

The Grace of Talent

There is an art to art. There is a magic and a mystery to art that is hard to articulate. And the magic, the “God thing,” is what permits the creation and the engagement. The process ranges from the small – children at vacation Bible school painting summer-themed pictures to share with their family, to the sublime – stained glass windows and majestic banners beckoning congregants to engage with God.

The act of creation is, to me, a true gift of grace. Unmerited favor. The ability to observe closely and to translate your sight with a pencil or a paintbrush onto a paper or canvas is the gift. Then, like all things, the gift requires nurturing and focus. Be it painting or piano, the gift of talent demands practice, repetition, and sometimes starting over. The gift requires one to look inward and recognize that the talent should be encourage and used.

The art of art is about creation, clearly, but it is also about connection, the relationship between God and ourselves. His Creation inextricably connects all of us to Him and to one another. I think this sense of connectedness, this need for connection, is a driver for artistic people – many times only on a subconscious level. The ultimate goal of the artist is to evoke a response, to make a connection with the viewer, to change a perception. When these things occur you know you have been successful, and, hopefully, used the gift God gave you to the best of your capability.

We have a handwritten note on our refrigerator, which paraphrases the passage from Luke. It says, “Much is demanded of those to whom much has been given.” Depending on where you are in life’s arc, this can mean different things. But one constant for me has been to recognize that talent, unmerited favor, requires “doing.”

I started drawing at an early age and won a contest at age six with a picture of Cinderella’s coach. On the way through life I had high school art, a few Saturday morning art classes, and one disastrous college semester of studio art, read: drawing nudes. While I loved creating “crafty” things for our children, Sunday school, and AYSO soccer, I never thought to paint until I was 43. Our son, at that time twelve, said to me, “Mom, you are too old to start something new.” Which, of course, had the expected effect of spurring me on. I’ve never looked back.

For the most part I am self-taught, though I worked in an atelier, of sorts, for several years surrounded by painters more experienced than myself who became helpful guides. In the beginning I painted in acrylics for the simple (and ridiculous) reason that the brushes were easier to clean. But acrylics have a downside. The paint dries very fast and is unforgiving. Oils, on the other hand, provide more depth and a deeper color. And, at the end of the day, like all things that require a bit more effort, they are so worth using.

Many people ask me if painting is relaxing. It is not. Painting requires amazing concentration and focus. After completing a session, you can feel,

physically, as if you've run a race. And, sometimes, but not always, the magic, the "God thing" happens and you look at your finished work and think, "did I do that?" That is your glimpse of grace, unmerited favor.

There are two aspects of painting that are, in a way, ministerial. One is the connecting piece – the creation of an emotional or spiritual connection between the Creator, the artist and the viewer. Painting allows, no demands, a focus on Creation – an intense scrutiny of a place or an object that, for the most part, does not occur in everyday life. You must concentrate on the lemon, the tree, and study every aspect carefully. This process underscores the complexity and providence of God's plan.

The connection is visual as well as creative. Because I primarily paint landscapes and still life's, the paintings have a sense of place. All paintings receive a title as well as a short accompanying story – perhaps only a few sentences long – that explains or suggests the background of the piece. And then the viewer, because they are then connected, becomes a part of the painting. An example of this might be a painting entitled "Normandy Vista" whose story is:

So quiet now, so serene the fields where once smoke swirled and gunfire peppered the landscape. Where men dashed through the fields and hedgerows hoping to come out alive on the other side. So quiet now. The fields are healed but we will never forget.

The other ministerial aspect is the teaching piece. People always ask a painter questions: How do you draw it? How long does it take? Do you paint from life or imagination? The practice of creation causes people to engage, to ask questions and, perhaps, to consider their own gifts of grace and how they might be fostered.

Often people say, "I can't draw a straight line." Which is funny but completely untrue. Yes, talent comes in varying amounts and we all do not have the same capabilities. But there is something to be said for learning how to look more closely and observe life around you, being willing to take a chance and to maybe fail at first. Encouragement to try is sometimes the only catalyst necessary and with that you are launched. If nothing else, when you attempt to paint, to play an instrument, to throw a pot, to write a story, you better understand the challenge, the commitment, and the sheer hard work creativity demands. You will never look at a painting in the same way again.

I am blessed and I am grateful. It is a wonderful gift to be able to encourage others to try. It is a wonderful gift to be able to bring others pleasure through my work. My happiest moment is when that connection occurs and another person has a glimpse into a process that is grace driven.

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