

Art and Devotion
Clark Knowles
Seacoast Baha'i Community

I've seen a series of commercials on television recently that advocate keeping the arts in our school systems. They show children as they might be without the influence of artistic studies. The children appear logical, grey, and humorless. They are effective ads, because despite our highly competitive, stress-filled lives, who would want to live in a world where we couldn't stop to admire the beauty of a sunlit skyline, the joy of a stirring piece of music, or the intensity of a good book? How drab would our world be if, when we looked at a spider-web, we couldn't see the intricate wonder of its construction; or when we read the poems of Robert Frost, we could see merely words, not rhythm or rhyme; or when we listened to Mozart, to hear only noise? Indeed, a world without the arts is a world in which our imagination takes a back seat to less lofty, and perhaps more materialistic goals. When we explore or appreciate our art-filled world, we continually open doors to perception, wonder, and even worship.

The language of our spiritual lives mingles with the language of our imaginative lives. We say that paintings are "divine," that virtuoso musicians have "God-given" talent, that singers voices are "angelic." We are "moved" to tears by beautiful images. Sometimes, we are heartened by a beautiful verse of poetry that seems to touch our "souls." Quite often in my reading life, when I'm finishing a particularly good novel, I'll get chills as I come to the end of the last page. Or I'll hear the right song at the right moment and find myself transported into new ideas and deeper emotions. None of this is accidental. We are hard-wired for these phenomena. Our search for transcendent music, images, and words is something ingrained in our DNA. Our humanity requires that we seek out and absorb that which is most exquisite in our creative world, and to imagine into being that which is not yet created. These faculties are divine in nature. In the Baha'i Faith, as in many religions, there is a tradition of encouraging artistic expression. Abdu'l-Baha, a central figure to the Faith, says, "All art is a gift of the Holy Spirit. When this light shines through the mind of a musician, it manifests itself in beautiful harmonies. Again, shining through the mind of a poet, it is seen in fine poetry and poetic prose. When the light of the Sun of Truth inspires the mind of a painter, he produces marvelous pictures."

And not only does the practice of our artistic lives lead us to respect our world, to engage in its wonders, it also leads to a better understanding of our place in creation. By becoming "creators" ourselves, or by engaging in the creations of others, we interact on a closer level with our own divine origins, and with the vast and mysterious forces that propel our universe. In fact, acts of creativity carry double impact, for they can be seen as acts of prayer. Abdu'l-Baha says, "I rejoice to heart that thou takest pains with thine art, for in this wonderful new age, art is worship. The more thou strivest to perfect it, the closer wilt thou come to God. What bestowal could be greater than this, that one's art should be even as the act of worshipping the Lord? That is to say, when thy fingers grasp the paintbrush, it is as if thou wert at prayer in the Temple."

So each time we sit down to write short poems to our loved ones, or whistle seemingly simple little tunes, or sketch the image of a tree, we connect with the creative spirit, an everlasting force running through our bodies. Baha'u'llah, the prophet founder of the Baha'i Faith, says, "Every

word of thy poetry is indeed like unto a mirror in which the evidences of the devotion and love thou cherishest for God are reflected.” He says the same things about music: Music has been made “...as a ladder for your souls, a means whereby they may be lifted up unto the realm on high...” So why put off artistic endeavors? Not only do they provide outlets for our imaginations, but they also bring us closer to an understanding of God. They allow us the opportunity to connect on deeper levels with the creative threads of our universe. Not only do these undertakings beautify and celebrate the whole of our human experience, they allow us a chance to mingle with the spiritual energy that guides existence.

Clark Knowles is a member of the Seacoast Baha’i community.
He can be reached at Clarkknowles@mac.com