

On Balance

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Spirituality, Mysticism, the Arts, and Education

*"If the doors of perception were
cleansed, then everything would
appear . . . as it is—Infinite."*

—William Blake

Teachers of the arts face a difficult dilemma. On one hand, modern society increasingly demands that what is taught in schools be justified in utilitarian terms. How practical is it? How well does it help us succeed in the world immediately around us? On the other hand, teachers of the arts know that the ordinary ways of thinking and talking about education don't do justice to the spirit of what they do. The principal value of the arts lies in helping us to put aside ordinary conventions of material success, to rise above the mundane, to soar on spiritual wings, to perceive with heightened consciousness, to feel anew the exhilaration of being fully alive. The arts connect us to this reality: to wonder, to mystery, to awe at the experience of how things are. Attempting to imagine a world without music, for instance, is almost inconceivable, yet no one can say precisely why such a world appears so starkly inhospitable.

Doing justice to the arts in education is difficult, therefore, but not impossible. Throughout history the arts have been a spontaneous and universal means through which human beings have recognized and then expressed their experience of life itself. The arts have been an integral part of living and have needed no special validation to be considered worthy subjects for formal instruction. But recognition of the human condition and the impulse to express the experience of living—whether fostered in or out of school—are among the many steps on the path of wonder, mystery, and awe, a path that has been well trodden throughout the ages, not only by artists, but especially by persons of a strong spiritual or mystical

bent who have pursued it to its very end. Seen in this light, education in the arts is literally a wonderful portion of the journey of life, the beginning of a still-larger education in how to respond to the ultimate mysteries of living. What, then, can art educators learn—really what inspiration can they take—from those persons who have followed the path of spirituality and mysticism at length?

Put simply, spirituality can be defined as awareness of one's relationship with the Infinite and mysticism as the art of union with the Infinite. Evelyn Underhill, the great English poet, novelist, and mystic of the early twentieth century, in a book first published in 1915, offers an expanded definition of mysticism as "the art of union with Reality. The mystic is a person who has attained that union in a greater or less degree; or who aims at and believes in such attainment." (Underhill, 1986, p. 23) Underhill's definition makes clear that mysticism is not something only for a chosen few. Anyone who sincerely aspires to union with Reality is a mystic, even before that union may be attained. Surely, the ultimate purpose of the arts is similar: to put us in touch with the basic mysteries of living, such as birth and death, truth and beauty, love and eternity. There is much to learn in all this. Spirituality, mysticism, the arts, and education have much in common. Indeed, mysticism can be considered the highest form of education.

The above definitions point out that spiritual persons are those who have some notion of their place in the great scheme of things, persons who (to use a modern term) have a well-developed sense of "situatedness." Mystics are persons who

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extend this sense into the desire—and in some cases the ability—to merge with the ultimate Reality that lies beyond mere appearances. Mysticism is a way of approaching Reality through personal experience, not through logic or reason. While the first of the two definitions of mysticism refers to the Infinite and Underhill's to Reality, the underlying idea is the same, and many other names have been applied to it, such as the Absolute, the Ultimate, the One, the Incomprehensible, or God. It is not necessary to personify the referent or to invoke a deity, though most of the world's great religions indeed do so. The important point is that as human beings we live in a universe of deep mysteries that are impossible to fathom rationally. Space and time appear infinite from our perspective, space limitlessly expanding beyond us in all directions and time continually flowing over us with neither beginning nor end. We are vaguely aware, but we do not fully understand. Whatever specific reference we use in some attempt to name the source of these mysteries will thus remain inadequate. The referent itself is beyond comprehension. The mysteries surrounding it obscure it from rational view. It remains infinite, and we remain finite.

This kind of spiritual view of the human condition keeps us aware of our inherent limitations and, on the surface, seems pessimistic. In actuality, the opposite is true; there are considerable consolations in it. These consolations are given gratuitously, as gifts. One gift is the realization that we as finite human beings are a part of the Infinite. We partake of the Infinite. The Infinite is reflected in us. Our fundamental human nature is, therefore, good, and our basic task in life is to live as consistently as possible with the source of goodness. "Seek and you shall find" say the great religions of the world. "The Kingdom of heaven is within you." A natural life is one that partakes most fully of goodness. What a revelation!

A second gift is that the way to a natural life partaking of the Infinite has been shown to us by the experience of the great mystics and practitioners of such spiritual disciplines as contemplation, centeredness, silence, and solitude. While many mystics have left us specific descriptions of "ladders" of prayer and other exercises by which we may attempt to climb upward toward union with the Infinite, still others have described their experiences of union as happening almost as in response to their deepest longings. One such story is recounted by St. Augustine in his

Confessions, when he conversed with his mother at a window which overlooked the garden in the courtyard of the house where they were staying in Ostia. "There we talked together, she and I, in deep joy . . . and while we were talking of His Wisdom and panting for it, with all the effort of our heart we did for one instant touch it." (Augustine, 1979, Book IV, p. 10) Throughout our lives we can remain both hopeful and expectant.

Another gift springs from the nature of the Infinite as ineffable. In attempting to talk about it, we must do so indirectly, in metaphors. Ordinary language is incapable of describing the essence of the unchanging, ultimate Reality that lies beyond the physical world of appearance and is the ground for the physical world. This is the starting point for the arts, for the artistic impulse—whether in poetry, painting, music, dance, or any other medium—is to express the artist's relationship with Reality, something that cannot be done literally. The world requires the gifts of artistic creativity and metaphor. In her famed comprehensive study of mysticism (*Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*, originally published in 1911), Underhill points out the similarities between artistic and mystical experience, using music as her prime example:

Mysticism, the most romantic of adventures, from one point of view the art of arts, their source and also their end, finds naturally enough its closest correspondences in the most purely artistic and most deeply significant of all forms of expression. The mystery of music is seldom realized by those who so easily accept its gifts. Yet of all the arts music alone shares with the great mystical literature the power of waking within us a response to the life-movement of the universe: brings us—we know not how—news of its exultant passions and its incomparable peace. Beethoven heard the voice of Reality, and little of it escaped when he translated it for our ears. (Underhill, 1955, pp. 76-77)

Still another gift arising from a spiritual view of the human condition is the awareness that we are all potentially both artists and mystics. Just as the world requires the artist's creativity, it also requires the mystic's vision. Yet, just as art-making in some form is accessible to anyone, so is envisioning Reality. Indeed, many of the well-known mystics did not consider themselves as possessing any unusual talents or capacities. Their visions and intuitions of the Infinite simply came to them as happy acci-

dents beyond their understanding. We can all strive to prepare ourselves to receive such gifts when they may be granted, but, still, they will come when they will come, as joyous surprises. We can be ready, but no one can invoke them at will. Artistic and mystic vision are much alike for many reasons; there is a sense of rightness, a feel of familiarity about them that all humans can share in to one degree or another.

Beyond this, artists and mystics follow a similar method of purging their minds of abstract concepts and thoughts to concentrate on and to absorb things as they are. Concentrated communion with each thing itself through pure sensation leads to an intuitive understanding of how that thing reflects—indeed is radiant of—underlying Reality. Anyone following this method has, as Underhill puts it, “carried the peculiar methods of artistic apprehension to their highest stage. . . . You have begun now the Plotinian ascent from multiplicity to unity, and therefore begin to perceive in the Many the clear and actual presence of the One: the changeless and absolute Life, manifesting itself in all the myriad nascent, crescent, cadent lives. Poets gazing thus at the ‘flower in the crannied wall’ or the ‘green thing that stands in the way,’ have been led deep into the heart of its life; there to discern the secret of the universe.” (Underhill, 1986, pp. 124-125)

Yet another gift is the call to an active life in the world. Spirituality and mysticism do not require withdrawal. In fact, those people who have most intensely perceived Reality may be the most ready and able to change the world for the better. Spirituality and mysticism may indeed involve developing new states of consciousness and having new emotional experiences, but doing so is far more a beginning of learning how to live in the world than it is an end. Again as Underhill puts it: “The mystics are artists; and the stuff in which they work is most often human life. They want to heal the disharmony between the actual and the real: and since, in the white-hot radiance of that faith, hope, and charity which burns in them, they discern such a reconciliation to be possible, they are able to work for it with a singleness of purpose and an invincible optimism denied to other men.” (Underhill, 1986, pp. 184-185) Of course, healing “the disharmony between the actual and the real” not only describes how the arts function in individual lives, but also how they function collectively in society.

Lastly, regardless of how far each of us may travel along the path of mysticism, perhaps the

greatest gift of a spiritual view of the human condition is to plunge us into the permanence of love, the same love described by Dante as that which impelled his will and his desire, “The love that moves the sun and the other stars.” Love, the final principle, moves the entire universe, love as the most resplendent manifestation of the Infinite, of Reality, of the One behind the many appearances of things. Once experienced, it may sometimes be forgotten, but it never goes away. It always remains the central burning-point of life. Above all else, the spiritual and mystical path is “a Science of Love,” as Underhill says. Whenever you have met life in this way, “Whether you realise it in its personal or impersonal manifestation, the universe is now friendly to you; and as he is a suspicious and unworthy lover who asks every day for renewed demonstrations of love, so you do not demand from it perpetual reassurances. It is enough, that once it showed you its heart. A link of love now binds you to it for evermore. . . .” (Underhill, 1986, p. 190) This is, of course, the same love that binds artists and art educators to their kindred tasks.

Much more could be said in summary, but not in more stirring words than these of Underhill:

We have seen that all real artists, as well as all pure mystics, are sharers to some degree in the Illuminated Life. They have drunk, with Blake, from that cup of intellectual vision which is the chalice of the Spirit of Life; know something of its divine inebriation whenever Beauty inspires them to create. Some have only sipped it. Some . . . have drunk deep; accepting in that act the mystic heritage with all its obligations. But to all who have seen Beauty face to face, the Grail has been administered; and through that sacramental communion they are made participants in the mystery of the world. (Underhill, 1955, pp. 236-237)

Fully educated, we would all realize our spiritual natures. Fully educated, we are all destined to be mystics, only some of us don't yet know it. The arts point the way.

References

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