

ESSAYS ON FAITH: ART LESSONS DON'T JUST TEACH US HOW TO DRAW

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HE was trying to draw a picture of a sunlit forest. The magazine page lay to his side as a model. A lovely photograph of a fall scene. He drew a brown trunk. Then a green lollipop top. When he drew a black circle in the middle of the trunk with the word "hoo" in a bubble coming out from it ... well, I had to turn away so he would not see my amusement.

The art teacher stood behind my 6-year-old son with her eyebrows raised. Her amusement was thinly veiled as well.

"He likes to draw," she said with a smile.

What happened next, I cannot explain. She knelt down beside him and gently redirected his attention to the magazine image he was attempting to re-create. She showed him how the trees that were deeper into the forest looked like they were up higher on the page, and how to fill in around them to ground them with the others. She showed him how the leafy foliage of the trees overlapped to create one beautifully diverse umbrella individually distinguishable by light and shadow, she showed him how to change his strokes with the pastel to create interest to the eye.

After each lesson, she moved away and let him work on his own for a while, only to return a few minutes later to point out something he had failed to notice.

"Do you see this trunk?" She would ask. "I'm glad you saw the brown in it, but I want you to look at this picture again. What other colors do you see here? I want you to pull out all the colors that you see and put them here beside your paper. There's not only brown here, is there?"

She moved around the table, making similar points for the other students. Each time she would direct the child's attention to the image he was copying. "Look," she would say, or "See."

I was mesmerized. She was not so much teaching them how to draw as she was teaching them to how to see. I watched as a picture of trees became alive with shapes and colors for one 6-year-old boy. Within an hour's time, he had stopped looking at the world as flat and had begun to really see what it was really made of.

All because of a great teacher and a little practice.

As I considered the transformation in my son, my heart felt a heavy sadness. I began to think of this great world, and how we all might benefit from some art lessons.

Recent events, I fear, have clouded our ability to see. The terrorist attacks in Great Britain ring far too close to home. Our hearts and psyches still brutally damaged from the events of 9/11, we find ourselves rooting for those involved who still remain alive to be caught and punished

severely. The tragic events in London were followed shortly by the shooting of an apparently innocent man. The situation was complicated, to say the least, but there has been much talk of racial profiling and fear of backlash among those of Middle Eastern descent.

It's frightening. I've heard more than one comment indicating that the tragic shooting was the man's own fault for running from the authorities. Well, running certainly didn't help him, but it was the callousness with which the comments were made that gripped my heart with fear.

Lives are becoming devalued. Fear has jaded our vision. We need a teacher to help us see. When we stop seeing others as individuals, when we start looking for differences instead of commonalities, then we are letting fear control us and cheat us of life's great gifts.

Great teachers and a little (OK, maybe a lot) of practice.

We must become teachers to one another. The counter to this is that we must also become students of one another. This is where the practice part comes into play. By reaching out of our comfort zone over and over again we are demonstrating to those who differ from us that we see them as valuable.

Does this mean we have to compromise our own beliefs? I don't know of any religion whose doctrines are violated by treating others as individuals and with respect.

My heart is strengthened by the efforts of people such as the Imam Jamal Daoudi from the Islamic Center of West Virginia. A recent Gazette article illustrates this man's attempts to educate others about his spiritual beliefs. Daoudi is described as "active in the interfaith community." He and those members of the faith community who have invited him into their world are to be commended. By listening to one another, they show they are of value to this world and to each other.

It's all in the way we see it. Our eyes light our path. How we see the world determines the choices we make. How we see others dictates how we will treat them, how we will talk about them, how much we choose to become a part of their lives.

The greatest teacher I know had something to say about this: "The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!" (Matthew 6:22-23)

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