

## **SCL Conference**

### **Arts Channel**

#### **Panel: Loving the Hard Stuff: Raising up Young Artists with a Prophetic Voice**

**Thursday 25 June 2020 3:30-4:15pm**

#### **Panelists:**

Cody Miller (Visual Artist, Columbus, Ohio)

Brendan Jamieson (Musician/Pastor, Charlottesville, Virginia)

Jerry King (Arts Director at the Covenant School, Charlottesville, Virginia)

#### **Introduction**

The Arts in Classical Christian Education are too often expected to be benign, smilingly decorative, reassuringly realistic and color-coordinated with the couch; “Bach or Mozart, pick one. What?! Vivaldi? Oh, alright....”; Shakespeare, certain Greek tragedies (but NOT *Medea!*), Moliere or a Restoration comedy, or “Our Town” (again!). You know what I’m talking about.... Have we lost our God-ordained prophetic edge? Are we now expected to “stay in our lane” and not make waves? And, be honest now, isn’t that safer and more comfortable for us as teachers in the Arts anyway?

How can we effectively dig deeper, raise hard issues, ask tough questions without losing our audience? Or corrupting our kids? Or saddling them with “matters too weighty for me” (Psalm 131)? Could our students – *our* students! -- go out into this world as artists to be reckoned with, pull up chairs at the table of current arts and cultural dialogue with confidence and be heavy-weight, substantial contributors, “dangerous for good?”

In this panel discussion, let’s consider together, first, whether or not this is even an issue, part of our calling as arts educators. Then, if this is in fact a challenge we must face, what are the obstacles that make this difficult, what can we do to effectively gain ground in this responsibility/privilege, and ponder what some of the outcomes might look like.

Our panelists are Brendan Jamieson and Cody Miller.

Brendan is a musician (singer/songwriter) who has recorded many albums over the years and fostered all kinds of musical collaboration. He is also the pastor for community formation and the arts at All Souls Charlottesville, VA.

Cody is an internationally exhibited mixed-media artist whose multi-layered work captures both his theology and anthropology in arresting images that grab one’s eye, heart and mind and won’t let go. These are far from your kids’ children’s Bible illustrations! Having won numerous awards, most recently one of his pieces was chosen for a 60’ high replication in the Columbus Convention Center in Ohio where Cody and his wife make their home.

We will hear from both Brendan and Cody, after which I will offer a few ideas on this topic; then we will have our panelists respond to some question, followed by some Q and A time for you.

Let's start with Brendan...

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Thanks, Brendan! And now, Cody...

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Thanks, Cody!

Now, before we move to some questions for these two, a few thoughts of my own.

1. I grew up as a good, church-going boy, part of a smallish Fundamentalist congregation that worshiped in a plain, stripped down church sanctuary. The arts appeared only as organ-and-piano preludes, choir anthems, singspiration evening service hymn marathons and the obligatory "special music," usually a ladies trio or quavery not-quite-operatic solo from the dentist. Visual art was confined to schmaltzy photos with Bible verses artfully dropped in on the bulletin cover, the weakly painted sentimentalized "is that the Jordan River valley?" mural behind the baptismal pool ("Believer baptism only!"). When a "chalk talk" artist took the entire evening service, I thought I had died and gone to heaven. Theater made its episodic appearance only as the annual Nativity pageant, VBS puppet extravaganzas and lurid Moody science films about "the Red River of Life: the Blood" and anti-evolution broadsides. And dance... Yeah. Nope. A tapping foot could trigger a disapprovingly arched eyebrow, and a swaying hip could get you tossed from youth group.

To say that the arts lacked a certain prophetic edge in my growing-up years would be the most massive of understatements. Yet, turns out, I was wired for the arts. Couldn't help it. I drew relentlessly through long, exegetical sermons; I saw choreography in my mind while singing hymns; I staged with my siblings summertime plays, including, yes, a fully costumed Nativity pageant. And a completely verboten top-secret attendance of a Sadie Hawkins dance alerted me to the very problematic reality that I could dance. And liked it.

It has been a long road from those days/decades to this. But here have been some of the key realizations and milestones that have marked my adventure into the arts.

1. I grew up as a "Bible only" guy who spent hours and hours, years and years in scripture. Imagine my surprise to find that the very earliest mention of the Spirit of God giving unusual gifts to certain ones for His purposes in their community was... Exodus 31, the account of Bezalel and Oholiab being given special skills as artisan craftsmen to create beauty for the God-commissioned

- tabernacle. Visual arts, not tongues, healing, prophetic utterances..., but metal, fabric, color, 2D and 3D patterns and objects... Extravagant, lavish, meaningful beauty. Oh my...
2. I remember when the realization hit me that the largest, most central book in the Bible was a songbook. Selah.
  3. Over and over, prophetic messages from God to his people were delivered not only as “thus sayeth the Lord” oral communiqués, but as potent images, performance pieces, redolent symbols to live with, actions to re-enact over and over, heaped rocks that told a story (proto-Andrew Goldsworthy?). And so we are handed in scripture not only verses to memorize, not only stories to capture and flatten onto flannelgraph boards, but also breads to make and eat, hands to raise, songs to sing and play, water to run over our bodies, naked Ezekiel to deal with, knotted belts, crystal seas and rainbow thrones.
  4. I’ve studied some Art History (grad school); and it is worth noting that there have been times when the artist was seen, not as a different-species exotic genius-or-idiot-you-choose, but as an important member of the community, with jobs to do, messages to deliver, transcendence to depict, truth to illustrate, even confrontation to stage. Artists were neither demigods nor marginalized eccentrics, (these days we might tag them as the first “non-essential workers to be shut down.” ) Consider the impact and importance of Euripides’ “Trojan Women” script, Michelangelo’s Cistine Chapel ceiling and “Last Judgment,” Bach’s St. Matthew Passion, Daumier’s journalistic lithographs, Alvin Ailey’s “Revelations,” Picasso’s “Guernica,” Miller’s “Death of a Salesman,” or Scott Joplin’s ragtime inventions.
  5. The arts are peculiarly suited to do end-runs around the frontally-defended cerebral. That does not make them weaker than logical rationality; it makes them “other.” And frequently, more potent, longer-lasting, more deeply impactful. The arts are signally effective at asking-without-immediately-answering; raising hard, thorny issues that do not yet have an obvious solution; teasing out many-sided subtleties; embodying and enwrapping in story things that might be too difficult to contain or confront in bald facts; giving us space to “sit with and ponder” rather than always “solving, checking off and moving on.”
  6. Finally, some of our students find themselves in our schools, our educational philosophy and paradigms in which “words matter,” and we emphasize “close and accurate reading,” “well-reasoned argument,” and “clear and persuasive articulation” --- and rightly so. But they themselves are not necessarily most fluent in “word languages.” But, Wow, can they “speak color, shape, line, form, texture, tone, movement, facial expression and dynamic phrasing!” Does their written and spoken language deficit mean that they have nothing to say? Hardly. Conversely, the verbally skilled: do we let them get away with being “mono-lingual,” disqualifying themselves from the Art Room, stage, Band and Choir rooms because, “I’m not the artsy type.”? Really? You sure about that? As Classical Christian educators, we are about the business of educating the students we have, not just the ones we wish we had.

7. In this day of social polarization running rampant and the collapse of the civil, friendly, invitational “meeting ground between” where you and I, who are NOT the same, who do NOT see every matter in the same way, from the same perspective, and who just might have something to gain from the other, you and I have precious little breathing, conversing space left to us where we can thoughtfully ponder and consider the “other.” Social, political, and, Yes, religious discourse has become so strident, so smug, so angrily flat and thin as to suffocate or shout down all who disagree or come from another point of view. The arts peculiarly offer an arena for more nuanced, complex and layered, insightful and probing consideration of sometimes really tough topics that are part of our world. I wish I could say that the arts were also somehow immune to this formulaic, straw-man-constructing, sloganeering devolution in social discourse; Alas, we’re not. But we – and our students! – have direct access to vocabularies, languages, images and stories that just might serve in stemming the hubris-laden tide of brittle, cheap posturing that is taking the place of open-hearted, open-minded engagement with “the one who is not me.”

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Okay. Now some questions for Cody and Brendan to respond to:

1. In what ways would you consider your own work to be “prophetic” (and I mean here, not necessarily “future-predicting” but “strong message from God-delivering” and “status quo-challenging”)?
2. What would you say to the objector who maintains that it’s quite okay – even preferable – for Christian artists to stay within the domain of the “pretty,” the “safely encouraging,” the “non-confrontational”?
3. What specifically would you like to see from us, Christian arts educators, as we work with students that would raise up, call out, strengthen them to be courageous in dealing with “the hard stuff”? Give us some good ideas!
4. What message would you send to our Arts students in this regard? What do you want them to *know*?
5. And how might you --- and we! --- encourage our school communities to allow --- No, welcome --- No, insist! --- that the Arts move into this place of asking tough questions, raising hard issues, depicting not only the obviously beautiful, but also the broken, the tragic, the horrifying?

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Now, let’s have a few questions from you all “out there...”