

Imparting One to Another

The Role of Humility, Charity, and Consecration within an Artistic Community

Tanya Rizzuti

A few weeks ago, there was a yard sale down the street from my mother's house. I struck up a conversation with the woman running the sale and discovered she was an artist, so I asked to see her work. The two pieces she showed me, both paintings on stone, were of great beauty. The artist spoke of her work and her creation process with a confidence that made me take a second look at her, a talented person who like millions of others around the world will probably never be widely known. She is a barmaid. When the woman found out that I, too, am an artist and asked me some questions, I was pleasantly surprised by the interest she took in my comments. I left the brief conversation feeling that I had met someone genuine and open, someone both confident and humble. I wonder how many people who come into the bar know they are being served by a woman with such ability.

Contrast her with a prominent Utah painter I met a few months ago. I asked him if he ever taught art, thinking that with all his talent he would have a lot to teach the next generation of artists. To my surprise, he took offense and responded curtly, "I am a painter. My paintings have been exhibited in galleries all over." He then proceeded to list his many awards and accomplishments.

Or contrast both these painters with my former college roommate, an aspiring watercolorist. She painted with meticulous accuracy, taking months to complete one of her beautiful paintings. They were well worth the wait; her paintings seemed to take on a life of their own. Many people complimented her on her work, but she would always respond in the negative, saying that it wasn't any good, that it wasn't anything notable, and that there were so many people more talented than she was.

These three artists represent three approaches to the profession. There are artists who want to learn and grow and want to help others do the same. There are artists who are self-involved, whose main concern is obtaining accolades. And there are those artists who belittle themselves into nonbeing. Of the three approaches, I believe that willingness to both learn and share is the most rewarding. A confident humility is the key.

Abraham 3 presents a concept directly related to humility. There the Lord teaches Abraham about the order of the universe, about the hierarchy of stars and of spirits. Some spirits, he says, have more intelligence, more light and truth than others (Abr. 3:16–18; see also D&C 93:36 and Isa. 55:8–9). Then the Lord says, “These two facts do exist, that there are two spirits, one being more intelligent than the other; there shall be another more intelligent than they; *I am the Lord thy God, I am more intelligent than they all*” (Abr. 3:19; italics added).

When compared to the creations of God and his glory and intelligence, we are of ourselves nothing. Humility, however, is not self-deprecation, nor is it a lack of confidence. Confidence is necessary to an artist—you must promote your work and your capabilities to land the job, impress the client, win the grant. When I speak of humility, I am referring to a deep understanding of how you fit into the cosmos—a simultaneous awareness of your worth and nothingness. I love Ammon’s example of confident humility. In Alma 26, Ammon spends nine verses rejoicing in the missionary miracles he has seen, only to be rebuked by his brother Aaron for boasting. Ammon responds:

I do not boast in my own strength, nor in my own wisdom; but behold, my joy is full, yea, my heart is brim with joy, and I will rejoice in my God. Yea, I know that I am nothing; as to my strength I am weak; therefore I will not boast of myself, but I will boast of my God, for in his strength I can do all things; yea, behold, many mighty miracles we have wrought in this land, for which we will praise his name forever. (Alma 26:11–12)

As President Benson once said, “Humility, of course, is not a sign of weakness. Humility does not mean timidity. A person can be humble, powerful, and courageous. The Prophet Joseph is a good example. Humility is an acknowledged recognition of our dependence on a higher power.”¹ As artists we should recognize that there is a higher power who can teach us, inspire us, and help us use our talents for a greater good. And we can show appreciation to God for our artistic endeavors by giving glory to him.

Abraham 3 may also relate to the hierarchy of talent and technical knowledge within an artist community (or any other community). Obviously, not everyone is at the same creative level. There are some artists just

starting out who do not yet comprehend how composition and structure can improve their work. They need guidance to help their potential grow into mature artistic expression. Other artists have years of experience or more intuitive talent than others. Do these advanced artists have a responsibility to the beginning artists?

Again we look to the Lord for an example. It's impossible to imagine the Lord saying, "Ha, ha. I know more than you do. My creations are better than yours. A sunset you paint will never be more magnificent than the real one I created." He is more intelligent, more talented, and more in tune with spiritual and temporal things than we are, but he does not keep his abilities to himself. He has declared that his sole "work and glory" is to "bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man" (Moses 1:39). His is a generous, charitable work. He wants to teach us "line upon line, precept upon precept" (2 Ne. 28:30) and, if we are obedient, give us the "mysteries of [his] kingdom" (D&C 63:23).

God does not become any less a god by unselfishly imparting his knowledge. As we advance in creativity, his glory also advances because he is the one who gave us the talent and implanted in us the desire to create. As we progress by magnifying the talents he gave us for good, his work progresses. Therefore, as artists advance in the intelligence of their craft, can they not also give back to other artists and help lift them to a higher level? Doing so would not decrease the advanced artists' own talent and the beauty of the works they produce. If anything, it may glorify them further when artists give them credit for what they have been taught.

In the preface to *Teaching, No Greater Call* is a comment directly applicable to art: "You have been given a stewardship to teach the gospel of Jesus Christ. Part of this stewardship is creation. In a sense you are creating a teacher from the talents and resources given you by the Lord."² As Latter-day Saints, the majority of us have been trained as teachers from childhood; we have given speeches, we have served in callings, we are visiting and home teachers, and many of us have taught in a class setting. Opportunities to teach also abound in the art field. Not only can we teach other artists about style, technique, symbols, practices, and history, but we can also teach ways to view art and appreciate its language, to look at a piece of art and interpret the feelings it evokes. Teaching another person can help us improve our own understanding of a topic and cement those principles in our own lives: when we teach others, we teach ourselves.

To have humility, then, implies an obligation to share the knowledge we have. Additionally, an understanding that we can be teachers and yet learn helps us become charitable. Humility and charity must go hand in hand, for "knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth" (1 Cor. 8:1). "Charity

suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up” (1 Cor. 13:4). Moroni adds that charity “seeketh not her own” (Moro. 7:45). Charity is crucial to the artistic community’s humility.

I had the opportunity to work at a design firm in California where a remarkable artistic community spirit existed. While keeping the clients’ needs in mind, artists were usually allowed full creative control to come up with design solutions. An artist would sit down for an hour and sketch whatever ideas came to mind. Then these sketches would be displayed in the conference room. Other designers would offer feedback on what was working, what color combinations were most effective, and which designs were the strongest for what the artist was trying to communicate. Through this process, the selection would be narrowed down to two design concepts. After a review of the two finished images, the designs would be presented to the client. Remarkably, in the entire time I worked there, I never witnessed any hurt feelings during this process. The attitude of giving and receiving feedback was one of charity: my colleagues wanted to see the best design come out of me and knew that I wanted the best from them. The art was what was important, not the ego. For this reason, any time an artist learned something new, took a class, or attended a workshop, he or she was expected to hold a “town meeting” and teach the new skills to the others.

My art has been enriched by such sharing. Often I have found that revelation and inspiration during the creative process comes not only from above and within but also from the thoughtful suggestions of my peers. When we have an attitude of charity, of goodwill, and of genuine concern for the progression of art and artist, then we start on the path to establishing an artistic Zion, a safe place where people can grow in inspiration, talent, and ability: “And Zion cannot be built up unless it is by the principle of the law of the celestial kingdom; otherwise I cannot receive her unto myself” (D&C 105:5).

In the New Testament and the Doctrine and Covenants, we read about the celestial law of consecration. (See Acts 2:44–47, Acts 4:32, 2 Cor. 8:14, D&C 42:30, and D&C 78:5 as examples.) This law, too, applies to the artist community. I took some 3D classes at a college in San Francisco at a time when I already had two years of professional 3D experience. The class encouraged students to present their work in stages in order to receive critiques. When the first student showed his work and asked for comments, no one said anything. Having graduated from Brigham Young University, I was accustomed to student feedback. I raised my hand and commented on what I liked about the piece and what could be improved. Another student also offered suggestions. A few others followed, but out of a room of about twenty, only five offered critiques. Thinking maybe people were feeling shy

or did not know how to give feedback, I turned to a silent member of the class and asked why he was not making any suggestions. His response was nonchalant: “Why? They’re the competition.”

There have been many other instances of selfishness at that school and in other jobs. But in those same places, I’ve also met many good artists with charitable hearts. Looking back on what I have learned in the past six years since graduation, I think of Mosiah 4:21: “And now, if God, who has created you, on whom you are dependent for your lives and for all that you have and are, doth grant unto you whatsoever ye ask that is right, in faith, believing that ye shall receive, O then, how ye ought to impart of the substance you have one to another.”

Creating a Zion artist community does not mean we lose our identity, nor does it entail competition. It means sharing strengths. Equality in Zion does not mean everyone is creating the same pieces of art, nor that no one is experimenting with different techniques. Suppose I meet someone who delights in painting cacti, and I decide I would like to focus on the same subject. After a long time studying with this artist, not to mention a lot of practice, I learn everything about cacti and how to paint them. But no matter how much I learn about cacti, I would modify the other artist’s technique to fit my personality and reflect what I have to say about cacti; I would create my own style.

Even if I were to equal my instructor in knowledge and technique, my renditions would not have to be exactly the same. Nor would my versions be better or worse than his, although that judgment may depend on the viewer’s perspective. Millais’s painting of Ophelia is not necessarily better than Hughes’s; I find beauty in both works. There is no need to fear sharing techniques and ideas. With consecration there is room for growth all around.

I see seven ways Latter-day Saint artists can help bring about a Zion art community:

1. Recognize that the Lord has given each of us talents and wants us to reach our full potential. He does not limit growth to one individual.
2. Offer thoughtful solutions and generous advice when people ask for help.
3. Realizing that people need to be understood, suspend judgment through such questions as, What are you trying to say in this piece? What made you decide to pick this subject? What does this color or that shape mean to you?

4. Learn to be accessible and willing to share information. Recently, a man said that a mutual acquaintance was the most generous and unpretentious artist he had ever met. I have come to believe that this is the highest compliment he could have given this artist. I hope that someday someone says the same of me.
5. Avoid jealousy of another's intelligence by having a heart full of humility.
6. Willingly receive criticism and suggestions from people from all walks of life. Who knows? That barmaid with only a ninth-grade art education might know something I don't about composition.
7. Extend forgiveness to artists who close their hearts and minds. The Lord has said, "I, the Lord, will forgive whom I will forgive, but of you it is required to forgive all men" (D&C 64:10).

Let us choose to offer humility, charity, and consecration to the world through our art and by the way that we treat our fellow creators. By doing so we can increase joy in the world and offer a safe haven for future ideas and learning.

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1. Ezra Taft Benson, *The Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 369.

2. *Teaching, No Greater Call: Resource Materials for Teacher Improvement* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1978), iii.