

Generosity Of Spirit: A Perspective On Faith, Art And Teaching

by Matthew Ballou

TRANS-
POSITIONS

During my graduate studies at Indiana University I encountered a way of thinking that not only resonated with my faith but also changed my perspective on teaching. It was a view promoted by my main professor, Barry Gealt. He advocated a quality called "generosity of spirit", and he talked about it in two primary ways.

First, he saw it as consciously extending goodwill toward other artists. This meant acknowledging that when an artist is in the studio, working hard, spending time with ideas and words and actions and images, they deserve some true consideration and an assumption that they're not just working to deceive a gullible audience. People who really dedicate years of their life to art-making aren't doing it just to craft a lame inside joke; they're doing it because they love it, believe in it, and have made huge sacrifices to make it a part of their lives. Barry claimed that sacrifice deserves both respect and the generosity of believing the best about someone making it.

Secondly, Barry expressed his notion of generosity of spirit as a networking principle. Not as a crass, dog-eat-dog use of people just to get ahead of the competition, nor as *quid pro quo*. To Barry, generosity of spirit meant taking initiative to actively create opportunities for others and, in so doing, create a culture of opportunity for oneself. This went beyond doing something nice just to get something nice in return. It was a lifestyle choice meant to create a reciprocal community of support and encouragement. With enough people involved, each giving and receiving in a dynamic beyond "you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours", a sea change in the human equation would take place and grace would abound. Generosity of spirit was Barry's version of "pay it forward".

My personal understanding of Barry's generosity of spirit rests on a rhetorical question from 1 Corinthians 4:6-7. We're asked what we have that we haven't received. The answer is obvious. We've received *everything* (life, breath, language, mental capacity, etc) and could have done *nothing* to obtain it all.

Realizing this creates a perspective of deep gratitude and hopefulness in me, which in turn causes me to seek the best for others, hold them up, show compassion, and live with joy in what I do. Why? Because I know that I am not what I am because I "deserve" it, but rather because I have received the great treasures of existence and consciousness and the fundamental dignity of being human.

In light of these things I recognize the essential value and significance of others who have also received all. We are *Imago Dei*. We have, and we are, what we cannot manufacture for ourselves. We give because we have received a gracious gift. Grace: extending goodness and honor to others without considering their "worthiness". Grace: purposely working to be thoughtful, honest, loving, and considerate to everyone, regardless of what they can or can't do for me. Therefore I must recognize, value and uphold the dignity of those around me through true appreciation and goodwill. I fail at this all the time - I am so easily swayed into favoritism or laziness - but it's what I strive for in my interactions.

I have adapted these notions into a philosophy of teaching that is centered on facilitation, encouragement, and tact. I extend basic goodwill toward my students, assuming that they, in spite of their missteps, want to pursue their education earnestly with diligence and passion. I attempt to become an advocate for my students, seeking to serve them as they adventure in learning. I try to foster a culture of support and exhortation in my classes. I see my role not as a dominating presenter of facts but rather as a fellow pioneer, who has, by God's grace, tread a few bends further down the road. In all of this I seek to give grace to my students, shaping them as I myself have been shaped - not by alienating force but by generous fellowship.

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Matthew Ballou is an artist and writer living with his wife and daughter in Columbia, Missouri. He teaches painting and drawing at the University of Missouri as an Assistant Teaching Professor. His work has been seen in many venues across America; he recently concluded a solo show at Gordon College near Boston, Massachusetts and a two-person show with Tim Lowly at the 930 Art Center, in Louisville, Kentucky. His writing has appeared in Image Journal and Neoteric Art, and he is currently developing a publication on Christian conceptions of the image of the human body.

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