

SCL CONFERENCE Session 2: "Welcoming All/Pursuing Excellence"
Thursday 25 June 2020
Jerry King

Intro.

We Arts educators in Classical Christian schools are in a dilemma.

On one hand, we can be charged with "elitism." And maybe sometimes we deserve it. Many of our schools have string programs, but no band. Certainly no drumline! We train our visual arts students in representational drawing skills harking back to Albrecht Durer, but get really nervous when someone starts pouring paint onto raw canvas like some Junior Varsity Jackson Pollock. We give prizes for crisp recitations of Shakespearean sonnets, but get squeamish when someone asks to deliver a Mary Oliver poem. And forget spoken word! In our academics, we insist on rigor, quality, excellence. Shouldn't we likewise insist on that in our Arts programs? Isn't beauty, after all, a real thing? An equally substantive quality in the "goodness, truth and..." triumvirate? And if a student drawing of a manatee actually does approach something of scientific accuracy and less "a flippered blimp with mustache whiskers," isn't that laudable? If your strong-voiced alto keeps singing her part almost $\frac{1}{4}$ step flat, that's a real problem, right? We need to aim for excellence, without the anxiety of being labeled "elitist."

But, on the other hand, how many of the Middle School or Upper School students you know would calmly agree with you that being involved in the arts is every student's rightful domain, utterly unremarkable, "... and why would you even question that?" Yeah: not many. Most are plagued by the damnable lie that the Arts really are "Fine," here meaning, "reserved for only a few who are inclined that way." I.e., an "elite." So many of our students excuse themselves from diving into the Arts and really going for it because they have long since concluded, "Not for me. Not the artsy type. Would never be good enough. Can't (fill in the blank:) sing a note, deliver a line without peeing myself, draw a stick figure..."

Counter-intuitively, the corollary to that kind of thinking and attitude is the "anything goes" mentality that we also run into in epidemic proportions among our students. This is the unblinking anti-elitism that says "Whatever I do is fine. It's good enough, right? I expect a top grade for mediocre work. An award for participating. What do you mean "That's a weak painting? I tried hard; I spent a lot of time on it! It's a painting of my Mother! That's got to be worth something!" And they know very well that we don't go around gleefully pasting C +'s on people's mothers or discounting time invested and sincerity of effort. But when the cultural tide all around is insisting that, in the Arts, all standards are relative to the individual, it's hard to insist, "Yeah. No. There really is excellence. And that's not it, sorry."

I do not mean to make light of this very real dilemma we find ourselves in. Okay, just a little. Sometimes, you just have to laugh...

But seriously, what we are trying to do as Classical Christian educators in the Arts is a real balancing act, a vexing dilemma on bad days, a dynamic tension fraught with opportunity on good ones!

Let's unpack just a little where the roots of this conundrum run.

If we were all members of an ancient, traditionally rooted society whose standards of beauty, excellence, virtue were well-established, known and agreed upon, then this would be a non-issue. The only matter for discussion would be the extent to which we (or, by extension, Arts Teacher, your students) measured up to the recognized standards. If no one travelled or read widely, an unexamined agreement would settle down over us with its comfortable assumption that "we all agree that this is good... that's not... this is excellent... that is inferior" without a twinge of doubt.

But that is manifestly not our world. The US is a nation of predominantly immigrants – and not all from the same place at the same time. Our globe is shrinking; cultures are bumping up against each other, competing and sometimes cross-pollinating all the time. Internet connections have upped the speed of cross-cultural impacts to 5G quickness. To make inferences about a person's tastes, standards and cultural norms based on where their family name comes from, in which nation on earth they are sitting behind their computer screen tonight, the color of their skin or texture of their hair... Well, that is really dicey territory now. Best not; you'll likely be wrong anyway.

Agreed-upon standards of excellence are just harder and harder to find and defend in our world. And that can feel awfully off-balancing, threatening to "things I hold near and dear." You've seen the ubiquitous posts about identifying common household objects – common to those who grew up using them 50 years ago, but opaque mysteries to our students! Sometimes there is an appended comment about "missing the good old days..." Darker than kitchen implements, there are also those lists of common, wholesome experiences that "we all did when we were kids," but now, post-Columbine, post-9/11, post-(pick your social/historic watershed moment), they're gone! Wrapped only in the sentimental glow of Boomers' nostalgia. "I tell you: this world is going to hell in a handbasket...!"

I was in ministry (Sr., campus, overseas) for some 4 decades, and I noticed this: most people do not like to live in "dynamic tensions." Most prefer a clear, sharp, simple lay-of-the-land in which wearers of black hats are obviously distinct from wearers of the white ones; where "self-evident truths" really are as plain and simple as the nose on your face, and "is this really so hard to understand?"; where whatever is already known, part of a discernible pattern, safely in the past, is superior to "all this craziness that's going on these days." I found that default preference --- sometimes

insistence! – not only among my congregation members, but frequently also in the domain of Christian Education. Hoped for “simplicity” was subtly swapped out for “over-simplification.” Doctrine or practice were enshrined as rightly righteous and therefore absolute, and, if you found yourself on the wrong side of the boundary line, then you were... well, on the wrong side of the line. To live with paradox at all is to live with discomfort, with very real mystery, and often high-stakes humility. Not a home address that we generally prefer.

I think many of our Arts programs reflect that. Either we swerve into the ditch of all-accepting, populist, low- or no-standards (“It’s all good, kids! And I do mean, ‘It’s ALL good!’”); or we hue to standards of excellence that really are embedded in a culture (usually mine! The one I’m comfortable with/a success in!); but we act as if they were God-given absolutes dropped sovereignly among us, whispering “Violins are better than trombones... landscape oil paintings are more beautiful than industrial metal sculpture...” And we teach accordingly. It’s just easier.

What’s at stake here? Is this really such a big deal?

Yes, I think it is. Here are a few reasons:

- Theology first: God Himself is endlessly multi-faceted. Never one-note, finished, exhausted, relegated to tired re-runs. We should expect newness, ongoing-ly creative originality to be springing up all the time --- over-flowing from God’s own, eternal, never-static Trinitarian dance. Now there’s a paradox to end all paradoxes. Or begin them? When we find ourselves teaching boring, same/same/same Arts, something is wrong. We would do well to revisit our theology, our living faith, and ask, “Who is this God whom I worship? What manner of man is this Jesus? Am I just weary? Discouraged? Fearful? Is that why I’m taking refuge in *status quo*?”
- The kids, our students: Intentionally, knowingly or not, the way we work with this dynamic tension between welcome inclusion of every blessed one of us and the pursuit of real excellence – that communicates profoundly to our students what we actually believe about the nature of things, about who the Creator is, about what it means to be human, about real “beauty, truth and goodness” (or not!), about openness, interest and appreciation of variety in this world (or not!). Will our students leave our doors doubled-down in the mistaken belief that the Arts are not, in fact, essential to being fully human; that they are the domain for only a select few; OR that there really is not anything real that we can meaningfully call “excellent,” or “beautiful,” or “powerful.” That beauty -- or any other quality – really is, at the end of the day, only in the eye of the beholder? And so, “anything goes”? Remember, it is the crafting of young lives that

we have been invited into, not just skill in dabbling on color or realizing a dramatic role or playing a note in tune. The stakes could hardly be higher.

- And yet, they are: We are also called, privileged, invited to be a redemptive presence in this aching, breaking world of ours. Granted: really not easy nor simple these days. But if we simply dissolve into the dominant culture's subjective, personal relativism OR retreat into a reactionary, separatist, functionally inaccessible Classical Christian ghetto enclave, then we are refusing to be the transformative "salt and light" that Jesus calls us to be – wherever and whenever we are. It is hard to remain open, interested, listening, observing, learning new languages – because some of it is gross, or violent, or repulsive, or like a brick wall to an "outsider." You get bruised, sometimes infected as with a contagion, sometimes beat-up or left out or misunderstood and under-appreciated yourself.

But then I think about Jesus: He who knew better than anyone what "excellence" of every kind really looked like, and how utterly "not excellent" everyone and everything was around him. Yet, he learned our language, took on our culture, sang our music, ate our meals... and was the most sharply observant, interested, not-a-bit-put-off person I have ever heard of. Not for a moment because He had to, but day after day, because He chose to, Jesus welcomed widely and called transformatively to honest-to-God goodness, truth, beauty... "excellence." Bible writers usually use the term "glory."

It's what this reeling, sickened world is ultimately destined for: beautiful, multi-faceted, multi-colored, multi-cultured Glory. Apparently, the heavenly beings before the Throne in Isaiah's vision, have a whole lot sharper vision than we tend to – than I tend to, most days. They cry out to each other ceaselessly "Holy! Holy! Holy is the Lord God Almighty! The whole earth is full of His Glory!" (Isaiah 6) Then?! Now?! This fall when we welcome all of the students God sends to us into our classes, our programs?! World without end?!

Wow. It's a high, holy, and bracing privilege to be called into this dynamic tension as Christian Arts Educators! Let's do this gloriously messy thing!