

## “Please, Give Me A Classic!”

Rev. Annie Holmes

Some years back I attended a Robert Mapplethorpe exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago. As some of you may know this is a collection of black and white photographs. The pictures were for the most part six and seven feet tall. The scenes were of people on their jobs, but not any jobs I had been familiar with in my life, up until that exhibition. They were pictures of people in odd and often bloody and unusual jobs. As I viewed the pictures I remember feeling rather sick and disgusted. One photograph had three middle aged men holding three bloody heads of cows. One of the men had a large machete all bloodied in the other hand. In another was a picture of a naked man covered in bees from head to foot. His whole face and chest where nothing but humming and seemingly moving bees.

I was, I can tell you appalled by the pictures, I was definitely pricked and felt uneasy and uncomfortable. He was depicting a part of life, while not a part of my own experience, a large and necessary part of life for those people in the photographs. What may have made me feel uncomfortable and queasy, was for someone else, a natural part of their life. But what bothered me most was Mapplethorpe's medium to express those people and their professions. I questioned his method and his appropriateness for me and then - I made a gigantic leap, and decided that they were not appropriate for anyone. I started skating on thin ice when I began telling people how terrible these pictures were and how could he show such awful depictions of life and so much blood and so large and on and on. I was starting to make ethical decision for others by assuming that my opinion on these pictures was valid and a norm for everyone. Since then I have struggled with those pictures and my reaction to them. Does it follow because I had problems with the content, those pictures should be censored?

Well, that's exactly what the National Endowment of the Arts decided on some other photographs of Robert's. Mapplethorpe, before his death in 1991, did some photographs depicting same sex couples in rather erotic/sadomasochistic poses. As I viewed those photographs, I was again appalled. I considered myself to be a liberal who would defend to the death someone's right to construct their own expression of art as they saw fit. But, for the first time in my life I was ready to draw an imaginary line in the sand of individual expression. “No more!” I wanted to scream in the art gallery. I was looking around at people at the exhibit and feeling desperate because I was sure this exhibit would cement their perceptions of the gay world as mean, vicious, weird and therefore a lifestyle to be feared and loathed.

“How could Mapplethorpe do this to us?” I kept asking myself. He was a gay man who must have understood the consequences these pictures could bring on our gay lifestyle world. It was my fear and my feeling of being betrayed that

lead to my dismissal of his work as anything but loathing and disgusting. So did the National Endowment of the Arts. I, in my pain and fear and misunderstanding of true freedom of expression, fell into the age old trap, of, “If it bothers me, then I, speaking for all of society, say we must get rid of that expression.”

Each of us has our limits, limits beyond which we will not be pushed or pulled or prodded. Or do we? I have changed my mind about Mapplethorpe and his view of reality. And the reason my limits have been pushed is because of Mark Twain. In the last years school boards around the United States have decided, on arbitrary, and often a personal basis, that a certain book or work of art is unsuitable and therefore should be banned and ultimately destroyed. When I discovered that books like Tom Sawyer and Catcher in the Rye and Uncle Tom’s Cabin were banned from many high school libraries my consciousness was raised. “Who do these people think they are?” I bellowed. Exactly, who do any of us think we are to pass ethical judgment on anyone else’s expression of reality, and so I was forced to do some soul searching and Mapplethorpe was in there wrestling with me, in my soul.

I decided I needed some objective advice and I went to ethical critic Wayne Booth and his book The Company We Keep. I found I needed some new tools by which to make intelligent, not simply emotional opinions. Booth and I had some serious discussions and from his book I learned some maxims that have helped me with this issue and another issue I will raise with you this morning. Oh, you of the liberal heart and minds.

What I discovered were some definitions, criteria and features of what we have come to call in our society, a classic. But the problem remained of how to define as classic, those expressions that bother us. And, how do some expressions get the distinction of becoming a classic? It seems we want to put cellophane around any expression that we deem classical and then make it immune of further criticism. Booth told me that what we mean in naming certain texts, events, images, rituals, symbols or persons a classic; is that here we recognize nothing less than the disclosure of a reality we cannot help but name truth. There is an image here for being compelled in the face of reality to see a truth, or that certain expressions of the human spirit are so disclosing of a compelling truth about our lives, that we cannot deny it as some kind of normative status.

I was being challenged, pushed, nudged, cajoled into broadening my limited view of a classic, beyond a feeling of only liking what made me happy. Booth went on to say a classic is; a realized experience, a medium of transforming our perception of reality, a claim that will reinterpret us as we try to interpret it, listening to the wider community, more than we are able to as an individual. A classic is a model of a dialogue, not a closed argument. In a classic, the artist’s or writer’s journey of intensification, helps us see life and the journey is worth the trip, and the risk, and therefore the text must remain a structural whole. The style conveys the author’s presence, semantics, syntax and genre. The author or artist is bold because they know we dare not allow timidity in entering

the game of expressing a truth of existence. We, the receivers will either recognize or disown that authentic public-ness of a true piece of art. The classics cannot be confined to either neoclassical norms, romantic enthusiasms, or above all, to the discreet charm of bourgeois, fundamentalist sensibilities or technological privatization. The classics must be freed, as was observed, to become our educators in the realities which as noble and true, are always and must remain public.

Because of these ideas, I could begin to allow Mapplethorpe's work, all his work, as a whole, into my idea of classic, or otherwise, an expression that will be allowed into my sensibilities, my consciousness and most of all my heart, as valid. Instead of berating him, I began to listen to him. Even within the pain of the brutality, the expressiveness of the parts of life that are not always pleasing, I could allow the work to stand as truth. But what about Mapplethorpe the artist? Booth helped me see that an artist too is on a classic path. The artist is on a journey. I was intrigued by this analogy. Mapplethorpe did not just one day wake up and produce a whole series of photographs, as his exhibition, "Some Women", in 1987. But rather, as Booth points out with the help of David Tracy, University of Chicago professor of ethics, as this artist is on a journey, every journey of intensification needs expression. The artist has had a profound experience in life and is therefore was compelled to share it. The sequence could be artist-experience-expression-classic!

The hero, the artist, the thinker, the author, the poet, the saint; each must express that understanding and their experience of life, in an action, a symbol, an image, a gesture, a text. Each must therefore, risk the final moment of intensification and understanding; the moment of the distancing of the self from itself in order to express, to render, to produce a communicable, a shareable, a public way of their meaning. The artist always risks alienation from the original experience. And because of this alienation, the artist may suffer. And yet one must thus risk anew and set out on this second journey of intensification. I had to come to the conclusion that Mapplethorpe did not set out trying to hurt anyone's sensibilities, rather he was distancing himself from an experience he had had, in order to share the depth of its meaning to me. That is the role of the artist and author and poet and saint in our society. But for the artist, writer, mystic etc. this is the step that is often the hardest, because the profound experience they had often is not translatable and therefore they often feel their marvelous experience has been trivialized by the expression. What I had to be able to begin saying was that Mapplethorpe's idea of the world had validity. I began to consider the enlightened and the transformative power there lies in walking awhile in the artist's shoes as you, the viewer or the reader, experience their journey to the point where they actually created the classic.

There are risks one takes when one "takes on" a classic, so to speak. The artist, writer, mystic took a risk of mediocrity in their expression of their incredible experience. There is the risk of the reader or the viewer of opening yourself up, becoming vulnerable to the text, the artwork the novel, the movie etc. But, as

the interpreter of that classic, what can be learned is not only the experience that the classic gives you, but also how to be the most open interpreter you can be. My habit was to approach every artistic expression with fear and the authority of my own censorship. Like in the 1950's and 60's when the Catholic church told us which books we were allowed to read, and how to stay away from B movies. I was taught to be on the cautious side of exposure. As if the movie or the artwork could hurt me. "Don't open me up too much." I would say, "don't make me see too much, and please don't make me look at any of the ugliness of life."

Tracy sees the interpreter's role, our role, as observer in a sequence of four moments; **first** the interpreter of the classic comes to any reading of the text with a certain pre-understanding of the subject, certain personal questions, opinions, responses, expectations, even desires, fears and hopes are present. Then the **second** moment of the interpretation begins. If the classic is truly a classic, another force comes into play, that force is to claim the attention, a vexing, a provocation is exerted on the reader, or the viewer of the text. The interpreter in the **third** step will go into a dialogue with the author and this dialogue will encourage the reader to enter into the **fourth** step, the larger conversation with the entire community of readers, viewers etc.

As I began to walk in Mapplethorpe's shoes for awhile, by allowing his works entrance into my life, lo and behold, my life was deepened. I still don't like the pictures, but my life was enriched by his expression. Journeying with Mapplethorpe helped me begin to discover the journey of pain, and those people screaming out in pain, taking a journey with them may in fact be worth the risk of my own helplessness in the face of their situation. I know I began to see Robert Mapplethorpe, photographer, as a teacher, no longer an enemy, in this journey of life and expression. Booth says, a true friend is one who has the same relationship with others as they have with themselves.

One of my main objections to Mapplethorpe was that I felt he was being irresponsible and immoral in his portrayal of the gay experience. But then I had to step back from my own smug, middle-class, extremely privileged and sheltered gay experience and say, "Wait a minute, first, what is the critical approach a person takes with art, and secondly, how does an interpreter react to an author, a painter, mystic who seems unfriendly?" The ethics of a narrative, or work of art is reciprocal, Booth reminds us, it affects both the tellers and the listeners. What we do once a story, artwork, play or song has been given to us, is where the ethics of the art begins.

Booth and Tracy would uphold Mapplethorpe's artwork in its entirety because they would claim that the ethics of art is inherently a universal subject; in the beginning and from then on, there was a story, and it was largely in the story that human beings were created and now continue to recreate themselves. What we, as ethical critics, and that's what we are doing every time we read a book or watch a movie or see art, what we critics must remember is that ethical criticism can never rest content with talk of mere consequences. Too often we

are so willing to damn what is to us appearing to be evil, play the hanging judge because we are in our heart of hearts are afraid of the message.

So what is a reader, listener, viewer supposed to do with a piece of questionable material? Booth talks about the three roles we assume while listening or viewing, 1. The immediate believer, 2. That of one who knows that they are dwelling in an unreal world, 3.. And the flesh and blood that we really are, no matter what we were exposed to. Separate out your flesh and blood person from the listener and realize in the world of the artist, what we receive is only their representation of life and the world.

Those who screamed pornography and perversion and obscenity were judging Mapplethorpe's entire collection on only seven pieces of the man's entire work. Let's face it, those seven pictures could not stand alone and still be judged true in their ethical criticism of his total life's work. In too many cases, judgments like those made in courtrooms around the world, deal with national funding and not artistic merit. Too often decisions are made about art in the courtroom whose ruling influences so many other people who also become judges of particularity and fear rather than truth and universality. But, as we all know, it is very difficult, almost impossible to be fair and reasonable, open and nonjudgmental when you feel you and your sensibilities are being pushed to the limits. But, on the other hand that is exactly the time and the place to begin to question your motives for your position and why you find you cannot, or will not move from a certain position.

I learned my lesson well. I have in the years since seeing those pictures talked to dozens of people I trust. I have checked out three books of his photographs. I have attempted to converse with him in his journey, his work, in as real a way as I was able. I feel I have walked out of a confining cave into some new freshness and light on this subject. I have grown in a new appreciation and awareness of Mapplethorpe's genius. I still don't like the pictures, but I see the reason for them. I will never look at anyone's artistic expression with the same eyes, nor will I judge as I have in the past.

As religious liberals we must begin to work with the questions of censorship, national funding for the arts, our own reaction to art and finally our community's response. Dealing with the ethics of art may be a priority agenda for the liberal church of the 2000's. Because the bigger question is always, what truth are we afraid of facing by limiting the exposing of some piece of art, a book or an expression of religion that may not fit our own criteria. It just may be time to look again at that criteria and see if it is valid, open and not fearful of learning something new about life.