

SCL CONFERENCE Session 1: "Thinking Rightly about the Arts"
Thursday 25 June 2020
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NOTES:

Intro:

Four years ago at this time, I thought my teaching career was closing. My wife and I had decided that our five years on-campus as an all-boys boarding school were... "sufficient," and that it was time to head back to the Midwest to be closer to our kids and grandkids. I had done well enough as Arts Director at my boarding school post and was assured upon submitting my resignation that I would be "snapped up" immediately pretty much wherever I wanted to work next. Yeah, not so much. That spring and summer, I had to get used to being "the runner-up," one of the finalists, the recipient of "Thank-you for your interest," and just plain silence. As we camped out at my sister's house, exploring job prospects as they appeared on the posting boards, but in a stream that was drying up to a trickle, let's just say I had ample time to ponder, "Had I lost it? Had I ever actually had "it"? And what was "it," exactly, anyway: to be a Christian Arts educator? To see the world and its seemingly endless possibilities in a way that seemed perfectly obvious --- to me, but apparently not to others? To care deeply, fiercely, passionately about things that others saw as ancillary, decorative fringe, a nice add-on detail if time, space and money allowed, but certainly not woven into the central fabric of --- anything? Had I been delusionally pursuing a path toward some kind of fantasy goal that, in fact, probably didn't even exist, but was clearly in no way essential to the educational enterprise of helping to raise up solid, vital, functioning, good human beings to send out into the world? And, if there still remained some kind of market for Arts educators, I was probably too old to be worth the paycheck anyway.

And so my wife and I were set to become innkeepers on the west coast of Michigan!

Those were dark days, four summers ago.

Then, at the very end of July, the call came from The Covenant School back in central Virginia - where we had just moved *from*. The Theater/Arts Department Chair position had just come open and was I still available/interested? I was, at least to the extent of taking an interview. And it was in that interview that my flagging faith was revived, my vision for "what could be, what should be in terms of Christian Classical Arts Education" was refreshed and sharpened, my hope buoyed. Covenant sounded like "the school that I no longer believed existed." The job description ran so counter to what I had come to expect that I had to check and double-check to be sure I had heard right: I was charged with bringing the Arts into the heart of the life of the school. "Get out of that back hallway. Appear where you are not expected. Stir

things up. Create a buzz and hum. Make some noise. Lead the rest of the school in how we can all better do this integrated, backwards-design, formatively-assessed, cross-disciplinary, creation-noticing, beauty-generating, God-honoring, wonder-provoking thing we call Christian Liberal Arts and Sciences.” Battling my own skepticism that this was all too good to be true and would prove to be yet one more slick sales pitch without much sustaining substance behind it, I said, “Yes. Let’s do this thing. If you’re serious, then so am I.”

And, for the record, Covenant generally, and my steely-gazed boss, Leslie Moeller, have been as good as their word. I still love my job.

And maybe that’s why we are having this session together right now....

A school district in Massachusetts has pulled the plug on its entire Arts Program. They decided that it’s just too hard to figure out how to “do the Arts” during this coming COVID – impacted fall.

No one will contend that Arts teaching is going to be easy during this school year, for sure! (Come to our Patio Q & A Idea-Sharing for How Best to Teach the Arts in the COVID era Breakout Session VII Fri 2:30 CT!) But the elimination of an entire Arts program (with, Yes, the laying off of all related faculty!) likely reveals a deeper set of values, one that considers the Arts an extra, a luxury, a frill that can be trimmed if necessary without a huge loss. You may have yourself experienced working in a context where you know very well that you and your area were considered “extra.” Non-core. Elective.

This kind of confinement of the Arts to a sidebar, an attractive decoration if you’ve got the time and money for it... this is not limited to one school district in New England. Evidence for this kind of thinking, this hierarchy of values, can be found in budgets, facilities, schedules, curricula and institutional decision-making from the largest of governments to colleges and universities, all the way down to our schools, our own families, and even very personal choices we make. It is so pervasive in this country at least as to look like “the landscape,” the shape of things as they are, the givens. Perhaps not that many in your world and mine would roll their eyes, snort or sigh and say straight out that “the Arts are so extra!” but, when push comes to shove, it’s sadly, alarmingly common that the Arts will be one of the first thing on the chopping block. And I am not thinking of declining corporate sponsorships of civic arts organizations and events in this current economic recession; I’m thinking about many (most?) of our schools, Yes, even within the movement.

I would suggest that the root of this de-prioritization lies, not with economic pressures, facilities and resource limitations or even the independent school market demand, but with our own thinking. We ourselves, some of the highest stakeholders, can be very fuzzy in our own thinking about the real importance and place of the

Arts in Christian Classical Education. Let's devote a few minutes right now to make some progress toward fixing that, shall we?

1. "Christian"

Let's start with the lens of the "Christian" in CCE.

In the Genesis account of the beginning of all things, we meet God **Creator**. The first actions of the narrative are **creating** actions (and, not incidentally, qualitatively evaluated step by step as "it was good!"). Humankind finally makes its/our entrance "in the image of God," and is charged with increasing what is already good, true, beautiful. As image-bearing **creations**, we are commissioned to be **creative**. So, from the first, this domain of human activity was anything but an after-thought, an extra, a non-essential. To exercise human creativity was central to what it means to be human. Nor was it some thin, cute, "fine," prissy activity involving paper mache and tempera paint, C#'s that were or weren't quite in tune, Shakespearean monologues in perfect iambic pentameter or exquisitely partnered pas de deux – Not that I am opposed to any of those things! I'm not. It's just that what was understood, and apparently lived from the start was full, robust, vital, red-blooded, creative human life. Anything less than that would have been inconceivable, a reduction so severe as to strike at the very heart of what it meant to be a living human being.

Pause: now think about your school. Could that last statement be said truthfully about the life, the culture, the curriculum, the community of your school: "Absent the Arts would make our school "inconceivable, a reduction so severe as to strike at the very heart of what it means to be a student (or teacher or administrator or family...) here?"

The very first Biblical reference to supernatural gifts being imparted by God's Spirit to human beings is not healings, prophecy, tongues, signs and wonders...., but.... The Arts! Exodus 31 records the God-ordained empowering of Bezalel and Oholiab to become top-drawer, team-leading artisan-craftsmen, endowed with noteworthy abilities to craft metal, work in fabric, 2-D and 3-D, both, recreating natural forms and deriving new ones, textures, colors, shapes.... All to aid people in their worshipful connection to the God Who Is. Core. Essential.

As the Hebrews writer says, "I do not have time to mention...." that the central book of the Bible is an extended songbook; that prophetic messages were frequently delivered as compelling visual images, as theatrically staged performances, as literal object lessons; that apocalyptic literature is one striking visualization after another; that the conclusion of the entire Biblical story is a blizzard of images heaped one on the other, trying to fit into earthbound human comprehension what REAL "good, true and beautiful" looks like, sounds like, feels like, smells and tastes like.

2. "Classical"

Now let's think together for a few minutes about the "Classical" and the Arts.

If we think in terms of "Classical" meaning "rooted in all things Graeco-Roman," then you cannot take a step without tripping over some artifact, some musical reference, some script or amphitheater, some piece of stunning architecture. The Arts are everywhere in our study and appreciation of the Classical world. If you are skeptical of that claim, your standard 100-level Western Art Survey course should be sufficient to convince you. And, let's be honest: students of a Classical K-12 education have a better chance than most to gain a working appreciation of the raft of treasures we have inherited from the ancient Classical world. And Amen to that.

But let's think about "Classical" in terms of "having stood the test of time."

Maybe it's easier to think about this kind of "classical" in terms of literary texts and the languages that convey them to us. Probably most of our schools study the Odyssey or Dante's Divine Comedy; many still stage productions of Shakespeare's plays and keep a rigorous Latin program humming along. Great.

But what about staging an Ibsen script? Or making a deep dive into the Biblically-themed paintings of Rembrandt? Or taking on Bach's Advent Chorale, "Wachet Auf!?" There is something simultaneously freeing and grounding when we choose to put ourselves in the presence of a "classic." We realize immediately that we are not just looking into yet another self-reflective mirror or "me in the here and now." This thing is... well, old. It was around before I took my first breath. Some of the issues I find here, I can barely understand, let alone relate to. That's humbling. And helpfully grounding. Steadying. Because, at the very moment I start to yawn and dismiss as "Outdated... irrelevant... can't relate...", I find that, Yes, in fact I can! I recognize things: characters, circumstances, events, joys and sorrows, questions and struggles. Sometimes it is even the case that, having finally lit up and become engaged in a "classic" piece of artwork, theater script or music, I realize with something between a slow dawning and a shock, that, "Hey, wait a minute! This is something that *does* still speak to our world now. It does! Who'd have thought it?" And that's a moment of freedom. Sometimes, frankly, today's news cycle is so screamingly "NOW!!" and high-stakes and "Do Something!," that we can't even process it. There's just no room to ponder, to sit with, to let quieter, deeper considerations emerge. Classics give us – and our students – room to breathe.

3. "Education"

Now "Education" and the Arts.

Education has to do with people formation; our considered, respectful and loving participation in the discovery, fortifying and releasing of "what God meant when He meant this one" out into the world to be "dangerous for good." So, this is the contemporary, June 2020 part of our discussion: "How should *we* then Live as Arts Educators?" (Thanks, Francis Schaeffer...)

Just a few ideas:

- Given a Christian theology and anthropology, no one is allowed out an unlocked side door. If you're a living, breathing human being, then the Arts are for you and you are designed to be a creative in some way. Let's find out which way/ways! Then we'll work together to strengthen your divine design and wiring, give you some helpful skills, shore up glaring weaknesses or fill in detrimental gaps, and try to dial down inappropriate fears of trying things that are challenging or "risky" in some way for you. (The Arts are peculiarly good at cooking fears, real and imagined, to the surface, then dealing with them!) Everybody in the pool! There really is no such thing as "the artsy type," (a pejorative expression usually used to self-disqualify, often cloaking real terror!), as if to be an artist of any kind is akin to being almost a different species (sometimes above the speaker, often beneath, but certainly "mysteriously different from" me, a normal person). The Arts ARE and by rights must LIVE right at the heart, the nerve center of every student's experience of Classical Christian Education. Why? Because each one is human. Full stop.
- This world needs functioning creatives because we are spinning faster and faster and faster The artists provide the God-designed service to the community of helping us all to slow down. We are noticers. We are time-takers. We are sometimes the laggards, but only because something has caught our attention, arrested our headlong hurtle, and we've paused to notice. To appreciate. And, when given the chance, we will be the ones to call out (Sometimes you just have to yell!) "Hey! Wait! Come back here! Did you see this? I mean, did you really SEE this? Incredible..." And sometimes, someone comes back, stands next to you and says, "Ohhhhhh..... Didn't notice that. But you did. Thanks." And do you see how that makes the Arts next-door relatives to both Science and Theology? Close observers of what's been given to us, and worshipful thanksgivers. (Come to our session on "Intergrating the Arts and other Disciplines in CCE!")
- The Arts ought to earn the deserved reputation of being the most dangerous department in your school, not the most domesticatedly benign! We are the inheritors of, I believe, the Biblical job of the prophet and centuries of artists daring to depict, enact, sometimes oppose and call out really hard things in our world. Sometimes really evil things. Fearlessly, potently and convincingly. The Arts can very effectively do an end-run around the merely cerebral and land a blow when least suspected. (Come to our Panel session on "Raising up Arts students with a Prophetic Voice!")
- Finally, the Arts are very effective cross-cultural bridge-builders. If we think of the various Arts as languages, then to be fluently conversant in several languages makes possible all kinds of dialogue, connection and understanding that might not be possible if the only possibilities for discovering our shared

humanity are verbal. An instrumental ensemble made up of musicians from several different cultures, possibly speaking different languages, can nevertheless create strong and beautiful music together. And something real happens in that moment. To begin to decode a culture's understanding of the use of color is to begin to enter a much deeper understanding of "what this visual language actually means." If I begin to move in dance patterns that come from *your* background, that puts some of "you" literally into the pulses of my own physical body; and then we can trade; I could teach *you* how to bust a few of *my* moves! And then – something that really interests me a lot! – some **new** thing might be born that is greater than the sum of its parts. In a world of fractures, chasms of reinforced distance and walls, the Arts in the service of the One who, in His own body, broke down dividing walls of hostility, can be strong, steady and healing.

Well, just a few thoughts about why the Arts are in no way the "red-headed stepchild" of Christian Liberal Arts and Sciences/Classical Christian Education. We are on every front, at every level truly "essential workers." And we are designed and called to be (one of my favorite phrases) "dangerous for good."