The Solemn Responsibility of a Teacher in the Arts

Fifth Chinese Art Education Leadership Workshop at Brigham Young University

David Warner

Dean Jones, our distinguished guests from the great middle kingdom, China, dear friends and faculty members at BYU, it is a privilege to be with you.

I have a special reason to be joyful today. In addition to our shared love of the arts, I share a love for your history, language, and culture. As a young man, I was a missionary learning and loving the rich traditions and deeply held values of the Chinese people. I love the profound virtues of your culture.

As teachers of artists, you are uniquely positioned to be the guardians of those virtues. They are expressed both in your traditional art forms and your contemporary creative efforts. We are grateful you are here because we know we will learn from you, and we will be better artists and educators because of you.

Welcome to a Community of Artists

As artists and educators, you will be interested in the founder of this school. During the 1800s, our Church members moved from place to place across the country, seeking to establish a community of believers. Wherever they settled they established schools and arts organizations. Though often without basic conveniences, they were rarely without choirs, bands, theatre groups, poetry societies, and the visual arts. The Mormon Tabernacle Choir, led by Welsh
immigrant John Perry, was originally one of these small choirs, its members singing as they came across the western plains in covered wagons.

No one was more outspoken on the necessity and benefit of the arts than Brigham Young, the leader for whom this school is named.

When Church members finally arrived in this part of America, there was nothing but a desert basin and an enormous salt water lake. Immediately they built a makeshift structure for meetings and arts performances. Within five years there was a thriving dramatic association and performance hall. Ten years later they had built this theater [*slides*], which was dubbed “Cathedral in the Desert.” With a capacity of 1500, it was the grandest structure in thousands of miles. It was used for performances of every kind. Brigham Young felt that dancing, music, and theater were essential to a virtuous and happy life. Indeed, the basic beliefs of the Church include this declaration: “If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report, or praiseworthy, we seek after these things.”

In a time when dancing was generally frowned upon, Brigham Young said, “Many of our aged brethren and sisters . . . were never inside a ballroom or theater until they became [members of our Church], and now they seem more anxious for this kind of [entertainment] than are our children.”
“Our work, our everyday labor, our lives are within the scope of our religion. . . . Our pursuits should be so diversified as to develop every trait of character and diversity of talent.”

“There is no music in hell, for all good music belongs to heaven.”

“If you want to dance . . . do it!”

So, if you love the arts—welcome to home, or at least welcome to your home away from home. This is a community that loves the arts and prizes education. You are truly honored guests here.

One of the reasons the arts are essential to establishing communities and cultures is because what they require of people. The American choral conductor Robert Shaw said, “The arts are the open hand of man reaching for his brother.” A community where the arts flourish is a community where people are working together. It was written about the early participants in Brigham Young’s theater, “There was, indeed, a strange bond existing between the stage and the auditorium. All were friends; they would meet in daily labor, they would dance together…All were alike interested in bringing about that miracle—when the desert should blossom as the rose.”

Brigham Young also taught that the arts and artists can shape the moral character of a community. He said, “The stage can be made to aid . . . in impressing upon the minds of a community an enlightened sense of a virtuous
life.” Our students, young and inexperienced as they are, will have an inordinate influence in our communities.

As teachers of the arts, we have a solemn responsibility to prepare them to use that influence for the betterment of all. Our students are intensely interested in us—what we think, how we see the world, and we have lived our lives as artists. They are paying attention not only with their ears, but with their eyes and their hearts. In our work with them, they will listen, and absorb much more than we intend. It is a message beautifully captured by Stephen Sondheim in “Children Will Listen.”

[ Musical Selection: *Children Will Listen* ]

**A Deeper Purpose**

Thank you Ross and Michelle. We are on a journey. Your being here illustrates that in a dramatic way. Thank you for making the tremendous effort to come and join with us at BYU.

Think back for a moment on how this journey began. When did you first want to be an artist? What were your hopes and dreams? What did you want to accomplish?
After thirty years of teaching in the arts, I’ve noticed that many of the gifted people I have known have something in common: They feel a deep sense of purpose. They feel they have been given their talents for a reason.

Even from an early age, they recognized that their abilities delighted and blessed others. In this awareness, they didn’t think of themselves as better than other people, but they may have felt more responsible.

Growing up they wanted to do something more than just advance themselves and their reputation. They also wanted to do more than just elevate their art. They wanted to do something for the betterment of the human family.

In my experience, many would consider the highest compliment to be something like: “Your performance inspired me to be better—more tolerant, more generous, more loving.” Or “Your work helped me to be a better father, or mother, friend, colleague—a better person.”

This is a deeper purpose that many of our students already feel: they want to lift and bless others and society.

As teachers in the arts, we have tremendous responsibilities to establish the arts in our society—to envision, organize, and administer schools and studios and theaters where artists can do their work. And of course that work depends upon something even more fundamental: teaching and training young artists to achieve excellence in their fields. This is essential.
With that understood, it seems students do their best work when they are fulfilling their deeper purpose, which has to do with other people.

By their very nature, the arts require an expressive spirit, of going out from ourselves, of communicating with others, and of influencing them. When students only focus on learning the fingering on the piano, or mastering a specific dance step to pass a test, something vital is lost. Their sense of purpose, what makes them artists, is not engaged.

Our work is infinitely greater than teaching forms and drilling technique. Our more fundamental work is to teach them in a way that awakens and develops the artistic, expressive spirit within them—the spirit that is focused on blessing and enriching others.

How do we do that?

One of our solemn responsibilities is to help them understand the influence they can and will have on other people. As the composer Gian Carlo Menotti stated, the arts are not “the after dinner mint of society.” They have enormous power.

Thirty years ago I was in another country and met a young writer. He was smart, witty, and also somewhat cynical about life. He was talented and focused on achieving success. I don’t know what his teachers taught him, or the influence they had on him personally. However, several years later I noted his name in the
credits of a film so depraved that it garnered considerable critical attention. It was about two young people who, for want of fame and glory, went on a killing spree. The young man I had met was the lead writer. For a time, he was a popular screenwriter in Hollywood. However, as a result of that film, there have been many copycat acts of violence, resulting in dozens of injuries and deaths.

A contrasting experience:

A month ago we broadcast a concert from Salt Lake City featuring a well-known singer from the Metropolitan Opera in New York. I hadn’t seen this artist in ten years and to me he seemed warmer and kinder than I remembered him, and he was genuinely interested in me and in others. As we talked, he confided that recently one of his sons had committed suicide—a terrible tragedy for their family. The next day in the concert, this singer performed a song about the gates of heaven being open to everyone, including those who have suffered. As he sang he was visibly moved, at first sorrowful and then filled with joy. As he struggled to keep his composure, it was clear he wasn’t acting. I sensed he was thinking about his child, and that by singing this song he found a measure of hope. Two days later, I was in another city and met a friend of mine who also lost a son to suicide. My friend, an engineer, has little interest or ability in the arts. He had unexpectedly found the concert on TV and told me how inspired he was by one singer—the singer from Metropolitan Opera. “What touched you?” I asked. With tears in his
eyes my friend said, “I don’t know what it was about that singer, but the way he sang helped me feel peace about our son’s death. I really needed that.”

It is always challenging to help young people recognize the needs of others, and how influential they can be in meeting those needs. Without experience, young people easily misunderstand what is possible.

One of our solemn responsibilities is to help them realize that their work will be a seed that takes root and grows in the lives of others. Every piano scale they play, and every tendu combination they rehearse, is preparing them to make a difference in the world.

In the examples I’ve just given, the artistic work of the screenwriter grew into a poisonous and destructive weed. The performance of the singer became a fruitful tree, imparting hope and comfort, and awakening insight and understanding.

**Focusing on the Fruit**

Most of our work, and the work of our students, is not producing poisonous weeds; however, it is easy to create work that gives little attention to the potential good that can be done. What can we do to cultivate fruitful trees?

From our point of view as educators, professional conferences and exchanges like this one, and opportunities for students to tour and perform beyond
their classrooms are essential. Outreach in our own communities, especially among those who are not artistically inclined, is also important. These efforts beyond the classroom are especially helpful if their purposes and influence can be made visible to the students.

From our student’s point of view, does our work sometimes look like we are helping them perform a kindergarten science project? We ask them to put seeds in little paper cups and get them to sprout, but never really pay attention long enough to discover what the seeds become, or how the mature plant benefits the world.

How do we help them evaluate the fruit of their work?

When colleges and universities are accredited, it is based on whether they accomplished their own purposes—their own goals. Sometimes we allow our students to do the same, evaluating their own efforts by whether they accomplished their immediate goals—to please us, pass their exams, and receive positive reviews. Do we give them an opportunity to measure their work against their own deeper desires—to influence others in meaningful ways?

When I was a student here at BYU, I had the opportunity to tour with a choir internationally. It was a wonderful experience. We performed in great concert halls and in prestigious settings, and stayed in the homes of local people who attended our performances. But what I remember most is going back to the houses of the people who attended the concert. We would sit around their dinner tables
for a late night snack. They would ask us questions and share comments, and we would learn about how our work was received. In many cases, the concert was merely admired. But in some cases, the most memorable cases, our hosts were influenced and even changed. Beyond the vocal and choral singing techniques I was learning, beyond the discipline and the appreciation for an aesthetic tradition, I started learning about my role and responsibility as an artist. I started to see the deeper purpose of my work being accomplished. And I began, in a rudimentary way, to think about the principles that would guide my work in the future.

As a teacher in the arts, I ask myself, have I given students opportunities for this kind of personal learning and growth? Have I invited them to ask questions beyond: “Did I do a good job?” and “Did the audience like it?” Have I let them learn for themselves whether they are accomplishing their own deeper purposes?

Have I given them the chance to experience for themselves the deep personal satisfaction and joy that comes when their artwork lifts others to higher moral and spiritual ground? Have I prepared them to feel the inner call to stand on higher ground themselves, for the very purpose of lifting others? Have they had the opportunity to make transforming personal sacrifices (including daily choices about the way they live their lives) so that they are capable of doing artistic work that truly blesses the human family?
Jerzy Grotowski, the highly influential Polish theatre director, described this kind of artistic work as a “total act,” requiring the whole soul of the artist. He said “This act cannot exist if the [artist] is more concerned with charm, personal success, applause and salary . . . There can be no total act if the [artist], even away from the theatre, dissipates his creative impulse and . . . sullies it, blocks it, particularly through incidental engagements of a doubtful nature.” Stated another way, artists must be worthy of the influence they hope to have.

**Artwork as Artifact**

Whether or not artists fulfill their deeper purpose, their work is an artifact of their lives. American dance pioneer and educator Daniel Nagrin observed, “[Artists] cannot escape the reality that the raw clay of their craft and their creative process is their own personality.” Said one spiritual leader: “It is vain to hide a bad spirit . . . for it will show itself in our speaking and our writing as well as all our other conduct.” Every work of art is an artifact of the person who created it.

Let’s revisit the two examples I shared earlier—the degrading film and the inspiring song.

First the film about two people seeking fame and glory from killing. Where did that story come from? Was it merely an artistic choice, or was it intended to stimulate conversation or social change? Or was it the artifact of a life lived in pursuit of fame and glory, whatever the cost to others?
Where did this singer’s profoundly moving rendition come from? Was it vocal technique? Was it acting? Or was it the artifact of a life of real suffering and genuine effort to find understanding and peace? My friend the engineer knew nothing about the singer who touched him. But the song was an expression of the singer’s life. In it were the remnants of his personal struggle, his seeking to understand, his discipline in moving forward, his endurance in sorrow—all of that was there. The power of the song was more than technical achievement. It was the power of a person—the power of his soul, forged by true and earnest living. And my friend felt that, deeply.

Our Solemn Responsibility

Now, how do we help our students become the kind of people necessary to achieve their own deeper purposes? We cannot responsibly limit our work to technical education. To do so would be to fail them.

But we cannot interpose ourselves into their lives—the ethics of a professional educator would not permit that.

The obvious answer is to be the kind of artists we hope our students will be. A teacher in the arts is much like a parent. What a child observes and feels teaches him much more than what a parent says or tries to enforce. What our students observe and feel in us can show them, very clearly, the path to accomplish their deeper purpose.
If they find in us a well-developed, balanced human being, deeply caring and nurturing others as we reach for the highest artistic standards—they will understand that great art is the artifact of a great person. It is the expression of a soul that is enlarged with virtue, truth, discipline, harmony, and peace.

Accredited by our lives, our students will seek us out to teach them about much more than the arts or, we should say, the deeper purpose of the arts. We will have abundant opportunities to help them. Here are two of dozens of examples I am personally aware of:

A vocal student struggles with his high notes—he simply cannot mobilize the physical power necessary to sing them. One day in a voice lesson, his teacher demonstrates a passage with a high note. The student recognizes that the teacher is totally unafraid and is holding back nothing. This inspires the student, who begins to realize how fearful he has been, in part because he has been doing things he doesn’t feel good about. He changes his behavior and becomes more confident. His singing improves and he becomes a more expressive singer.

An advanced student lacks grace in her dancing, despite years of effort to correct the problem. Her teacher talks to her about the idea of being gracious in life. The student observes this has been a problem for her, especially in her relationship with her parents, against whom she harbors a deep grudge. Through conversation she realizes that a change in the way she treats other people would
make a difference in her dancing. Over the next weeks she improves dramatically. Eventually she reconciles with her parents.

Let me offer one more—a true story that happened in the building just below us here—the Physical Education building. It’s not about an arts educator, but it could be. Many years ago, before the Internet, an elderly custodian was cleaning out lockers and found a young man’s wallet. Looking inside to discover the name of the owner, the custodian found small pictures that were degrading to women—what we would call pornography. He called the young man, asking him to come retrieve the wallet. When the young man arrived, the elderly man noticed he was married and then sat down with him. Informally, and in a spirit of friendship and brotherhood, the elderly man said, “Before I return your wallet, may I share what is in my wallet?” Opening the leather billfold, he showed the young man a picture of his wife of many years, and pictures of their children and grandchildren. Then he showed a little card that represented commitments he had made as a young man. He said something to the effect of, “The things in this wallet represent the greatest joy of my life. But they could only be mine by living true to the commitments I made when I was your age—by being completely faithful to my wife. I wanted to return your wallet, but I wanted to give you something much more valuable. I want you to know that I have confidence that you can have such a marriage and family. It is possible, and you have the power to do it.”
Our Journey Home

The expectation upon us, as teachers of artists, is awesome, overwhelming, and easily intimidating. As teachers of technique, we can teach pirouettes long after we are physically able to perform them. And in our role to develop people—wisdom, experience, and understanding are on our side.

Obviously we have an obligation to continue using our gifts. But being the kind of people we hope our students will become may be our most solemn responsibility. For who we are not only impacts our students, it impacts all those throughout the world who will experience our students’ work.

We and our students are on a journey. In a children’s song beloved by the students here at BYU, we sing about God being a loving, wise Father who wants us to come home to Him. The words of that song could substitute for the plea of our students to us, “lead me, guide me, walk beside me.”

Where are we leading them? In most every culture, there is profound meaning in the idea of coming home. Everyone must leave home—leave father and mother to discover their gifts and talents, to grow, to become independent. But through it all we feel a pull—a longing to come back to our origins, to embrace what we first learned to love, and to accomplish what we dreamed about and wanted for ourselves and others.
In the epic novel *Les Miserables*, Jean Valjean—a teacher as much as a parent, gives everything he has to bring home the young man he has regarded as a son. Dallyn Bayles will share this beloved anthem from the musical—a reminder of our own journeys and the hopes we have for those we lead.

[[Musical Selection: *Bring Him Home*]]

Thank you, Dallyn and Ross. Helping our students realize their own deepest aspirations, their deeper purpose for being artists, is one way to help them come back to their home. Here at BYU, so far from your home in China, we hope you have an opportunity to come home in your hearts. Here, we invite you to consider your own deepest purposes, your hopes and desires for your students, and how you want to help them to bless this world.