships so, too, we have to work at our relationship with a work of art. In wandering around an art gallery, for example, we have mainly to be guided by instinct. That instinct may cause us to stand before a painting by Paul Klee. Has the painting chosen us or we it? We gaze at it. What was Klee trying to express? After looking at the painting for a while we may still get nothing from it and we may give up, or we may come back another day and try again. If we do it is because we begin to sense there is something there. We may read about Paul Klee in an attempt to understand what he was trying to do. In a sense we are already hooked. We learn that Paul Klee was convinced true painting could only be a presentation of feelings. *The true artists,* he wrote, *those with a vocation, are the ones who strive to approach the secret depths.* Intellectually we begin to understand what he was about. We continue to stand silently before the enigma of one of those richly coloured sheets of paper with their fine calligraphy. And then one day something happens! A door opens and we step into another world. It is a door into our own world, into the space within each one of us. At that moment the vision and the experience of Paul Klee become our vision and our experience.

Experience must always precede understanding. I recall sitting with Barbara Hepworth on a winter's afternoon in St.Ives, and listening to her describing how she always knew whether or not visitors had experienced her work, as they went round the garden, by the way they would touch or caress her carvings, or the way they would look shyly at her. *They might not be able to go home and write an intellectual analysis for The Times,* she said, *but you know that the works have touched them in a very deep part of themselves.*

Robert Frost, who was also one of the most inspirational teachers of literature at Amherst College, used to say that all he might have to go on to assess a boy's awareness and understanding of poetry would be perhaps one remark thrown out during the course of the year, to tell him how close that boy had come to understanding. Like the boy I once met with a group of youngsters in a village in Dorset. I had been giving a recital of poetry but they had all been too shy to come, but had arranged to meet with me afterwards in the village pub. This boy picked up a slim volume of poetry from the pile I was carrying, turned the pages, alighted on one poem, read it silently and then, looking up, quietly remarked, *That's good!* It is called *Evans* and is by R.S.Thomas.

In trying to understand the purpose and the function of art, I find myself asking another question: How does art affect the majority of people? Is it anything more than a luxury for a privileged few? Many people are put off by the very word *art.* For many it suggests the highbrow, something for those who have had a specialist education. There are many who will never enter a concert hall, a theatre, or art gallery, because they feel threatened. Rather than the word *art*, therefore, I would prefer to focus on the word *creativity* for that is something that is innate in each one of us. And what is urgently needed today is to restore to people an awareness of their own creativity. Today people need to learn how to give form to their most urgent feelings that they may the better understand themselves and others. It is by the exercise of our imaginations that we are able to put ourselves in other people's shoes, to empathise with them. As the novelist Ian McEwan, recently observed, *Imagining what it is like to be someone else is at the core of our humanity. It is the essence of humanity and the beginning of morality.*

Our task must be to enable people to enable people to exercise their own creativity, through gesture, through movement, through colour, rhythm, sound, words and music; in their living, in their loving, in the creation of a home, a garden, or a relationship; for we are all capable in some measure of being artists. We are all capable of love. In art, as in love, we give of ourselves. There are some homes, some relationships, you walk into them, and you are conscious at once of something created with the discipline of love.

In her novel, *The Rector's Wife*, Joanna Trollope observes how *so many people lack the capacity to live life richly at any level.* Similarly Emily Dickinson in a letter to a friend, writing of what she calls *the quiet desperation of ordinary lives*, comments, *So few that live have life. How do most people live without thoughts.*' What we need to realise is that the vast majority of people die without realising a fraction of their powers. Born millionaires, they die in poverty.

Up in the Barn Centre at Bleddfa, in the reception area, are some words by the Spanish poet, Federico Garcia Lorca, painted on wood by the calligrapher, John Hencher. These are the words:

The poem, the song, the picture,
Is only water
Drawn from the well of the people
And it should be given back to them in a cup of beauty

So that they may drink
And in drinking
Understand themselves.

Those words sum up what for me the *Bleddfa Centre for the Creative Spirit* represents. True creativity is closely linked with the inner, spiritual life of each one of us. It is, as our patron, Rowan Williams has observed, *by encouraging creative expression in everyone, we help them to become fully human.* To become fully human. It is when we encourage people to use their own creativity that we often get the greatest surprises. I think often of some words written by one of my American students when I was teaching in Colorado. Each had been invited to write a prayer to a known or unknown god. This is what Dickson Musslewhite wrote. He was not an artist or a poet but in these words he gave form to his deepest aspirations:

With the unsecuring sea stretching
Before me
To mystery
I make my pledge:
To search,
To swim,
To dive as deep as I can.

With the unsecuring sea stretching
Before me
To mystery
I give my thanks.
For you I am thankful
With you I am
Without you I am not.

For those who, like Dickson, have the courage to make a commitment to the mystery of life and death, who are prepared to search, to dive as deep as they can, they are the ones who will always find the sunken treasure deep within themselves. Like Walt Whitman, they will be able to say, *Now in a moment I know what I am for, and a thousand songs spring to life within my breast.*

Anna Halprin in America, has devoted most of her life to helping communities and individuals develop their own rituals for various life situations. When I last saw her, she said to me, *Art is an enduring process for it touches on the spiritual dimension in a way that no other human activity does. In art you are able to give expression to it; you receive back a vision which is a map by which you can set other goals.*

The purpose and the function of art, at its deepest level, is, I would suggest, to enable us to cross our own frontiers, exceed our own limitations, fill our own emptiness and, above all, fulfil ourselves as human beings.

And so we return to the origins of art, when they belonged to people, to communities, and not just to the professional.

Sir Maurice Bowra, writing about the origins of primitive art, says this: *Such arts are indispensable to those who practise them. Because they give order and harmony to their sudden, over-mastering emotions and their tumbling, jostling thoughts, because they are so inextricably a part of their lives, it gives them a solid centre I what otherwise would be almost chaos.* Similarly Henry Moore has said of such art, *It is something made by people with a direct and immediate response to life. Sculpture and painting for them was not an activity of calculation or academism, but a channel for expressing powerful beliefs, hopes and fears.* That is why it is important to re-awaken in people a realisation of their own creativity. We all know how much more meaningful it is to be given something that another person has made, rather than bought from an expensive boutique: a loaf of bread, a cake, a bird table, a knitted scarf, a plant grown from seed, a meal, a surprise picnic, an embrace.

For those of us who are practising artists, our task is also to open doors and windows of opportunity for others so that their lives may be enriched. Whatever gifts we have been given they must be passed on to others. For a thing made with love is a gift of ourselves to another. I would like to end with something that was said by Jeanette Winterston in an interview on radio with Bel Mooney. What she has to say echoes what I also strongly believe:
My work in this world is to open people up to the joy and the strength that is in life and in themselves. And to get people out of this littleness, this feeling of being boxed in, this feeling of being out of control. One of the reasons I am passionate about art, she continues, *is because it is so large and because it opens cathedrals in the mind where you can go and be and you can pray and you are not small. We have to be able to put meaning back into the lives of ordinary people.*

We have to be able to put meaning back into the lives of people. And to realise that every aspect of one's life, from washing dishes, preparing a meal, digging in the garden, collecting a child from school, or helping a neighbour, is an opportunity for being creative, for the making of something with love. In her auto-biography, the actress, Sarah Miles, in answer to the question, *What is life?* replies: *To me life is an art form, therefore to live life as compassionately, courageously and wisely as possible is the highest form of art there is.*

With courage, therefore, with compassion, and with wisdom, our task is to open doors and windows in the dark places of each life and to let in the light.