The Man who Almost Became an Artist

by Pastor Adam Murphy

What makes an artist? There are theories. The one I like best explains the artist as one who makes a desperate effort to communicate things of the soul when normal communication fails. There is a variation of it not limited to any particular kind of communication—the message might come from mind, soul, body, or whatever. In other words, art can be done by anyone, whether soul is involved or not. This makes art more recognizable because anything qualifies. The stricter version that I favor is somewhat controversial for that reason. (Obviously this theory applies only to males. When a woman has something to communicate, she just says it and moves on without being too concerned about the effect. Or if it happens to be something of importance, she keeps saying it until she gets the desired results, which is the only example of a reliable communication technique that I'm aware of.)

As we all know (for we were born knowing it), song is the natural safety valve built into human nature for venting your soul's frustration. But song was originally designed for very small audiences, such as an animal or God, though later on it was adapted to wives and mothers. Over the millennia song developed to the point where talented people with nice voices and admirable energy were singing to large audiences, and so it became a form of art. (Although the original art of song is unknown in popular cul-

ture, vocal performances continue in styles originating somewhere else, evidently not in human minds, souls, or bodies. This is my own opinion, not part of the theory.)

For those men who insist that they have something to express to a wider audience (I mean when God, dog, mother, and wife are not impressed), there are other options. Man always finds unnatural means of doing things when the natural ones are too limiting. So before long artificial voices were devised to create definite experiences in the listener, thereby constituting a means of communicating whatever was difficult with words. If you work hard at mastering a musical instrument, the result generally puts you not in the spotlight as you expected but in the lonely spot of being ignored. To the hard-working musician, this feels like rejection of the whole self, which adds to the original frustration. He can always go back to singing (or screaming or yelling or whatever is in vogue), but the more humane approach is to go silent and resort to a visual art form such as painting where one starts with a blank canvas and you express yourself silently, for long periods of time, unrestrained by any custom, and without inconveniencing anyone else. The downside of this is the often-observed fact that artist's perceptions become skewed and there comes a time when the lone artist begins to admire his own work. This is a real trap, and if you should find it happening to yourself, you must immediately plunge into something so absorbing that your paintings are forgotten. Typically this will be poetry, but if that is not palatable prose serves the purpose nearly as well. This is where 90% of the would-be artists end up, all of them expecting to be warmly em-

braced by publishers.

It is no surprise that writing should fail too. Words are the primary means of normal communication, and if they fail you in the first place, why should you find them effective on the second or third try just by adding a bit of creativity? It turns out that playing with words and putting them together in odd ways, much as you would do with sounds or dabs of paint, is not generally considered communication, and it may even fail as art—if that is possible. But even here the same old deception comes along and tricks the hopeful artist into thinking that something admirable has been achieved. At first everything goes well for the writer as long as he is working in solitude. But as soon as he remembers that he needs to bring it to a conclusion and share it with the world, trouble begins. Whether the writer is worse off than the painter at this point, I do not know. The demand he places on a reader is altogether unreasonable because of the amount of time it takes to read a book. The cost to someone forced to view a piece of visual art is of a different sort; though one glance is sufficient to comprehend the work, the pain in that moment can be excruciating.

This is as far as the theory goes. It does not explain the existence of gifted artists who may or may not attract a following. Whether they are recognized or not seems to depend on unrelated factors. Suffice it to say that an artist becomes recognized as an artist when someone says he is one. After that the machinery of celebrity takes over, and suddenly everyone wants to know what he thinks about everything. At that point plain words will do, for

communication is no longer an issue, and the man finally reaches the place enjoyed by all women. Whether or not anything he says makes any sense matters not at all. So naturally he will delight in telling you why you like his work and how it is that he enables you to see things more clearly, which has become his mission in life.

Now I have said all this (with tongue in cheek, you realize) so that you will understand why I did not encourage a certain man to write the book he was planning. His story is quite interesting, however. I heard it briefly one Sunday morning shortly before the service, and he filled me in on the details later.

This man read and traveled widely and was a careful observer of everything. Finally he came to the place in his life where he was ready to make his statement. His statement was a carefully considered summary of the world, balanced as well as he was able to balance it with what he knew of its glories and wonders but very thorough in setting forth the cruelties of man and nature, which, though he was refined enough not to say it outright, were intolerable to his sense of rightness and forced him to feel (along with certain anti-theistic authors he admired) that the glories and wonders were the works of deception if they were anything but accidental. Unfortunately he could not objectively justify the feeling, so he could not say it plainly, and that drove him to consider being an artist. He had no taste for music or painting, so he thought he would go directly to prose, bypassing poetry where so many literary artists prematurely end their careers. You understand that the earnest statement he was determined to make was essentially a complaint. Against whom he would not say. I'm sure

you are familiar with this type of thing.

And so he planned to put his hard-earned insights down in writing, approaching the difficult things tangentially with great forbearance and humility. He would write of the wonders as objectively as he could, not needing to wonder himself, for his understanding was complete (being well established by the authors he followed). But before setting it all down in his own prosaic way, he did begin to wonder. I do not know why he began to wonder, but he did. What he wondered is why things are just so.

He wondered about the great cities. They have so many dreadful enemies: earthquakes, fires, horrendous floods, not to mention gangs, bombs, and corrupt governments. Yet most of them thrive and continue to grow all over the earth even after terrible setbacks, almost as if their terrifying opponents were mere inconveniences.

He wondered about the oceans too. How is it they continue to provide transportation, food, and essential resources in spite of deadly storms, enormous influxes of pollutants, and resources buried at impossible depths, not to mention military skirmishes, tariff wars, and pirates.

That led to his wondering about the very population of the earth. In spite of genocidal wars, famines, and plagues, not to mention regulations, easy birth control, and economic pressure to forgo childbearing, it is a wonder that people continue to multiply.

Certainly technology plays a big part in that. But why has technology and manufacturing so far exceeded everyone's expecta-

tions in spite of failures exceeding successes, frequent bankruptcies, and surprisingly hazardous products, not to mention stifling regulations, layers of taxes, and attorneys.

He began to see a pattern regarding obstacles, and he wondered how pervasive it was. He wondered about mountains. They seem to inspire nearly everyone in some way: skiers, climbers, tunnel-builders, miners—in spite of the forbidding monsters generating dangerous weather, letting loose avalanches, and spewing rivers of ruin from volcanoes. To take one example, the danger and loss of life in mountain climbing is not enough to discourage some from attaining the highest peaks; rather it seems to attract them. In fact, no peak on the face of the earth is too high for the most determined climbers—almost, but not quite.

A wonderful thing, sport: a thing totally impractical, completely unnecessary, yet it seemed to him that the earth is somehow sized for it—mountains towering to heights barely attainable, waves just big enough to challenge the most daring surfer. The globe itself is of such a size that it challenges many to attempt solo circumnavigation by water and air.

Nature presents man-sized challenges galore: big and dangerous game to master; prize fish to find and fight; the romance of prospecting for gold! Cost and hardship are great, but not too great to discourage everyone; and some are rewarded magnificently.

Another remarkable thing: though not designed for swimming, the animal body is such, and the water is such, that an ability to swim can be developed without much difficulty. The human

body is optimized for walking on land, but people swim from shore to shore for sport: a challenge attainable by the determined few. Somehow it is possible and rewarding to them.

And the air—the magic of flight, mastered by birds, a few animals, and even attempted by fish. What a cruel challenge it was to those of us created without wings, creatures bound to the ground, continually teased by soaring birds and zooming insects. Yet it is possible. In fact, the particular density of air, the particular force of gravity, the strength of materials, and the energy density in petroleum turned out to be right for it. Manned flight became so successful that no one could say any longer he was not meant to fly! What a surprise! A gift laying dormant for thousands of years.

This man went on and on like that. For example, he loved to watch accomplished ice skaters, and he wondered at the special property of ice that made it possible—the same thing responsible for deaths when cars lost their traction.

Why were things just so? In the days prior to this wondering, he had assumed that the world could be a much better place if any number of things were better designed. But he now realized that there would be risk of making other things worse while making one thing better. It weakened his thesis, the implied complaint in the book he planned to write. But he saw in it an opportunity to go beyond the usual. After all, he had read a number of books that had said essentially what he was going to say. If he could postulate some change and show in some convincing way that the world would be a better place overall, it would elevate the credib-

ility of his complaint a notch above the average.

So he went to work on this concept. First he conceived of a "misery index," which would reflect the number of premature deaths in the world. But a difficulty soon appeared as he tried to define what he meant by premature. Ultimately, it led him to ask why every death was not premature. Ideally, in a perfect world, there would be no deaths. But that would not do on a finite earth: the size of the planet would have to be much larger, but that led to all sorts of difficulties due to immense gravity; he would have to redesign the laws of physics, and he was not up to that. Regardless of the size of the earth, if there were no deaths, there would have to be no births after a point, which would mean redefining womanhood, and he would rather attempt devising a new physics than tamper with that.

So he narrowed the base of his misery index and pegged it on deaths from natural disasters—what he unhesitatingly called acts of God. Then the question he had to answer was what would it be like if, say, there were no earthquakes. Obviously, there would be more people and fewer cemeteries in certain parts of the world. There would also be more old buildings. Come to think of it, any building that could withstand wind and snow would suffice, making buildings less expensive to build. He realized that the ramifications were too complicated for his simple method of thought experimentation, so he hired an expert in modeling things on a computer to make his research more credible.

The first model yielded some interesting results. Overall there were more collapsing buildings than there were in the real world

with earthquakes. He had the computer expert go over the model, for surely there was some mistake; and indeed several were discovered, but when the simulation was run with the improved model, the results were much the same, only the number of buildings collapsing had increased slightly. It was explained to him that damaging earthquakes were relatively rare, but the fear of them was widespread, and that fear led to better building practices the world over. When everything was quantified, that's how it came out. It was hard to accept that earthquakes could be a good thing. He knew there would be some who would believe it since it came from a computer simulation that could be called scientific, but he couldn't force himself to believe it. He was forced to accept it by the numbers in front of him, but he couldn't believe it. It was unnerving. He realized that he couldn't drop the project without resolving this conflict, so after consulting with more computer simulation experts he decided to go for broke and underwrite a more extensive project.

They came up with a model where many parameters besides the frequency of earthquakes could be varied. They could adjust floods, droughts, and storms of all sorts, cranking them down to zero if they desired. What they found was nothing that made any sense. Sometimes less made things worse; sometimes more made things worse—as one would expect—but sometimes better. Worse, there was no definite cause-and-effect formula that they were able to discover which could be used to optimize natural disasters. And things were always changing. After a disaster of significant size, the response to changing the parameters was different. The com-

puter experts were alarmed by this too, and they promised to find the bugs in the program and make it work properly; and they made many improvements and greatly increased the sophistication of the model, but the general behavior was not greatly improved. They put the model itself under an automated search, varying parameters systematically to find a combination that yielded a long-term improvement. But none was found. It seemed that the world was an unstable system that somehow had been optimized, but there was no known paradigm to explain such optimizing other than that of someone of great skill steering an unstable vehicle. It was a full-time job for an intelligent helmsman of stupendous ability. The computer experts admitted that all the evidence pointed to their model being at fault, and they continued to work on it long after the client's funds were exhausted. But they only got more and more bogged down in the complexity of things, and in the end they had to quit without having discovered anything.

So the man decided to write a book about his experiences in all this. But the moral he was finding in it was unsettling, and he was reluctant to follow where it was leading. He would have to give up being a critic of the Creator, which meant he was on the verge of becoming a believer in a wise and even benevolent God. He gradually developed the idea that he could benefit from interviewing clergymen on this subject. But he found none that were much interested in computer simulations; few of them even understood the significance of an unstable system. Finally, someone recommended that he look me up at Grace Bible Church—as a practical

joke, I think.

Anyway, he showed up one Sunday morning early, before many were there. When he came through the front door, the only person in the foyer was little Hannah Foster who was arranging tracts on a table as she did every Sunday morning. The man asked to see the pastor, and Hannah, being uncertain about knocking on my door before the service, took him to Pamela Evans, her Sunday School teacher, who then brought him to me. I could see that this man was hard bitten by life, a bit my senior, and probably a lot more knowledgeable than I on many subjects. I doubted that he would give me much credit if I tried to explain how things really were. It was plain that he liked Hannah, so I insisted that he talk to her. I sat the two of them down and stood back while she explained the workings of the universe to him in the words of a child such that even he could understand. And he did. I don't know why, but he did. I recommended that he get a copy of the world's best-selling book and read it before he started writing, which he did. It saved him from becoming an artist.

He said to me once after that: "I don't know whether any of that computer modeling was any good. I suspect that it fell far short of what it was supposed to do. But if it had turned out differently and instead of throwing away my money I had succeeded in doing something great, I would have been insufferable in my pride. And I think that's the way God must feel about us and why he stands by when things don't go so well in the world."

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