

Inching us closer to wholeness

Why artists matter in the church by Jason Ropp

I've noticed a trend among artists in Evangelical churches—they don't fare well. I first noticed this during a brief foray into the Christian Music Industrial Complex, when a small record label in Ohio was courting my band. I began hearing backstories from the label execs about all my favorite childhood Christian musicians. Moral collapse was high and faith was often (in my limited purview at the time) abandoned. In the end, they wanted us to be a rock and roll worship band. I wasn't interested. Around the same time, I also began to be fairly uncomfortable in church settings. Much of the work we did as musicians *was* leading worship, which I felt unqualified for and uninterested in. But people expected us to do it and called what we did ministry. It got worse when I started writing my own songs. Having been in so many different church cultures (over 100 different churches), I learned that each culture has a different set of rules and taboo subjects—landmines you find by talking. What I was digging for creatively was something more than the typical Jesus music fare; whatever I wrote would be a point of tension somewhere in the church. So while I started writing profusely during that period, I showed very little of it to anyone; this caused a strain that would degrade into cynicism.

When we are children, art is simple: we draw and then we show people what we drew. Like Jake (age 5) who after church this past Sunday was ecstatic to show us the Star Wars comic strip he had made. He had also written scene descriptions, which were helpful, considering the low quality of the drawing. It was a loose rendering of the Star Wars canon; for example, in this particular Star Wars universe, Vader chops off Yoda's head and Yoda's lightsaber is lying on the ground next to him, still turned on. Jake obviously doesn't realize that lightsabers typically disengage when dropped. Though there is that scene on Bespin . . . but I

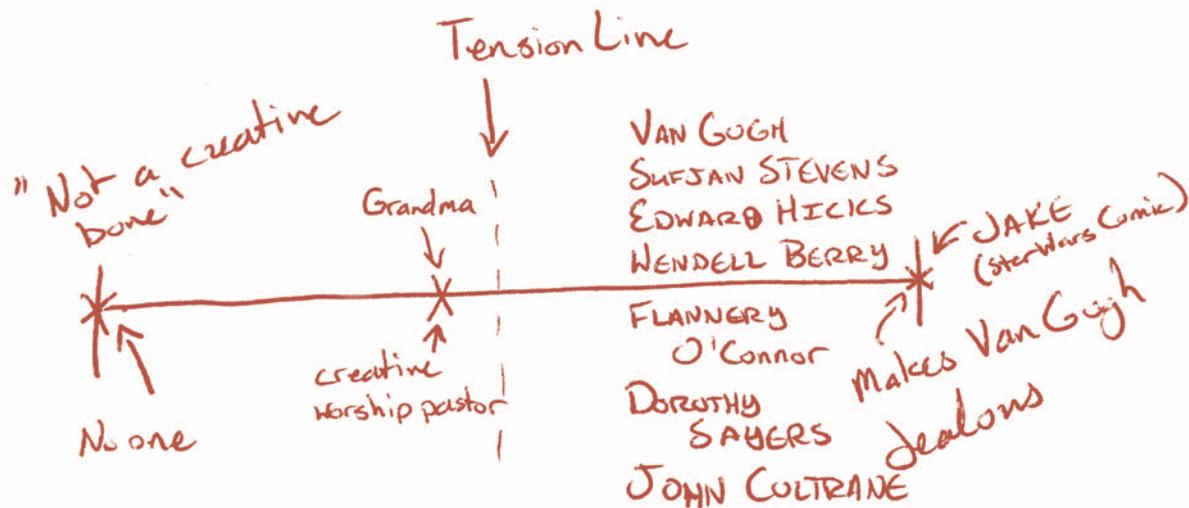
digress in nerdy fashion. The point is that Jake's drawing wasn't all that good, but none of us cared. It was hilarious and he loved making and showing.

At some point, perhaps in two years, someone will tell Jake that his drawings aren't very good—unrealistic, abstract even. Jake will then spend the next 80 years either letting a creative part of himself die miserably, or fighting to hang on to his crayons. When artists stop creating and showing, a large and important something inside of them shuts down; they go partially numb and the world around them loses something important. It took a re-awakening in myself before I realized how cynical it made me, especially toward the church culture that I was afraid to show my work to.

My own story ends well and without any severe moral failure—or at least no severe spike in my typical severe moral failures. I found a group of artists who have learned to navigate these tensions of art and faith, a group headed up by my now friend and mentor, Jonathan Reuel. While songwriting and performing over the last 20 years, he has picked up artists, people on the fringes of faith, or people of faith only on the fringes of art. His goal has been to help them plunge head first into both. I've heard from dozens who attribute the vitality of their faith and art to Jonathan.

But a lot of artists haven't met people like my friends in the Dandelion Seed Company. So they sit uneasy in pews with an impulse, and they have no idea what to do with it. One of three things happens: they abandon their art, dilute it severely and lose impact, or slowly distance themselves

Every so often I meet another artist feeling these tensions and I'm reminded how great it is **to have people who understand both faith and art on a deep level.**



from their faith community while they fight to hang on to their crayons. Every so often I meet another artist feeling these tensions and I'm reminded how great it is to have people who understand both faith and art on a deep level. I don't have to pick one.

As to why the tension exists, it's something I've been trying to study and work out, both for myself and others. There are myriad reasons, historical, theological, and otherwise, but for this limited space I'll offer the dime tour. Consider the spectrum at the top of this page:

On one end you have the self-proclaimed "I don't have a creative bone in my body." Hogwash. I've never met anyone who has zero desire to make something and show it to people. There is a level of creativity to everything we do—business, teaching, preaching, cooking. As you move up that spectrum, you have people we call "creative": a worship leader who plugs her banjo into electric guitar pedals and sounds like Appalachia formed a U2 cover band, or my Grandma who knows nothing about electric guitar but makes these impressive angel brooches out of old spoons, or as I learned recently, has some impressive oil painting skills that she honed as a child.

But somewhere along that spectrum the natives get restless, shifting uncomfortably in the pews as they wonder what the artist is up to and if maybe they secretly vote Democrat. They also might wonder why the artist isn't writing "Christian songs" with a clear spiritual message—by which they mean things that get played on Christian radio and are suitable for Becky and her kids (Google "Becky Christian Music" for an exploration on the target market of Christian radio). The point is, there is a line on my completely made up spectrum where artists leaning hard into this process of creating things and showing people get tense. The artist beyond the line starts asking difficult

questions, or just incessant questions like a child: "Why? Why? Why?" and "because" as an answer only makes them more curious. So all the things you'd rather not talk about are precisely the thing that this breed of artist wants to put on canvas. Annoying—isn't it? How far the line is along the artist spectrum depends on the church, but I've only seen a couple of churches where that line genuinely doesn't exist.

In the end, churches aren't sure what to do with art or artists' constant questions and tinkering with ideas; and artists often aren't sure how to engage the church, how to ask the really hard questions as a committed member of the culture.

There is more, much more, and every artist is different. Some are as right as rain in their church and really leaning



Vincent Van Gogh's *Starry Night*

into their art. But we need to get to brass tacks here. So I'll leave the more for another day.

How can we carve space for these strange people in our communities?

Realize that on both the artists' and the evangelical churches' side, we are in a stage of infancy and without a strong tradition. Right now the work is about learning what works and doesn't. Studying other communities that do this well can help, but more importantly we need to think of our current task as one of experimentation: uncomfortable, unpredictable, seemingly wasteful. So create time in your service and the life of your community for these experiments. Many attempts will fail, perhaps thousands. Expect that, but the one light bulb that does work could be transformative to your community; expect that too.

How can we support them and help build and guide what they do?

Artists need margins: time and emotional and financial space to think and try and fail and grow. Depending on the stage of the artist's skill and maturity, supporting those margins will look different. At an earlier stage perhaps it's supporting some sort of skill development, helping pay for instrument lessons or painting classes if they can't afford them. At this point you are an early investor—like the guy who wrote a \$100,000 check to two college kids 10 years before people knew what Google was.

Artists need margins: time and emotional and financial space to think and try and fail and grow. Depending on the stage of the artist's skill and maturity, supporting those margins will look different.

In all seriousness, what artists need most is a continual call to responsibility. While they are rightly responsible to find a way to put food on the table, they are also responsible to make the necessary effort and sacrifice that allows them to make things and show them to people. It is their role in the community of Jesus that inches us closer to wholeness. Their in-laws are probably after them about putting food on the table; challenge them to take their art seriously in the coming decades.

Why even bother in the first place?

First: There is a connection between the arts and the prophetic. Not necessarily foretelling, or "Thus says the

Lord," but Walter Brueggemann suggests that part of the role of the prophetic is to subvert and enrich our sense of imagination about the way things can be. Hope and purpose is a process of the imagination, a future story that we work toward. The OT prophets themselves were often spouting some of the most complex Hebrew poetry we know of. Art uncomfortably challenges the narrative we've bought into and forces us to ask the hard questions, to keep seeking God Himself rather than worshipping our image of Him. Artists' tough and incessant questions regarding what we believe and do makes for a healthier church.

Second: Artists can also go places and speak to issues that others can't. I just found an old issue of *The Atlantic* that featured the social club that met for beers every Tuesday morning and gave us such great works as the Narnia series, Lord of the Rings, and others. Lewis and Tolkien and Flannery O'Connor have a voice in the literary world, not Beverly Lewis.

Or as an anecdote for why art matters, consider Dave in Beijing. Dave was asked to head up an Asian missions organization doing cutting edge work in Thailand, China, Tibet, and elsewhere. But Dave was in a rock band. The organization is supportive of artists, but my friend Dave felt like dropping his dream of having a rock band in Beijing to do the more "responsible thing" and lead the missions organization. My mentor Jonathan intervened and told Dave he had a responsibility to create and asked the missions organization not only to free him but support him. He turned down the position. Within a couple of months, Dave's band was contacted by a company building China's largest video social network. One of the higher-ups had been attending shows and loved Dave's band. She asked them to be a feature band on the platform's battle of the bands. They made it to the final round, singing Mandarin rock songs informed by faith for 30,000 people.

What I'm hoping to see happen between artists and the church in the next twenty years is no small task for the church, but it is far from hopeless. Attitudes are already shifting; I've heard controversial artists such as Derek Webb (check out his song "What Matters More") say that the work of the artist in the church is far less dangerous than it was twenty years ago. I suppose you could say that the ground has been leveled—now a foundation can be put down.

P.S. I've hardly broken through the surface here. But I am interested in helping people go deeper. Feel free to contact me if you'd like to chat further: jasonropp@jasonropp.com