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Creativity in the Cosmic Context

Our Challenges and Opportunities

Jon D. Green, Jerry L. Jaccard, and Rita R. Wright

The gospel paradigm of creativity is embodied in the Savior's words: "I came into the world to do the will of my Father, because my Father sent me" (3 Ne. 27:13). Taken in isolation, this statement is the farthest thing from our society's notion of the creative individual. The world's view is that any moral restraint or external control automatically stifles the creative mind and leads to art that is derivative and formulaic. This prevailing definition is the aesthetic equivalent of moral relativity and license. Art that has eternal value challenges our narrow vision of the human condition, a vision filtered through the lens of worldly fame and moral expediency, and teaches us how to recognize the good, the true, and the beautiful. True freedom and creative achievement is grounded in moral and aesthetic discipline, humility, and a willing submission to divine law. Thus, the Savior personifies this highest level of creative achievement. He is the "Word" (John 1:1) through which the Father created "worlds without number" (Moses 1:33). Indeed, his atoning power derives directly from his creative power, as Nephi says, "for it behooveth the great Creator that he suffereth himself to become subject unto man in the flesh, and die for all men, that all men might become subject unto him" (2 Ne. 9:5).

We introduce this gospel paradigm of creativity for educators who want to help students understand how to distinguish superficial, manipulative art from that which nourishes and edifies the soul, as well as for students interested in discovering their own inherited creative capacities. Both groups could benefit from understanding and applying this paradigm in order to fortify themselves against the worldly models so prevalent in contemporary media and to undo the belief that we are not

naturally creative, a false notion sometimes implanted early by well-meaning parents or by the school system.

Crisis in the Classroom

Two of us have regularly taught a basic Humanities 101 class each semester in which students learn how to critique the major fine arts. In preparation for teaching them needed perceptual skills, we assign them to write a creative process paper. They choose a creative project (perhaps writing a poem, drawing a picture, carving a bar of soap, or composing a tune) and then write about the process of creating this object. For some it is a challenge to come up with a task they can accomplish, but for virtually all of them, the very idea of creating something is not only foreign to their self-images, it is terrifying. The vast majority of the students begin their papers with words like “When I found out I had to create something, I considered dropping the class, because I’m not creative!” or “I knew I wasn’t going to be able to do this project, because I don’t have a creative bone in my body.” One young woman had completed a beautiful piece of handiwork, and yet in her paper she insisted that she was still not creative, to which I replied, in large underlined letters, “Come up to me after class and take this back!” When she meekly approached me following class, I asked her: “Who told you that you were not creative?” The adversary can beguile us into denying this divine attribute. On the brighter side, one young man wrote from his mission in South America that he had brought several people into the Church with the help of the song he composed in Humanities 101. He was musically gifted but had never composed a song of his own before that assignment. He wrote, “I will be eternally grateful to you for showing me that I can create something worthwhile with my talents.” As author Marianne Williamson wrote, “We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It’s not just in some of us; it’s in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.”¹

The Nature of Creativity: Control and Freedom

Understanding the divine nature of the creative process will help us answer the question “Who told you that you were not creative?” We all understand through the scriptures that Christ and Lucifer possess diametrically opposed natures: God is good because he creates; the devil is evil because he destroys (his very name, derived from the Latin *diabolos*, literally means to throw across, to slander). Whereas the adversary’s eternal

goal is to “divide and conquer,” to separate us from God and to sever the ties that bind us to each other, the Father and the Son seek to unite us to them and to our families and friends through love and the sealing power of the priesthood. The Savior’s atoning sacrifice opens the door for us to return to his presence and heals the wounds that sin inflicts upon us all because of the Fall.

The Prophet Joseph Smith’s definition of creativity contradicts the traditional *ex nihilo* view of God’s creative activities in the universe. Joseph taught that “the word create . . . means to organize—the same as a man would organize materials and build a ship,”² bringing order, design, and purposeful function out of the chaos of eternal matter. Even in this light, most of us still tend to misunderstand what creativity really is. We think of it as a mysterious gift that only some lucky people possess, and that these fortunate few one day just sit down and create Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony or design Saint Peter’s Basilica or paint the *Mona Lisa* or write *Hamlet*. Nothing could be further from the truth. Enduring creativity is built on the foundation of discipline. For Jerome Bruner, pioneer American cognitive scientist, there could be no real creativity without prior structure and mastery of skills and concepts.³ László Dobszay, one of the world’s great authorities in Gregorian chant, observed that the very greatest composers have consistently “achieved their results by reshaping the musical elements in their memory and not by creativity drawn on nothing,”⁴ implying that those elements got into their memory through their study of the discipline of previously created music. Recent research into the nature of creativity and the thought processes behind it confirms that “creative work, at least at the conscious level, involves a far more orderly set of procedures than many artistic people like to think.”⁵

A study of the collegial relationships among Haydn, the composer-mentor, and the younger Mozart and Beethoven yields a perfect example of these creative dynamics. Haydn inherited from C. P. E. Bach the newly evolving concept of the symphony and brought it to the height of its formal structure and classical proportions. Mozart took that well-balanced form and filled it with new melodies and tonal colors, but always stayed well within the boundaries imposed by the form itself. Beethoven took the same formal structure and turned it inside out, stretching and pushing it to its limits, culminating in his highly innovative choral symphony, the Ninth; but Beethoven’s output was still recognizable as being symphonic in form, and it obeys all of the rules of thematic statement, development, recapitulation, and return to the original key. Yet no one would deny the

extraordinary creativity of any one of these three composers, who together composed nearly 180 symphonies.

These examples strongly challenge our popular notion of random, undisciplined creativity. One of the primary reasons for the inconsistency in basic arts education lies in the erroneous belief among arts educators themselves that “the teaching of art should focus almost exclusively on developing a student’s creative ability.”⁶ Believing this dogma has led many of our educators to resist specifying any structure or content “for fear that it would stifle creativity,” resulting in art, dance, drama, and music curricula that simply lack substance.⁷ This attitude arises partly because educators often confuse children’s natural expressivity with creativity, when these are actually different matters. It is easy to observe that many students have wonderful artistic ideas but lack the skills necessary to bring them to life. This is a tragic situation that retards our progress as a nation and that also affects our LDS attitudes about creative participation as a culture and as individuals, particularly when it has already been well established in many other disciplines that as human beings, “we have a native sensitivity to patterns, which accounts for many important human discoveries.”⁸ Edward Villella, former college baseball player and lead dancer for the New York City Ballet, observed that the paradox of dance involves the tension between total control and total freedom.⁹ This is the point we are making about all of the arts and about the true nature of creativity. The educator’s burden is to keep learners’ natural expressivity alive and growing until their knowledge and skills catch up. Only then can original creativity blossom.

The Arts in Society

We cannot escape the very visible role of the arts in our society, all of them accessible through every kind of media. Because we are so familiar with the fine and popular arts, we scarcely give them and their influence on us a second thought. We often overlook the necessity of art in attaining a fulfilled life. The earliest cultures expressed basic societal values through the arts. Living folk art continues today in many parts of the globe, where entire communities participate in creating and sharing through their arts. In these societies, children and adults participate together, the younger ones learning and being mentored while doing, rather than by being excluded until they are old enough or because they may be perceived as untalented. We have much to relearn from the example of these so-called primitive peoples.

Cecil Sharp, one of the instigators of the great British folk song revival before and after World War I, reported the following insightful incident

during a collecting trip in rural England: “One old woman once sang to me out in the open fields, where she was working, and between the verses of her song she seized the lapel of my coat, and looked up into my face with glistening eyes to say, ‘Isn’t it beautiful?’”¹⁰ This incident captures the essence of artistry revealed in our spiritual and emotional makeup. Contrast this with the adversary’s corrupt preemption of modern media for his own self-serving ends. He holds up to us the mirror of elusive hedonistic pleasures, infecting us with base desires and undermining the cultural unity found in more established cultures, where everyone participates in the artistic life of the society, where there are no obscene and obscenely overpaid superstars and their copycats, and where each individual plays a culturally unifying role by participating in the ebb and flow of seasonal and religious celebrations of life and death, of sowing and reaping, of gratitude and supplication. (Think of David, the king of Israel, dancing his dance of thanksgiving to God at the very altar of the temple!) The unfortunate result of the adversary’s forced shift in focus has led to many of our present dilemmas, where the influences of the arts and artists are destroying the very fabric of our morality and civility. We have privileged and enabled them to our great detriment.

The worldly model of the artist favors fame, wealth, and exclusivity. Rather than acknowledging the traditional ideals of a community of artists, today’s models strive for worldly reputation and frequently glorify aberrant behavior. Kay Redfield Jamison in her work on the artistic temperament, *Touched with Fire*, writes, “Certain lifestyles provide cover for deviant and bizarre behavior, and the arts, especially, have long given latitude to extremes in behavior and mood. The assumption that within artistic circles madness, melancholy, and suicide are somehow normal is prevalent, making it difficult at times to ferret out truth from expectation.”¹¹ A common characteristic of those with compulsive and addictive disorders is the belief in their own superiority or separateness from “the common crowd.”

Zion versus Babylon

Elder Boyd K. Packer, in his insightful essay “The Arts and the Spirit of the Lord,” focuses on the artist’s role in building Zion: “You who have such talents might well ask, ‘Whence comes this gift?’ And gift it is. You may have cultivated it and developed it, but it was given to you. Most of us do not have it. You were not more deserving than we, but you are a good deal more responsible.”¹² He presents here the Zion model rather than the worldly model of Babylon, and warns LDS artists:

It is sad but true that, almost as a rule, our most gifted members are drawn to the world. They who are most capable to preserve our cultural heritage and to extend it, because of the enticements of the world, seek rather to replace it. That is so easy to do because for the most part they do not have that intent. They think that what they do is to improve it. Unfortunately many of them will live to learn that indeed, “Many men struggle to climb to reach the top of the ladder, only to find that it is leaning against the wrong wall.”¹³

A retrospective documentary on Leonard Bernstein, narrated by his close collaborator, Arthur Laurents, reveals that the self-destructive egomania of one of America’s most gifted composers was aided and abetted by his adoring audiences. “I think the world wanted him to be outrageous,” said Laurents. “They wanted him to wear capes and not coats. And he did. I’ve never known anyone in my life who had more people throwing roses before his every footstep. . . . You know, fame is terrible stuff.”¹⁴ Here we have an example of a creative genius with his ladder too often propped against the wrong wall. His gift, with all its good, often left a wake of destruction in his personal life.

Since the Renaissance, when the image of the artist-as-hero first emerged, we have lost the communal vision of the arts as a spiritual and socially cementing agent in our culture—hence the “I am not creative” response. Even in the Church, we have been subtly seduced into accepting this false paradigm that has all the trappings of the tarnished veneer of Babylon or the spacious building floating high above those whom its inhabitants mock. The counterfeit model has deflected us from our true objective, which is to allow the arts to function as handmaidens to our religion in helping to establish Zion on the earth. When we are willing to separate ourselves as a community of educators and artists from the world’s model, we will be able to experience true spirit-directed art and receive the confirmation that each individual child of God is an artist/creator by birthright and heavenly inheritance. In Elder Henry B. Eyring’s testimony of Christ, he relates the story of when he was in one of the towers of the Salt Lake Temple.

I was . . . in a place few people would have been [in] since the building was dedicated. In a small room that has rarely if ever been used, I saw exquisite pioneer era woodwork.

I remember the sense of awe that came over me when I imagined the workmen who had so carefully carved and finished the detailed moldings. They toiled away without power tools in a place where, for the most part, only the Lord they loved and heavenly beings would look upon it. They did it not for man or for recognition but for Him, for His house.¹⁵

The Arts in Zion: A Community of Creators

The primary function of the arts in Zion is to grace our lives with beauty, to foster truth, and to perpetuate the good that is in all of us. Late in his life, the great Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy argued that “the ideal held up in a proper work of art comes from God, was originally revealed in action by the life of Christ . . . and is passed on to all humanity by artists.”¹⁶ John Gardner reduces his concept to a simple but compelling formula: “The gods set ideals, heroes enact them, and artists or artist-historians preserve the image as a guide for man.”¹⁷ The arts have a remarkable power, through the senses, to focus our attention on universal realities, or, as Percy Bysshe Shelley once wrote, to make “familiar objects be as if they were not familiar,”¹⁸ thereby lifting our sights and giving us a vision of what could be.

How do we reintroduce into our own culture the vision of communal artistic endeavor about which we are speaking? Reviewing certain scriptures through a more artistic lens reveals solutions we may not have thought of before. The collective vision of Lehi, Nephi, and John provides powerful metaphors that reveal stark differences between worldly and Spirit-directed creative activity. In Revelation 12:12–17, we learn that the adversary is symbolized as a dragon-serpent, and that the Church of God and its faithful members are symbolized by a woman and man-child. The dragon “was wroth” with the Church membership “and went to make war” with them who “keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ” by casting “out of his mouth water as a flood after the woman, that he might cause her to be carried away of the flood” (verse 15). Now consider this flood in the light of Lehi’s imagery of the fountainhead and the dangerous river flowing from it, in the depths of which “many were drowned,” “lost from [Lehi’s] view, wandering in strange roads” (1 Ne. 8:20, 32). Further, consider how Nephi explains that the river of water was “filthiness,” “an awful gulf, which separated the wicked from the tree of life” (1 Ne. 15:27, 28). We are certainly experiencing this flood now. The “great and spacious building” (1 Ne. 8:26) is an obvious type of Babylon. John describes Babylon as the antithesis of Zion in its lust for gold, silver, precious stones, pearls, fine linen, vessels of various make and materials, spices, foodstuffs, farm animals, chariots, slaves, and even the “souls of men” (Rev. 18:12–13). Those active in today’s Babylon have been knowingly merchandising in the souls of men. John’s description of the fall of Babylon has great relevance to our subject: “And the voice of harpers, and musicians, and of pipers, and trumpeters, shall be heard no more at all in thee; and no craftsman, of whatsoever craft he be, shall be found

any more in thee” (Rev. 18:22). This can be interpreted in at least two ways: either the artists and artisans were no more found in Babylon because they had long ago deserted that evil empire and its commercial prostitution of the good, the true, and the beautiful in favor of being artists for Zion; or, the worst scenario is that they all went down with Babylon. We hope for the former, but fear for the latter. There is much serious food for thought for us in these scriptural scenes. How ironic that composers of the stature of di Lasso, Palestrina, and Verdi would have set Psalm 137 to music: “By the [waters] of Babylon, there we sat down [and] wept, when we remembered Zion.”

“Seek Ye Earnestly the Best Gifts”

Besides putting our own houses in order by rejecting the lure of making merchandise of our God-given creativity, we can expand our conception of spiritual gifts to include artistic gifts, for they are virtually identical in origin and proper usage. It is clear to anyone who has studied the lives of great artists and composers that they came into this life already endowed with remarkable skills connected to their chosen art. Mozart, for example, was composing music when he was only four years old; Beethoven wrote his first composition when only twelve. The prophet Samuel heard the voice of the Lord while yet a child (1 Sam. 3:1–11), and the boy prophet Joseph Smith saw the Father and the Son in vision at fourteen; both became great in the sight of God. Whether artistic or prophetic, spiritual gifts are dispensed in accordance with ability, need, and potential for good, both for the possessor and for those who might be blessed by that gift. In fact, some gifts, like the gift of tongues, are paired—they require a giver and a receiver: “It is given to some to speak with tongues; and to another is given the interpretation of tongues”(D&C 46:24–25). Likewise, the full expression of an aesthetic impulse also requires delivery and response, an artist and an audience, and the results of bridging the two are similar: “Wherefore, he that preacheth [or performeth] and he that receiveth, understand one another, and both are edified and rejoice together” (D&C 50:22). When the unity of the artist’s expression and receiver’s edification fails, either the artist’s skill was insufficient or the receiver was unprepared to receive the message. Elder Orson F. Whitney promised, “We will yet have Miltons and Shakespeares of our own.”¹⁹ When a colleague’s wife was asked, “Why don’t we yet have such greats in the Church?” she replied, “We will have our Miltons and Shakespeares when we have audiences who can understand and appreciate the works of Milton and Shakespeare!”

But these points also relate to each individual: “To every man is given a gift by the Spirit of God” (D&C 46:11). It was once said of a departed friend: “He died with his music still in him.” We all have both a creative bent that needs development so we can give expression to all the good that is in us and also a “work on the earth” to perform. In both cases, we have an errand from the Lord. To realize it we must discover that inner gift and bring it forth as our special offering to help build the kingdom. Our faithful artists are uniquely endowed and especially responsible for giving sublime expression to the “music that is in them,” for the Lord expects us to give our best that all may be “edified and rejoice together.”

We have stunning examples of the hidden, humble artists of our own dispensation. Consider the artistic contributions of a prophet-craftsman like Brigham Young, who lovingly applied his carpentry, stone masonry, and glazier’s skills to the Kirtland and Nauvoo temples. What of the multitude of unnamed, yet highly artistic, brothers and sisters who carved the sun-, moon-, and star-stones; the wood and plaster friezes; painted the murals; and crocheted the altar doilies of our temples? Whether knowingly or unknowingly, an elaborately knitted altar covering mirrors a devoted person’s attempt to celebrate the God-created symmetry of the universe, where every planetary orbit works in perfect synchronization with all others in willing obedience to a divinely decreed order, just as Abraham saw in vision (Abr. 3 and Facsimile No. 2).

In the Washington D.C. Temple is found a small treasure created by President Spencer W. Kimball—a short poem in free verse written by a prophet of God to celebrate the quiet holiness of that place. It is art freely created and gladly given with no thought of personal gain. His small creative offering signals what we as a people must become—faithful servants who produce art for the glory of God and the beautification of Zion. Even scientific inquiry supports this point: studies have shown that the mind seems more inclined toward creativity when motivated by the joy of solving a problem than by extrinsic rewards.²⁰ President Gordon B. Hinckley wrote a telling inscription for Brigham Young University’s Museum of Art that is displayed beside the museum’s centerpiece, Carl Bloch’s *Christ Healing the Sick at Bethesda*: “What is displayed [at the Museum of Art] will nourish our finer instincts and cause us more frequently to ponder on the wonder of him who is our God and our creator, the author of all the truly beautiful.”²¹

Conclusion

The gospel paradigm of creativity suggests a new perspective on the arts in the Church and in our personal lives. Our individual creative impulses are outward manifestations of our divine parentage. Our need to leave an ordered imprint on a chaotic world, or merely to decorate a common object with an original design, reflects the divine spark in every one of us. The adversary, who manipulates most of the world's artistic media, is intent on blinding us to our creative natures in order to pervert the arts to his own soul-destroying ends. We sometimes unwittingly further these dead ends by uncritically accepting what is produced and made popular and alluring by the mass media. Even some of our best creative minds can be seduced by worldly models because they guarantee success in terms of self-serving fame and fortune, thereby undermining the communal creativity and selfless devotion that the Lord would have us give in laying the foundations for a Zion society. The importance of developing our individual creative capacities goes beyond professional pursuits; it lies at the very heart of each individual's potential contribution to the establishment of Zion on this earth. Perfecting our individual creative impulses is the final test of godhood. "Then shall they be gods, because they have no end" (D&C 132:20). If all this is true, then the answer to the original question—"Who told you that you weren't creative?"—is obvious.

Brigham Young had two grandiose visions of the gathering in the last days. The first and most important was following the guide of the Prophet Joseph by gathering the Saints to Zion to receive the higher law embodied in temple ordinances. The second gathering was a grandiose intellectual project, which was nothing less than the salvaging of world civilization. As Brother Brigham put it, "Every accomplishment, every polished grace, every useful attainment in mathematics, music, and in all science and art belong to the Saints,"²² and they "shall begin to rapidly collect the intelligence that is bestowed upon the nations, for all this intelligence belongs to Zion. All the knowledge, wisdom, power, and glory that have been bestowed upon the nations of the earth, from the days of Adam till now, must be gathered home to Zion."²³

Why? Because it is quite possible for such treasures to be lost and this wisdom to be taken from the wicked, and once it is gone, "I question," Brigham says, "whether it would return again."²⁴ In the spirit of Malachi's prophecy, we must turn our hearts to our cultural fathers by passing on that rich legacy to our children. This knowledge will provide a sure foundation for building our own creative contribution to the Zion that will surely come.

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