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PC, but not too PC by Tommie Howell

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I had a subject in mind for this month's edition, and I will get to it. I just caught wind of a couple of things, however, that I would like to address first.

Artists Helping Artists

We have all seen the various ways that people have helped those directly affected by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. We have seen the celebrity telethons, the animal rescues, the Salvation Army doing it's part, but recently I learned of some neat things being done by the artistic community.

The Santa Fe Art Institute under the leadership of Diane Karp, who first heard of the attacks on the WTC and the Pentagon while driving to her new job as SFAI director, decided to lend a bit of a helping hand.

Many artists either live or work in the area hardest hit by the attack. Studios and living spaces were destroyed or were placed on restricted access. The Institute offered what they call The Emergency Artists Relief Program.

With the help of many individuals, The Santa Fe Opera, The McCune foundation, and Southwest Airlines, the Santa Fe Art Institute established temporary residencies for artists from lower Manhattan. The two to four week residencies were just to provide a quiet and comfortable space for these artists to seek some respite from the hassles of getting their lives and careers back in order.

Artists seeking this help were asked to supply a resume', a description of their situation and photos of their artwork. To go one step further, the Institute allowed all applications to be made via email with supporting website photos. This was to speed up the process in order to allow as many artists as possible to take advantage of the program.

The Santa Fe Art Institute was not the only group to offer some help. The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts was established in 1987 as a stipulation in the late pop artist's will. They say that their main objectives are encouraging and supporting cultural organizations that in turn, directly or indirectly, support artists and their work.

After September 11th, the Foundation decided to donate \$600,000 in emergency grants to nearly 30 groups in lower Manhattan. Joel Wachs, the president of the Warhol Foundation said, "It was exactly the kind of thing Andy would have done...With non-profits, a little goes a long way, and we're making a statement to the rest of the city that art is important: New York wouldn't [be New York] without its creative community."

Many of the organizations that help artists experienced great financial hardship following the terrorism. Some groups were affected directly by the attack and others suffered financially due to a drop off in donations.

I am sure there were plenty of other efforts around the country. Major foundations and individual artists did what they could to make a difference. The two I represented here are just examples. So thanks to them and to all of you who helped fellow creators of art during this tragic time.

The value of dirty fingernails

Now, good reader, we move on to the actual topic for this month. I like to watch the Food Network from time to time. One of my favorite programs is called Molto Mario. Mario Batali, who cooks the foods of the Italian countryside, is a witty chef who is a fellow fat man. Never should one trust a skinny chef, in my not so dang humble opinion. Something that Mario has said on many occasions really sticks with me.

Mario says that if you ask where to find the best (insert your choice of food here) in rural Italy, you will more likely be directed to someone's house than to an eatery. He says this is because the common Italian folk value that which is made by hand over anything that could come from a grand scale operation. Their best is that which they have made, never that which they have purchased.

I think Mario's words sound a little strange to our modern American sensibilities. We are indeed a culture of rampant consumerism. In his song Union Sundown, Bob Dylan sings, "Why would anyone want to make it at home, when you can buy it cheaper someplace else?" Certainly we can identify with this as artists and crafters. We spend hours on a sculpture or a caned design, the price tag reflects the hours we have spent. Yet I can go buy a gargoye at the Dollar Store or get a nifty "fimo" slice necklace at 7-11. I can do this and it's cheap.

It isn't just the price tag though, is it? We can press a button and get our TV guide on screen. We can press another button and have a frozen dinner ready in 5 minutes. We can press yet another button and have a world of information at our fingertips. We are busy, busy, busy! So convenience plays a huge part in why we seem to devalue doing things by hand.

Sure, inexpensive and instantaneous have their merit. But what of the value of getting dirt under our fingernails? When people puts sweat and effort into the creation of something unique, they has invested more than time and money. They have imbued that thing with part of themselves. Now I

don't want to get overly nutty here, and I trust that we are all adult enough to take what we can from this and discard what doesn't appeal to us.

Mainstream creation theology hold that God created the universe "ex nihilo." This means that it was all created from nothing. In all my years of being a student of religion, I have never been able to wrap my brain around that. I, rather, prefer to think of creation as being ex ego, or from the self. God took a part of whatever cosmic stuff makes up such a being and transformed it into all creation. So God was apart from creation and yet very much a part of creation.

The person who makes a thing also is very much a part of what they create. I think that carries over to those who experience that thing. This past weekend my girlfriend's dad celebrated a birthday. She and I both bought him things from the store. But what went on the display shelf immediately? What drew the most interest and praise? The item that his grandson made with his hands was the hit of the day. I think it was more than just showing appreciation for the effort of a child. I believe that the fact that it carried with it an essence of himself is what made it so very special. It took time, it took materials, and it took effort.

It would do us all good to remember how important it is to make things. If we get discouraged when we see the prices on mass-market sculptures at Hallmark, we should remember the value of putting ourselves into what we do. When we see a cheap imported fimo slice necklace, we need to think of how much we love what we do.

Now I need to microwave some instant coffee. I got a new mug, I think it was made on an assembly line in China.

Tommie Howell