

Beyond the Screen:

A Father's Case for the Classical Art

Introduction

I have seven children from age 18 down to 2 years old. They are wonderful children. They love the Lord, respect authority and make decisions that make me proud. But as a father who in his professional career has been building and providing apps and websites that help with student planning and time management, I am constantly fighting battles at home against the digital world around us. Because of my profession, I have long understood the dangers of the internet and the screens that offer unfettered access to the darkest corners of the world—while simultaneously being built with addictive algorithms that suck our time away like a hungry tick. Our home has strict rules on when and where the devices can be used. We don't buy our children smart phones. And despite all the rules, the magnetic glow of the devices is undeniable. We are constantly reminding them about the rules, sending the children outside, and reeducating on why the screens are bad for them. There's a stark contrast between some of the older children and their youngest brother when boredom arises. The former seeks a device; the latter finds a costume, stacks and smashes a block tower, bangs the pots and pans or whatever seems interesting to him at the moment. Even our five year old trends towards drawing and coloring. Somewhere between toddlerhood and adulthood, the children slowly lose their drive to create, to imagine, to build and far too often fill the void with a screen.

Artisanship as The "Antidote to the Digital Age"

I recently read a book titled "The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness". The author, Haidt, presents a compelling, evidence-based argument that the surge in teenage mental illness is driven by a "Great Rewiring" of childhood. The conclusion is that a combination of heavy consumption through the screens along with the replacement of physical relationships with peers by social media is resulting in major neurological developmental issues with our young.

In my own home, there have been temper tantrums after we let a child watch too much television, play too many video games or use the laptop for hours. We weren't created to live in a sedentary state clicking, swiping, and viewing a two dimensional world and the children's emotional flare ups in my home are just one example of this. God placed us into this world full of beauty and the ability to satisfy and delight our senses with the order to "subdue it". We are not meant to be slaves to our own technology. When we see and feel the work of our hands, whether it be drawing, painting, or clay, it reconnects us with creation and in many ways our creator as well. The smell of the wood, the vibrations when we saw, the weight of materials, the resistance of the medium, the delicacy of the paintbrush, all of the various ways we engage our senses in the arts help us to slow down, to breathe and in many ways renew our minds and souls.

The Dignity of the Apprentice: A Magnum Opus

The fastest I have ever learned a complex skill was in college when I learned to play the guitar. I didn't start with theory and scales. I simply chose songs that I really wanted to play and worked extremely hard towards being able to play those songs. Along the way, I had to learn whatever fundamentals were needed. As the songs got more difficult, I would ask one of the better guitar players for advice on how to hold a chord or make a transition. I learned quickly because I wanted to play the song and had the right help nearby when I needed it.

This is exactly the approach to the arts I want my children to experience. Envisioning and then crafting an important work of art that they would want on their bedroom wall or displayed in their prayer corner will create the desire to work through whatever skill deficiencies may exist. Then while doing, while actually making their art, to be paired up with that experienced master of the arts to help guide them on their way will create the result of that great work of art that the student is proud to have created. Along the way, they will pick up and improve the fundamentals so that the next work of art becomes that much easier to create and with a higher level of craftsmanship.

Cultural Apostles with Future-Proof Skills

My family loves beauty in the church. When we travel around the country on our camping trips, one of our most memorable stops always ends up being a beautiful sacred space like Our Lady of Victory in Buffalo last summer. And we are not alone, data from parishes across the country shows that 80% of practicing families crave reverent, sacred worship spaces. Millennials and Gen Z parents are leaving parishes that prioritize utility over beauty. They are hungering for the transcendent. I want my children to both continue to love the beauty but also to consider that maybe they are called to help with making beautiful sacred art.

Creating a meaningful piece of classical art builds skills that are transferable to many other parts of our life. It's a major lesson in planning and forethought. The novice has to have a vision and then work through many steps to achieve their final result. In addition to the planning, there's also the necessity to slow down, exercise patience and be persistent. The inability to just delete something or start fresh contrasts heavily to the digital world where we fire off more emails or send another draft with little to no additional effort. This requirement for patience and persistence is exactly the kind of discipline that will set our children apart in their future careers, no matter what path they choose.

Conclusion

The magnetic pull of the screen is real. We see it in our living rooms, and I see it in the data behind my software. But beauty and truth exert a gravity all their own—a gravity that is ultimately stronger than the digital glow because it helps fill the God sized hole within us. I want my children to be so captivated by the act of creation that for hours on end, they forget the phone is even there.