

A Few Thoughts on Theoretical Dilemmas, Value Creation and Artistic Expression As We Approach a New Century

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"We fight, we sacrifice, ourselves and others, because of abstractions that are crystallized, isolated, and impossible to place in relation to each other or to concrete things. Our so-called technological age knows only how to beat at windmills."— Simone Weil¹

SEVERAL years ago, a chance reading of an article in *The New Yorker* profoundly affected my perception of value creation in artistic expression.² The author, Amitav Ghosh, describes the separatist violence of 1984 India after the assassination of Indira Gandhi. Ghosh's account differs fundamentally from most stories of violent confrontation, because he describes the unseen and often undramatic efforts of human beings to protect the lives of their fellows. He emphasizes the inner strength required of human beings to oppose the chaos of an environment permeated by the brutality of separatism.

In one incident, the pacifist group that Ghosh was with found itself facing a crowd whose members were intent on confrontation and who advanced with steel rods and knives. Indeed, the scene portended terrible violence and tragedy; however, Ghosh recounts something quite different:

And then something happened that I have never completely understood. Nothing was said; there was no signal, nor was there any break in the rhythm of our chanting. But suddenly all the women in our group—and the women made up more than half of the group numbers—stepped out and surrounded the men; their saris and *kameezes* became a thin, fluttering barrier, a wall around us. They turned to face the approaching men, challenging them to attack. The thugs took a few more steps toward us and then faltered, confused. A moment later, they were gone.³

In this description, it was the inner integrity of the women and their unspoken, yet simultaneous, interdependent and courageous action that resulted in the dissipation of the violence. The invisible positive qualities in the lives of the women defeated the brutish inhumanity of the aggressors. In most forms of depiction currently popular in our culture, the visible drama of violence takes precedence. Very seldom is the effort made to articulate the often hidden struggle behind the visible appearance. However, it can be said that the unseen positive qualities of human character also constitute the true nature of an event.

In Ghosh's account, he quotes an extraordinary author, Dzevad Karahasan from Sarajevo, who escaped his native country at the risk of his life in order to publish a collection of personal essays. In one of them, entitled "Literature and War," Karahasan states:

The decision to perceive literally everything as an aesthetic phenomenon—completely sidestepping questions about goodness and the truth—*is an artistic decision*. That decision started in the realm of art, and went on to become characteristic of the contemporary world.⁴ (Emphasis added.)

My purpose in recounting Karahasan's amazing conclusion is to argue the philosophical merit of his statement in the light of historical evidence. That artistic depictions, both textual and visual, may be responsible for the destruction and violence endemic to our time

is not an easy matter to face up to. Yet, my point is exactly facing up to this responsibility. The modern tradition of art for art's sake that dominates our Western thinking is a destructive tendency that completely overlooks the reality of good and evil, truth and falsehood, and the fundamental ability of life to create value. It is a fact that aesthetic theory in the twentieth century has separated life and art because of a mistaken perception that the inner aspects of life are separate from the outer realities. It is also an irrefutable fact that this century has been one of unprecedented violence.

BUDDHISM espouses that life is never divorced from reality—and that there is an interdependence of all phenomena that make up our universe. As stated by Daisaku Ikeda in *Life: An Enigma, a Precious Jewel*: “The life of a human being is a form of cosmic life action and is connected with the innermost source of cosmic being. In the lives of human beings, as in the life of the cosmos, life consists of the inseparable entity of physical and spiritual elements.”⁵ If what Buddhism expounds is so, then our actions in this century are in serious disharmony with this interdependent web that comprises all universal phenomena. In Karahasan's extraordinary book regarding the events of Sarajevo in 1991–93, he outlines several conclusions, one of which I state here:

We persistently avoid those questions [issues of good and evil and value], acting like Sleeping Beauties who dream about pure form, the beauty of the beyond and similar esoteric inventions, believing that we will never be awakened by a prince red with children's blood. Those are the questions I have to answer before I am able to continue the work I have to do. What is my responsibility in all this?⁶

I ask myself the same question. What is my responsibility as an interpreter of our cultural and artistic heritage amid this proliferating violence of depiction, where the value of life is a matter of indifference? Ghosh also questions previously written descriptions of the conflagration in 1984 India, and poses the same questions as Karahasan did in Sarajevo: Is that all there was to it? Or is it possible that the authors of these descriptions failed to find a form—or a style or a voice or a plot—that could accommodate both violence and the civilized, willed response to it?⁷

THESE questions are not easy, and the answers lie within the hidden reality of the depths of life itself. Both written and visual representations are the result of the inner life force of the people who create them. It is imperative that we summon forth both the inner resources and the strength of character needed to avoid the “aesthetic of indifference,” which is the central theme in the essays of both Karahasan and Ghosh. I believe this struggle against the aesthetic of indifference constitutes a central problem as we approach the end of this century. In a dialogue entitled “Culture Is a Spiritual Struggle,” Daisaku Ikeda states:

If people are spiritually empty, culture is nothing more than an embellishment, an empty entertainment. Think of Auschwitz, the death camp built by the Nazis. The military personnel at Auschwitz committed terrible atrocities daily, yet they were said to be fond of Bach and Mozart and read Goethe. The image of pressing the button on the gas chambers and listening to Mozart—surely this nightmare scenario is a symbol of how sick this century is.... The decline of a culture means the decline of a society and the individual in it. Likewise, when culture flourishes, individuals and societies

flourish.⁸

To take responsibility for our current cultural situation is not to fall prey to political movements motivated by ideologies that are fundamentally empty at their core because they do not make human life the central focus. Rather, our responsibility is one of deep questioning and inner struggle and has to do with issues of true self and eternity, and the correct perception of the valuable entity we call life. Instead of ideology or formalist doctrines based on theory, the fundamental question should be the valuable resources of life itself. As responsible thinking human beings, what are the means, the tools, the theories, the strategies, the depictions or the forms that we can call forth from within to protect and treasure the value of life? As we summon all of our inner resources and grapple responsibly with the realities that confront us, only then can the outer depictions, whether written or visual, be the sources of regeneration toward a century of life and retain their eternal values based on fundamental truths. When the treasure and the interdependence of life that comprise the reality of all phenomena are instituted as the basic values for art, literature and every other cultural endeavor, only then can we hope to usher in a more hopeful century. □

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1. Nevin, Thomas R., *Simone Weil: Portrait of a Self-Exiled Jew* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), p. 115.
2. Ghosh, Amitav, "The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi," July 17, 1995, *The New Yorker*, pp. 35–41.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
4. Karahasan, Dzevad, "Literature and War," *Sarajevo: Exodus of a City* (Kodansha International, 1994), p. 77.
5. Ikeda, Daisaku, *Life: An Enigma, a Precious Jewel* (Kodansha International, 1982), p. 26.
6. Karahasan, *op. cit.*, p. 88.
7. Ghosh, *op. cit.*, p. 41.
8. Ikeda, Daisaku, "Culture Is a Spiritual Struggle," March 10, 1995, *World Tribune*, p. 3, p. 5.