



the Intersection of Art, Spirituality and Health

Art assists in recovering and maintaining a sense of happiness and well-being

By Beth Dotson Brown

Three years ago when the Rev. Norman Fischer and a friend challenged one another not to waste their talents as artists,

they decided to utilize those gifts through a retreat for artists at the Cliffview Conference and Retreat Center in Garrard County. But using those talents wasn't the only reason for offering such an opportunity. Fischer says they envisioned that the retreat could, "help others reclaim that art can heal us. If we focus our energies and come away from the world and remind ourselves of the creativity within us, we can be healed."

During the past five years, there has been a growing movement among health care practitioners to recognize the role that art can play in healing. Across the United States, hospitals that renovate their facilities are incorporating visual art and music. Some are even offering opportunities for patients to create in some way.

Fischer, a Boyle County native, first learned about how art can be a vessel of healing from glassblower and Centre College professor Stephen Powell, his mentor while he studied art and psychology

at Centre. After a long attraction to visual arts, Fischer began to see art as a way of doing more than expressing himself. He believes art validates the truth of who we are as human beings, connects us with God, heals the body, mind and spirit and helps us start over again. "Art can be a great vehicle to recognizing where you are, where you want to be or where you can go," Fischer says.

In his own life, Fischer has experienced the power of art. He recalls that when he began to contemplate becoming a Catholic priest, he had to wrestle with the choice to remain single since Catholic priests are not allowed to marry. He knew he had to find something beautiful about the truth of the priesthood if he were to answer that call. So Fischer painted, oftentimes vessels, then Christ figures, then eventually an image of himself as a priest. "It gave me a way to hold before me something that might be without being scared to death. And it gave me solitude because when I painted I was most often by myself. So it gave me that time to recharge and also to contemplate. It gave me my intimacy with God."

Fischer likes to translate "intimacy" to "into me see." It was a fellow priest who helped him understand that his art could be a way of helping others, and God, see who he truly is.

Art also helps Fischer see into the way artists throughout history have used art as a language of God's love. "As a Catholic priest I find volumes of icons, windows into heaven, that are inspirational to me. I find religious paintings, stained glass awe-inspiring. They tell stories. We have mosaics and frescoes and triptychs and diptychs and the list goes on and it's endless about how artwork has been infused with Christian spiritual principles and ideas and concepts that I get to then translate for myself." Fischer also calls all people artists because even if a person does not create art, he or she can look at it and appreciate what is beautiful.

Judy Schaeffer, who has attended the artist's retreat and studied art at Centre College, has found a similar experience of drawing close to God through her artwork. "When you're painting landscapes, florals, anything like that I feel you're sort of connecting yourself with your creator because he created all of this for you and you suddenly get a deeper appreciation for God's creation," Schaeffer says.

"There are times when I cannot get into my studio and there's something inside of me that says you have got to get down there into that peace and quiet and close the doors and paint. There's a sort of peace that comes over me and I get totally lost in it." Schaeffer says that sometimes she gets so absorbed by her oil painting

that a planned hour of painting turns into four or five.

That sense of peace, connection with God and the way her art leads her into prayer all combine to prompt Schaeffer to say her art helps her stay on an "even keel" spiritually, physically and mentally. "It's just a feeling well-being that I get when I paint," she says.

"The spirit is tied to the mind. The mind affects the body," Fischer says. He has also seen the power of art help people who have been deeply wounded find healing. He recalls one retreat participant who was a famous watercolorist. His abilities had been greatly diminished due to a stroke. Initially, he was frustrated to realize he could not do the fine water color work he had produced before.

After the retreat, however, the artist returned to the art store to buy new supplies. He had realized that although he might not be able to create as he did before, he could find a new way to create with the abilities he retained. Fischer says: "Art can bring you out of yourself to validate where you are and where you're supposed to be."

Fischer and Schaeffer both use art as an analogy for beginning again. They recognize that the process of creation sometimes requires changing course, like in a painting where the composition doesn't seem right. Schaeffer says that has happened to her and she changed things around until the results were beautiful. "I think you can kind of relate that to prayer in a way when you think God isn't answering my prayer right away but in time it always seems to evolve," she says.

Fischer points out that many pieces of art are actually made from things that are "broken." Broken glass makes mosaics, for example. Broken clay vessels can be made into new vessels. "With art you can always start over and I wish that everyone in the journey of life could realize that, whether it's with our bodies or our minds or our hearts," Fischer says. "We can start over. We can recreate."

