

IDEAS, HOPE, & THE CREATIVE PROCESS – ECHO TALK 2010

I never thought I'd be doing this. Church work.

I've been an actor for 12 years.

Started when I was 9 in the breakout role of the Lollipop Guild in the Wizard of Oz in our community theatre play. I've basically been acting ever since.

I think a little about my church background might be helpful...

I grew up in Minnesota as a Catholic on the weekends and a Lutheran when I was at my Grandma's. I attended an Assemblies of God youth group in jr. high. I was confirmed in a charismatic – Catholic church, which was different than the one I attended with my dad. Then attended a non-denom, a Baptist church, and went to a couple Billy Graham crusades in college. And I now work at Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago as the creative director.

I've seen a lot of church.

Somewhere along the way, sitting in a lot of church and making a lot of art, I became fascinated by the intersection of art and faith. Always thought of all art as a spiritual experience of one kind or another.

Art seeks to tell the truth in dark places (movie houses, theatres) and it seemed to me that's what faith in God seeks to do as well – tell the truth in dark places.

I held that thought as I continued to pursue my career in acting.

Bounced around acting in various places - Indianapolis, NYC, Florida – footnote, if you want to know what hell is really like, I'll tell you: It is 4 months doing Guys & Dolls at a retirement community in Coral Springs, Florida. Hell on Earth.

A few years ago I moved to Chicago to continue working in theatre and on the willow creek drama team.

Then landed a role on Prison Break.

One reason ECHO gave you to come here was because I was on Prison Break and if you asked nicely I might act out a scene or two.

Let's just right-set expectations...I was in 5 ½ episodes...in the first season...4 years ago.

However, I did play a close friend (against my character's will) to the show's villain, I did have a shower scene with Wentworth Miller, and I did kill myself on TV.

So, still pretty cool.

Over the last 6 years my interest in exploring the intersection of art and faith continued to grow.

There isn't time to get into it here...but I felt pulled out of acting for a season...to take a sabbatical (Nothing against Kirk Cameron and his fans, but I wasn't interested in that route either)

And eventually found myself in Seattle at Mars Hill Graduate School studying creative art and theology.

I didn't go vocationally. I never intended to do church work. Which is rather ironic since I was at a seminary.

But I went as a sabbatical. For learning and healing and to more fully explore this intersection of art and faith.

After I finished my degree, Willow called wondering if I would be interested in doing creative work for the church.

Which brings us to today.

I've spent 16 years making art, 12 in the secular art world and 4 in the church world.

All along I've held the same frustration:

Most Christian art feels more like propaganda than truth.

Why is this?

Why is it that so much of the art I make / we make feels this way?

I believe it is because we've trained our church artists to be more like programmers instead of pastors and prophets.

We're overinformed (through blogs, twitter, vimeo, asking what other churches are doing)

And we're under-reflective (we don't know our own stories anymore)

We're afraid of being boring and un-attractional.

And in doing so, we often default to creating slick, fancy, emotion-laden programs that often lack richness and depth.

I want to frame this talk with an idea I've been playing with for sometime and it is this: I believe our work could be more potent, truthful, and effective if we viewed ourselves more as pastors & prophets than as programmers & producers.

If we turned inward for our ideas instead killing ourselves trying to create an innovative program like the church down the street.

And if we used our own stories to begin our work instead of someone else's.

Now don't freak out!

When I say we need to see our roles more as pastors/prophets, I am speaking more of our ***approach than our job description***. I'm not saying that the singer/songwriter or the web girl should give the message.

I am saying however that I think there is great benefit in expanding our view of our roles and in doing so start creating work that can be incredibly moving and helpful to our communities.

I admit that this is the pot calling the kettle black.

I work at one of the most highly branded, marketed, programmed, and produced churches in the world. We are so big and move so fast that it is a daily struggle to see my own work in this light and yet I'm devoted to it and I hope to convince you to devote yourself to this work as well.

WHERE WE'RE HEADED

What I want to do today is share with you the 3 areas that have been most helpful to me in my work.

Some are philosophical.

Some are pragmatic.

But they all take work.

If you want to make great art (services, music, videos, designs, websites, even messages) that provoke your communities to move toward redemption and restoration – and if you want to see your role as more than a producer, programmer, utility-maker, then you must work on:

YOURSELF.

YOUR IDEAS.

AND YOUR CREATIVE PROCESS.

LET'S START WITH THE PROBLEM WE HAVE WITH OURSELVES.

Just a heads up, I'm going focus a good deal of our time here, because I believe this area to be the most foundational of the three.

“We are already the most overinformed, underreflective people in the history of civilization.” – Robert Kegan & Lisa Lahey / Harvard-based psychologists

*“Without a richer understanding of who we are and the full range of needs we must address, we’ll remain insufficiently equipped to address the huge challenges we face.” – Tony Schwarz, *The Way We’re Working Isn’t Working**

A CHRISTMAS STORY

Fear was the dominant factor in the mistakes that I made.

You could say that I made the mistakes because I was afraid, but I think it would be truer to say that I made the mistakes I did because:

I DIDN’T KNOW I WAS AFRAID

My friend Jarrod always says that you don’t learn from your experiences, you learn by REFLECTING on your experiences.

Which I never did.

MY FRIEND WAS RECENTLY LAID OFF

I left the meeting disheartened because I felt confident that the things that brought him to this place of unemployment would continue to follow him into his next job and it was only because he wasn’t willing to do the work hard work of self-reflection

So what does any of this have to do with making media in the church, you might be asking yourselves?

You make art every week that asks people to reflect on and consider their own stories.

And if you aren't willing to do the same, your art will lack the truth and authenticity that you're asking from your congregation.

Every week you invite your communities, through your media, to enter the deepest recesses of their souls. You must be willing to do the same if you desire to create art that truly does what you hope it will do.

This plays out on an organizational level like we've seen (myself – where lack of self-reflection leads to an avalanche of trouble and almost preventing baby Jesus from being born that year; and in my friend's case where a lack of self-reflection contributed to the end of his career.)

And this also plays out on an idea level.

When we don't take the time to reflect, the urgency of Sunday takes over and we default.

We become powerless. We phone it in. We steal each other's ideas.

These are the very dangerous beginning elements of propaganda. I beg of you not to see yourself as only a producer creating programs filled with happy clappy hands and good feelings that awaken your audience to an idea – however life changing.

The sacred spaces you work in were meant for so much more than this.

I beg of you instead to see yourself as a pastor who has been called to "bear witness" to the light and darkness present in all our stories.

HOWEVER, you can only bear witness to that which you've reflected on for yourself.

Dan Allender, my professor at MHGS says it best:

You can't take anyone farther than you've gone yourself.

Self-reflection and awareness are the first steps.

In a moment I'll show you how this works in praxis, but what I want you to hear is that I believe knowing and understanding our unique stories are the foundational elements to making good art in the church.

SO, HOW DO YOU GET TO KNOW YOURSELF?

THERAPY - I've found this to be extremely helpful especially paired with my faith. Therapy and Spirituality are very both/and to me.

Psychology without spirituality is arid and ultimately meaningless, while spirituality without grounding in psychological work leads to vanity and illusions. – Understanding The Enneagram

MHGS – If you have 2-4 years, go to Seattle. It will change your life.

PRAYER – What does your prayer life look like in regards to your story? Ask God to reveal your story.

JOURNALING – Spend time with yourself and listen. What is going on inside? I wish I had done this during Xmas and I wish my friend had done more of this as well.

READ – *Let Your Life Speak*, Parker Palmer; *To Be Told*, Dan Allender

ASK - your trusted friends & spouse to tell you the truth. You must have people around you that can reflect back what they see.

Again, while this may seem like tedious, unrelated work to the topic at hand, hear me when I say that I believe understanding your story, being self-reflective, and contemplative to be the absolute foundations of your work.

Every great piece of art I've ever made didn't come from reading a blog, it came from reading my own story.

When it comes to best pieces I've created, I under-informed and over-reflected.

Now let's see how this works when it concerns our ideas.

Fredrick Buechner, in his book, *Telling Secrets* writes:

"Novels, for me, start - as Robert Frost said his poems did - with a lump in the throat. I don't start with some theological axe to grind, but with a deep, wordless feeling for some aspect of my own experience that has moved me. Like any serious novelist, I try to be as true as I can to life as I have known it. I write not as a propagandist but as an artist." – Fredrick Buechner, *Telling Secrets*

Think for a moment about the work you've done over the last year.

Which pieces are you most proud of?

Which ones were the most effective?

Moved the most people?

Chances are good that these pieces were so effective and moved so many people because they first moved you.

I believe that the best ideas are the ones that don't set out to prove a point but that set out to tell a story, create a relationship, seek to put into words or pictures some unexplainable feeling.

The best ideas must move you before they can move someone else.

So, if we can agree that these kinds of ideas are truly the best ideas...

How do we consistently find them and then how turn them into reality?

I can only speak to my creative process and hopefully it will be helpful for you as well...

I try to start by

LISTENING

To yourself and your community. I always like to start with reflection whenever possible.

You have a story that only you can tell, but you must first know what that is. I also try and listen to the community.

Through interactions with my friends, pastors, people who go to Willow, people who don't, I'm trying to uncover the narrative.

In some cases it is that we live in a mostly white, upper class suburb that really struggles with "the other". In other cases it is a story of wanting to do so much good with the resources the community has, they don't even know where to begin.

In all areas I act as a cultural anthropologist. Both in my own story and in the stories that surround me.

I capture everything I see and hear in my Field Notes.

Then every month I go back through my notes. Pull out the themes that move me and start creating projects for the themes.

* Say you have a pastor who tells you everything to make. You are essentially HIS/HERS producer. This probably doesn't exist! But if it does, can you commit to once every 6 weeks creating something that comes from a deep place inside yourself?

SCRATCH WHEN YOU DON'T ITCH

Not all my ideas come just from me. I need to input. A lot. To avoid copying when I'm panicked, I try to be really disciplined with this one.

Mostly I do this with music. (5-6 songs on repeat, then I write down everything I think and feel)

But I also read a ton, see a lot of movies, etc.

The key is to capture everything! Every feeling, thought, emotion.

Scratching isn't stealing. It is locking thoughts and feelings away to be used at a later day.

Scratching can look like borrowing or appropriating, but it's an essential part of creativity. It's primal, and very private. It's a way of saying to the gods, "Oh, don't mind me, I'll just wander around in these back hallways..." and then grabbing that piece of fire and running like hell. - Twyla Tharp

GO ANALOG WHEN YOU'RE STUCK

We all get stuck along the way.

Obviously we live in a digital age. We are all at a church tech/media conference. When I'm stuck, I go offline – twitter, facebook, email, blogs, vimeo, youtube, my iphone even. I turn it off.

I feverishly finished this talk after paying about \$40 for paper at the Westin (Which I assume ECHO will reimburse me for).

I printed out what I had and I wrote the rest by hand.

My wife, who is the real writer in our house swears by it.

CREATIVITY & DISORGANIZATION ARE NOT BADGES OF HONOR

For much of my artistic life I've fought the beast of disorganization. And up until the last year, I never worked real hard to combat the monster. I believed that being less organized meant I was being more creative.

As you might imagine, this is absolutely NOT the case. Being less organized just means you have more chaos in your life; and most wise artists will tell you that chaos is the antithesis to creativity, not the other way around.

Chaos literally subverts creativity.

A group in NYC – The Behance Network, they created the 99% Conference and Action Method products, convinced me that I am, in fact, a complete idiot.

We aren't getting paid to come up with ideas. We're being paid to execute out ideas. And do that, you need a good process.

I use their Action Method products.

The best resource for getting a good hold of creative process is Scott Belsky's, *Making Ideas Happen*.

I'm still working on this part of myself! I am NOT organized.

It took me weeks to write back to Jenni Wright and then I called her this afternoon asking questions that I would have known had I read the email clearly.

And then there is this final part of the process...

LET YOURSELF FAIL

In the book *Art & Fear* the author's write...

The function of the overwhelming majority of your artwork is simply to teach you how to make the small fraction of your artwork that soars. One of the basic and difficult lessons every artist must learn is that even the failed pieces are essential. - Art & Fear, by Bayles/Orland

There is probably no other tool I've used more than failure.

I WANT TO END WITH AN EXAMPLE - HOW DOES THIS LOOK IN PRAXIS?

The piece was called *AN ACT OF CONFESSION*

1. STORY - I started with my story – I am the chief sinner at Willow Creek Community Church

2. SCRATCHING - I real idea took shape after a scratching session 8 months prior.
3. ANALOG - I wanted to create something tactile and analog.
4. ORGANIZE - I had to FORCE myself to write it and it create all the necessary schedules.
5. FAIL - I created 9 other plexiglass pieces before I knew how to create this one.

ACT OF CONFESSION VIDEO: <http://vimeo.com/8972924>

"Our vanity, our passions, our spirit of imitation, our abstract intelligence, our habits have long been at work, and it is the task of art to undo this work of theirs, making us travel back in the direction from which we have come to the depths where what has really existed lies unknown within us." - Marcel Proust

The sacred spaces we work are meant for bigger things than filling them with our propaganda.

Our sacred spaces are to be filled with our stories.

Our stories of light and darkness

Redemption and restoration.

Told by you, our pastors & prophets.

Thank you.