

Art: Revealing the Us in the Other  
By Pamela Hill Nettleton, PhD

It is not a passive thing to sit in the audience. It is also not a safe thing.

We file in, avoiding eye contact and clutching tickets. We sort ourselves into aisles that are lettered and numbered in illogical fashion, we search for but cannot spell mezzanine, and we politely share the armrests as though nothing transformative is about to happen and as if we will emerge in two hours utterly unchanged.

But we are wrong.

When the curtain rises or the dancer enters or the baton drops or the singer exhales—if it is good art, and, heck, sometimes even if it is bad art—the cacophony of the disparate lives of 200 or 400 or 1200 people in the audience is stilled. Some common human ground is found and tilled and made fertile and our hearts are laid bare to each other and to ourselves.

We can know nothing about a people, yet when we listen to the rise and fall of their music, some visceral place in them touches a visceral place in us. Without living another life, we come to know another life. We believe that we are unique, that we are the first generation to be outraged by injustice or feel true passion, but art reveals the artifice in that sort of thinking. We learn that we share the ages, we share the planet, and we are not the only ones who have suffered great loss or who love to tap dance.

It would be rude to look a stranger in the eye and ask to see his soul. But from the audience, we can clearly see it.

Art engenders empathy. In its beauty and its ugliness, art reveals what it is to be humane. Art bypasses small talk and inserts us into the hearts and minds of those who we might otherwise overlook. Art reveals the us in the other. Art has the profound power to show us we are not alone.

I teach a course in writing about the arts. I bring students to galleries, the ballet, the symphony, the theater, and the opera. Even if their early education has been

excellent, this is often their first Vivaldi and Shepard and Balanchine and Pollock. First, we read good critical writing about the art form of the week. Then, we go backstage, to rehearsal or to the studio, to learn that art is made with effort and deliberation, that a ballerina's feet are covered in calluses, and that a good cello costs as much as a small house. Finally, they dress in carefully pressed dresses and badly chosen ties, attend the performance, and write a critical review, à la Roger Ebert.

They learn that "I didn't like it" does not constitute insight. They learn that claims should be backed up with logic. They learn to look up rather than guess how to spell Tchaikovsky, to actually read the program notes, and to stop dangling their participles. They learn that "good" is not a precise adjective and that the word "relatable" sets my teeth on edge. And, as valuable as it is to learn how to write a coherent sentence that communicates a clear idea, they learn a life lesson that is not at all about writing. They tell me about it in their final essay of the course.

"Part takes us out of our comfort zones into a world. We didn't even know existed."

"While the media is telling us what to think, artists guide us to think in a different way."

"This was my first symphony. It will not be my last."

"Covering art is not just letting people know when some art gallery opens, but letting people know that a gallery is a glimpse into the world around us, as well as into our own identities. "

"Here I was, a sports writer in the land of violas and pirouettes. It was my growth mentally as a person that was tested here, wrapping my brain around the arts, beautiful creations that I had never been exposed to, and making my own sense out of them. I believe that I not only survived, but learned to thrive and embrace the world, once that to be another dimension by me, as my own."

The formation of the mind and heart of students is one of five themes that shaped the universities strategic plan—a plan that envisions Marquette as a place where students examine the purpose of their lives in the context of the world larger than their own backyard.

Yet how can students come to understand what is beyond their own experience? A student cannot be lectured into becoming a socially conscious and humane professional. A compassionate heart and soul cannot be formed on command.

But students can make and witness art. They can stand on the stage and sit in the audience. Even if they don't speak the language, they can see the canvas and hear the music, and there, souls and hearts speak to each other without boundaries.

It can be a brave thing to sit in an audience. It requires nothing less than being fully human. We already know how to understand each other. From the audience, we can clearly see it.

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