

Why We Make Art

Today is a special day, a day to remember. Whatever your field or discipline is, whatever degree is about to be conferred upon you, yours is an exceptional achievement - a cause for joy and great pride. It is my honor to address you and your loved ones on this auspicious occasion.

I wish I knew the name of the person to whom I owe the illumination I am about to share with you.

She introduced herself as a student whose field was rocket science. And since here at the University of Chicago we do not have a rocket science concentration, at least not rocket science in its concrete meaning, this tells you immediately that we are talking about a student in a different institution. It was MIT, to be exact. And this young woman was explaining to us, members of an outside review committee, why the arts were personally important to her. She was a highly articulate young woman, and I remember her saying, "when I find myself hopelessly stumped trying to solve a complex problem in a science project, I take my cello and play." That was her way of taking a break. Amazingly, when she would go back to her problem, her mind seemed to have opened in some fresh, new way, and new solutions presented themselves.

That is about as cogent a way as I have ever heard someone explain what music meant to her and how, even though she was not planning a life in music, a life WITH music was critically important to her.

I started to compose music, invent melodies, around the age of seven. And no, I had never heard the word "composer" and, in fact, had no idea I was creating something that did not exist before. I think I must have thought that these melodies were always there, part of the universe, in the same way that there was water in the pond and birds in the sky. I would come home from school and read out loud to my mother what we had learned in school, and when the lines in the storybook contracted into a two or four-line stanza because a character was singing a song, my reading turned to singing. "Where did this melody come from? Did you learn it in school?" my mother would ask. I would point to the printed words and say, "it's here; right here." And indeed, initially I thought it was.

In time I started taking piano lessons, and my teacher wrote down my melodies, in music notation. The turning point was when my teacher, unbeknownst to us, sent some of my melodies to the Israeli radio, which led to the inclusion of two of my songs in a program called "Children's Corner." Lo and behold! Not only did I get to hear my songs sung by someone other than myself, it was a whole children's choir who had learned and performed them. A miraculous experience: something that came from inside me suddenly having its own independent existence -- bringing about the realization that I would want to repeat that kind of experience over and over.

People come to music in many different ways. There is a misconception in the mind of many that the kind of music I am talking about -- what people refer to broadly as classical music -- belongs in the realm of the affluent, European-bred, elitist, and, in a word, "stuffy" segments of society, making it of lesser relevance and interest to those who purport to know what counts in the life of the modern person who is engaged with the real problems of existence. An unfortunate, fallacious assumption that robs one of what is truly one of life's great joys. Recently I found myself watching segments of reruns of television news programs in connection with the untimely death of veteran correspondent Bob Simon. Most moving of many such programs paying tribute to Simon's life's work was "Joy in the Congo," and "From Trash To Triumph," the latter an extended program on how the lives of people in a small, poverty-stricken village in Paraguay are transformed when recycled trash is used to build musical instruments -- violins, double basses, woodwinds -- enabling young kids to learn music and play in an orchestra.

We are ALL ennobled by the active pursuit of beauty, a distinguishing characteristic of humankind that is apparently encoded into the Homo sapiens' genetic makeup. And as these two wonderfully-documented examples illustrated, when channeled through the rigors of discipline -- an essential ingredient in any endeavor that is worth seeking and that aims to better the human condition -- our lives are enriched, made more fulfilling, regardless of one's station in the hierarchy of affluence or comfort.

In what may be seen as an almost humorous, perhaps trivial flip side of this equation, a recent study cited in The Economist magazine in an article titled "Beware of Beethoven" on a topic that may be near and dear to a segment of the Economist's readership -- that of the buying habits of the online shopper -- seems to have shown that when classical music is played in the background, purchases of luxury items tend to rise. Aha, you might say: proof of classical music's elitist nature? Not so fast, please. I contend that, just as likely, the presence of classical art music increases a sense of "having," rather than "having not." Being surrounded by fine arts, regardless of media, allows us to luxuriate. Not in material riches, but in the comfort of the knowledge that to rise above the material is a privilege of which we can partake. If we can engage in the pursuit of the beautiful, then we have wealth, of the kind that sustains our spirit and uplifts our soul.

But what is the beautiful? Beauty, of course, is in the eye, and the ear, of the beholder. When creating, the artist becomes an architect giving shape and meaning to a given art form's raw matter; she becomes an inventor, an orator, storyteller, someone who holds a mirror to the world.

Art, in fact, is often NOT about "beauty" in some conventional, preconfigured sense of the word. Are you with us for the duration? Or do you tune out, thinking that the function of art is to sooth and entertain you? Listen to what a University of Chicago colleague, poet Rosanna Warren, wrote to me after hearing a concert of new music:

"I walked home with my ears newly tuned: every stray sound I heard -- wind rustling in bare branches, the whoosh of a car's tire, distant sigh of brakes -- seemed an extension of the music, raw material for possible music. It was an ecstatic experience."

It sometimes takes a non-musician to grasp the true essence of it. Music and its affect capture the world through sound. The enormity of what music can be is staggering. And at its core there is an essential human need to make things, and to communicate them to others. In my case, I enjoy making things out of sound. That instinctive pleasure must have been what prompted the creation of those melodies I sang to my mother as a young child. Over time, those melodies turned into song cycles, a symphony, concertos, an opera. I fancy thinking that our prehistoric ancestors, we will call them Mr. and Mrs. Caveman, took the same pleasure in using a sharp object to etch images, shapes and designs on the walls of their cave. Or picking up a hollow stick and blowing into it, then making patterns of the sounds that came out. There is joy in the activity. And there is great joy in the discovery that such activity leads to something on which you can feast your eye, your ear, and your soul, too. Something that offers insight, illumination, and the gift of sharing and communion. And there is intense gratification in the realization that others receive joy and happiness from it, too, feeling uplifted and transported beyond the here and now. Perhaps it is also the artist's way of saying "take note - I was here. This is my way of leaving a tiny imprint on the vastness of the universe. I, too, am part of the creative forces of our world."

Art by its very nature is meant to be experienced. For me, the presence of the listener, the one who takes it all in, is an inseparable part of the act of creation. And while I compose first of all for myself, filtering every decision I make through my own critical faculties, I cannot imagine a composer, a painter, a playwright, who would claim to be content without there ever being someone on the other end, ready to experience the work. Is there anything that is more in keeping with the flow of life than the need to touch -- both literally and figuratively -- and to be touched? And this is where communication comes in. And yet I would argue that to make communication one's starting point is putting the cart before the horse. We create, and we must believe that if we put all we have into the making there will be others with whom that which is "our truth" will resonate. Our shared humanity is what supports this belief.

But it starts with the act of making, for all of its toil, its rigor, the agony and the ecstasy of it; the ecstasy part -- the vision of which sustains us, those EUREKA moments -- often being doled out in tiny increments, and in vast disproportion, alas, to the price, the agony, that the process extracts from us. And so we've come now full circle, back to the premise that anything that is really worth pursuing, regardless of field or discipline, and that will better our, humanity's, condition in some manner, is not easily attained. The road is arduous, sometimes humbling. Which is why at the core of it all there must be joy in the making itself.

And this is what I wish to say to you on this great day of yours, to you and to the people who love you and who have supported you on the road you have chosen: set your goals far and high, and be willing to go to the end of the earth to achieve them. And may you always find joy in the sheer act of doing.

Shulamit Ran