

ARTS EDUCATION:
A FUNCTION OF FEELINGS AND SENSITIVITY

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The culture in which we grow up causes us to form opinions that are self-limiting, and as a result we close our minds to the value of many important things. One of the greatest regrets I have is allowing friends and relatives to close my mind to the value of the arts. All during high school I allowed my friends to convince me that the most important thing in my life was sports, and men who enjoyed the arts were sissies. I wasted so many years. Sports are of great value, but we can get our lives out of balance to the point that we exclude many other valuable things—such as the humanities.

I have spent a lot of time thinking about how we can get students more interested in the arts so they do not make the same mistake I did. It is difficult because each person is a different entity and because all the old cultural influences are still at work. Much depends on the teacher. Everyone responds to a teacher who gets excited about what he teaches, which is why I retired at 65 years of age. After 35 years of teaching the same thing, it became more difficult for me to develop excitement.

Several years ago I sat in a program and listened to Lamar Barrus play a musical selection on his violin, which I enjoyed immensely. I took some violin lessons in my youth and knew how difficult it was to master that piece of music. I wondered what motivated him to dedicate his life to achieve such excellence. Surely there must be something of great value in it or he wouldn't have done it. I purchased a book called *A Music Lovers Handbook* and found it extremely interesting. It inspired me to take a General Humanities and a Music Appreciation class. This led me to classes in Shakespeare, opera, poetry, history of art, philosophy, literature, and several history classes. It opened an entire new world of enjoyment, and I became excited about what I was learning. It only intensified my desire to study the arts more fully.

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Something one of my the teachers said sparked the thought that we live in a “prison house of language.” Often I have been so moved and inspired by an event or experience that I could not find words to express my feeling. Some people, when they couldn't find words to express their feelings, expressed them through music and art or used word combinations in poetry or literature. Those people are to be admired, and I can enjoy their feelings through their creations. But in order to do so, I must have the ability to tune myself in to their feelings. This cannot be done unless I learn something about them and the event that inspired the production

of the art. I decided to make an effort to understand as many of these areas as possible.

I purchased a good sound system for my home as well as all of Beethoven's nine symphonies. *The Music Lovers Handbook* helped me to learn what a novice could about music. The mood of the music can be changed by the tempo; low notes may indicate sadness or gloom, while high notes may indicate happiness or excitement, and so on. I find the 6th Symphony (*The Pastoral*) to be the most enjoyable because I can tap into the feelings Beethoven expressed in that composition. The first movement depicts his stroll down a lane on the way to his favorite spot of solitude. As the music plays, I visualize his stroll; and my imagination is led to different things he may have encountered. In the second movement he arrives at his favorite spot. The music leads my imagination to his sitting on a rock as the brook babbles by. Birds are singing in the trees, and the orchestra uses the flute to represent the song of the nightingale, the oboe the quail, and the clarinet the cuckoo, which develops into a trio. The third movement depicts gaiety in the village nearby. The tempo of the music lets me know that a dance is in progress and there is happiness all around. In the fourth movement, a storm descends on this beautiful setting, bringing the patter of raindrops interrupted by vigorous bursts of thunder, represented by minor tones and loud drums. In the fifth movement, the storm recedes into the distance and the shepherds' pipes can be heard. The music gives the sense of peace, and I imagine the smell after the rain has washed the dust from the plants and the earth has been cleansed. I listen to this symphony often because I can vicariously enjoy the feelings of the composer over and over again.

I enjoy Tchaikovsky's fifth symphony because I have studied his troubled life and can see in this symphony a musical rendition of it. Had I not studied his life, I would have been unable to interpret his music.

Paintings have touched my life in a very positive way these last few years. The progress in technique down through the centuries is extremely interesting. Almost everyone painted a Madonna. In Cimabue's and Giotto's Madonnas, the baby looks like a miniature man rather than a baby. It isn't until the 1500s that de Vinci's and Raphael's Madonnas show the babies with baby-like characteristics. The development of tempera and fresco are significant advances. Linear perspective allows a three-dimensional aspect in paintings. Chiaroscuro manipulates light and dark, which allows the artist to model forms and create the illusion of mass and volume. Vanishing points and other devices help the artist express his feelings and draw attention to the theme of the painting. The development of these techniques was very important for the advancement of painting.

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Paintings also give a feeling about the social and religious circumstances of the times. Two paintings by Honoré Daumier, *Third Class Carriage* and *First Class Carriage*, touched me because, although they were painted many years before our Depression in 1929, I could relate to them, having lived through the Depression and experienced those social conditions.

At first glance, one wonders if the artist was insane. Another painting I found to be enjoyable was Edvard Munch's *The Scream*. At first glance, one wonders if the artist was insane. But have you ever felt so frustrated that you could not find the words to describe your frustration and say, "I could just scream"? To me, the artist has captured that frustration. When you understand sound waves, it is amazing that he has depicted them the way he did. Other paintings that induce strong feelings in me were Delacroix's *Liberty Leading The People* and *The Massacre at Chio*. Gericault's *The Raft of the Medusa* can only be appreciated by knowing the artist, the circumstances in which he lived, and the story that prompted the painting. Many enjoyable years could be spent studying painting.

Often poetry reminds me of earlier experiences in my life. The poem, "Elegy Written In A Country Church Yard," by Thomas Gray, does this for me. I was raised on a farm in rural Idaho and have fond memories of my life there. The first two verses of the poem are:

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
The lowing herd winds slowly o'er the lea,
The plowman homeward plods his weary way,
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.

Now fades the glimmering landscape on the sight,
And all the air a solemn stillness holds,
Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight,
And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds.

When I read these lines, wonderful feelings of my youth spent with a loving grandfather come back to me. It reminds me of the times we trudged the two miles home from the farm after a long day of hard work. The sun was setting in the west; the horses were pulling the wagon; both they and we were very tired. Ahead of the horses, a herd of cows was being pushed along toward the corral and eventually to the barn to be milked. Insects were buzzing around the animals, my grandfather, and me. The twilight was starting to fade, and it would be dark before we reached home. The chores were done after dark with a gas lantern for light. Every time I read this poem, my bosom fills with love and nostalgia for those days and for a kind and loving grandfather. I took a literature study tour with Norman Gage and Phil Murdock to Europe, where we visited

the churchyard where Thomas Gray wrote the poem. It was apparent why he was inspired to write it.

Some of Petrarch's, Drayton's and Shakespeare's sonnets arouse especially desirable feelings. Ben Jonson's "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time" and "To The Daffodils" bring to mind how fleeting life is and how quickly it passes. John Ransom's "Blue Girls" brings memories of the lightness of youth and how fast it fades. Shakespeare has a special way of calling attention to the follies and pitfalls of everyday living and the innate behavior of people. One should never be foolish enough to make out his will or distribute his property without reading *King Lear*. In *The Merchant of Venice* Shylock the Jew exemplifies the disposition of people who must have "a pound of flesh" in their business dealings and also calls attention to the folly of merchants who put themselves in a dangerous position where their fortune and very life may be dependent upon funds not yet secured. It is a lesson for all of us. The most eloquent plea for mercy is found in this play.

The quality of mercy is not strained
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
The thronèd monarch better than his crown.
His septre shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
But mercy is above this sepered sway;
It is enthronèd in the hearts of kings;
It is an attribute to God himself;
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice.

Hamlet vividly portrays how hate and revenge destroy everyone, both the guilty and the innocent. *Othello* lets us see how easily we can be deceived and how quickly deception can lead to disaster. Each play I read brought out feelings of empathy, mirth, or sadness. Shakespeare's plays touch me with the entire spectrum of feelings. I have gained great respect for his knowledge of history, government, and almost every discipline of thought.

My most valuable pieces of literature are Emerson's "Self Reliance," Thoreau's "Where I Lived and What I Lived For," and Gibran's essays on work and education. Gibran's declaration that "work is love made visible" was the basis of my teaching philosophy. The most valuable literature, other than the scriptures, for strengthening my religious beliefs, were the

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thoughts of C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity* and *The Problem of Pain*. His discussion about training the wild dog caused me to reflect on why we must attain such a high level of conduct in order to be in the presence of God. In his book *Mere Christianity*, there is a chapter on Christian marriage. To me, it is the most outstanding discussion on marriage and indictment against divorce I have ever read. I bought copies of the book for each of my daughters just so they could read that chapter.

The most thought-provoking pieces of literature for me were Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin of the Inequality Among Men*, Maupassant's *The Piece of String*, Erasmus's *The Praise of Folly*, Machiavelli's *The Prince*, and Orwell's *1984*. Montaigne's discourses, especially "Of Intercourse With Books," were interesting as well.

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Since retirement I have taken classes in almost every discipline of the arts. These classes brought excitement to my learning. President Hafen and I were visiting one day, and he suggested I read *The Closing of the American Mind* by Bloom. As I read it, I could see I had closed my mind to many valuable things early in my life. In high school when we read literature and poetry, we were asked to interpret what we had read. I never could arrive at the same interpretation as the teacher and often felt "put down" because I didn't. It was discouraging and caused me to dislike it. When I took a poetry class here at the College, after we had read a poem, I asked the teacher what the poem meant. He replied, "what do you feel the poem means?" He never told me what it meant to him. I was surprised to know I could have my own thoughts that were valid, and I didn't have to agree with what he thought. It was exciting to experience my own feelings and open my own mind, and reminded me of an essay by Montaigne in which he says that students would learn better if they weren't hindered so much by their teachers. Of course this is not always true. We all need help at times, but it is important not to inhibit the students' freedom to think. Every teacher I have had these last few years has allowed me to do just that.

I went with a Humanities tour to Europe. We were in the Louvre where there was so much art to see that I became overwhelmed. I approached one of the teachers, Brian Merrill and said, "I just can't remember all of this." He said, "Don't worry about it, Lyle; just enjoy the moment." Since that time I have tried to enjoy the moment as I observe every piece of art, listen to every piece of music, or read every poem. What a blessing it is to be here. Guess what! It is all about feelings and sensitivity. ☺