

# **The Prophetic Artist:**

## **Reflections on the Writings of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin**

*Brendan Seaton*



**Stones 1**

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I first encountered [Pierre Teilhard de Chardin](#) when I was in grade 11. *The Phenomenon of Man* was an odd book for a 15 year old to buy, but I knew that there was something special about the spirituality and worldview of this Jesuit priest who died in 1955, the year before I was born.

The book was way beyond me at the time. I put it aside knowing that one day I would come back to it. It turned out that it would be 35 years later that I would again pick up and read *The Phenomenon of Man* and two of Teilhard's other classics, *The Divine Milieu* and *Man's Place in Nature*. Coincidentally it happened at a time when I decided to devote more of my time to artistic pursuits.

Condemned by the [Catholic Church](#) in 1962 and again in 1981, Teilhard de Chardin expressed a radical new vision of the universe and our place in it. Three aspects of Teilhard's vision struck me.

### A Thoughtful Universe

The first is that humankind represents a quantum leap in the evolution of the universe. From the big bang to our own era, the universe has evolved towards reflective consciousness. This reflective consciousness has been realized in humanity. Each one of us can trace back our lineage through the evolution of organic life, back to the organization of molecules in the primordial sludge of the earth, and further back to the creation of the basic elements that make up our bodies in the births and deaths of stars. As we stand on the bleeding edge of evolution we can look back on where the universe came from and dream about where the universe is going. Each one of us is a synapse in a great cosmic brain.

The second aspect is that the collectivity of human thought on the earth represents a new and very real sphere wrapped around the earth comparable to the atmosphere or biosphere. Teilhard coined the term [noosphere](#) to name this phenomenon. In our own day we see the coalescing of human thought in the electronic networks that connect the six billion individual minds on the planet and in our inventions such as computers that extend the capacity of the human brain and body. Through the collectivity of human consciousness and thought we are now taking control of the forces of

evolution. No more will the universe rely solely on trial and error in the evolutionary process.

Through humanity, the universe has the opportunity to figure out the next steps for itself.

The third aspect of Teilhard's vision that impressed me is that everything in the universe embodies three qualities<sup>1</sup>: differentiation, interiority and a propensity towards unity. Through

*differentiation* each element, each being, each person is unique in its own right. While similar, or

perhaps even identical to others, it is separate from every other element. It has its own existence. It is born, lives and dies as a separate and unique individual. While other things may be like it, nothing else can ever be it.

*Interiority* suggests that each individual has some inner reality best expressed in the awareness and consciousness recognizable in the higher forms of life. Our beings are more than the flesh, blood and other elements that form our corporal bodies. There is a spark of life that animates the matter. Not only can we look outwards at the universe, we can also



look inwards towards the energy that we recognize as the spirit.

All universal elements have a *propensity towards unity*. From the gravitational forces that create galaxies to the social structures that organize our day-to-day affairs, individuals come together to fashion a dance out of the chaos. Through this unity we form a force greater than the sum of the parts.

Teilhard de Chardin was a scientist. A geologist and paleontologist by training, he expressed a scientific perspective on the evolution of life and the purpose of mankind. So what does this have to do with artists?

### **A Prophetic Calling**

I believe that many artists have a prophetic calling. In realizing the prophetic mission, the artist could very well be the highest form of human. Who, other than the artist, is more aware of the universe around us and within us? There are truths that even scientists, with their arrays of complex instrumentation, cannot detect. Not only does the artist gaze out at the objective reality of the universe, she also looks inward to capture a glimpse of the human spirit, the soul of the universe.

An artist is a person who creates; who has original thoughts; who has the capability to transform matter and energy into a message and then communicate that message to others. The message can be simple or complex. It can be communicated through a variety of media. It can be concrete and lasting as in a painting, a photograph or the written word, or it can be ethereal and temporary as in a dance or a musical or theatrical performance. Most important is that the message reveals a truth to humankind. It is the mirror in which we see the universe, the world and ourselves.

A prophet is one who sees the world as it is; who sees the potential for progress or peril, and most importantly, is prepared to challenge the people and the powers-that-be to turn away from ruin and move towards life.<sup>2</sup> The prophet sees, reflects and

acts. He forces us to evolve. These are all qualities of a conscious universe.

The artist-as-prophet cuts through the bland; cuts through the noise; cuts through the barriers of our perception. We are challenged and changed by the artist's message. Art engenders a reaction. True art is active, not passive. The artist makes us see, hear, feel, taste and smell.

As humanity takes control of the forces of evolution, as we continue to dominate the planet and all of its ecosystems, as science meticulously deconstructs creation, the universe needs a conscience, a reflective element that can see and guide us along a creative and non-destructive path. This is the path of the artist.

### **What's the Point?**

Artists who are unaware of their prophetic mission often ask, "What's the point?" when talking about their art. Why paint a picture when a photograph is more accurate? Why write a song that few will hear? Yet these artists are compelled to create. They feel a certain emptiness or void when idle. Many are unaware of their role in the world. They are unaware that they are a channel for a creative universe.

Consider Carole's<sup>3</sup> picture *Stones 1*, the pencil sketch on the cover page of this essay. What truth is revealed to us through a simple pencil drawing of a bowl of polished stones?

Carole's pencil sketch conveys a simple reality that I did not realize, even though I actually saw this same bowl of stones sitting on the table in her studio over several days. The simple composition, complimented by her attention to light and detail drew life out of the rock. She somehow captured the essence of the stones. In the drawing one can discern the individuality, the interiority and unity present in what might appear to many as a collection of inanimate objects. It inspired in me an appreciation of the little beautiful things all around us. Carole's *Stones 1* is a simple still life, but it is also a true interpretation of creation that moved me just a little.



To capture a truth, no matter how simple, is to touch the divine. A true representation of a bowl of stones, one that expresses its essence perhaps even better than the stones themselves, brings humanity into reality. The artist's point of view, combined with a representation that captures some inner radiance, can sometimes ignite a reaction in the observer better than the external reality. The universe struggles to be seen.

### Art can be more true than Reality

The artist doesn't have to replicate precisely. The artist sees, or feels or otherwise senses an essential truth. The artist interprets. Then through a trans-

formation of energy and matter communicates the message. Simply recording a scene or a sound doesn't make it art. It must capture an essence, a feeling, and an emotion: qualities that are not always

seen with the eye or heard with the ear. The artist conveys meaning to the scene and gives it context. We give the artist *artistic license* and trust that their manipulation of reality will enhance our understanding of the truth rather than mislead.

But how can art trump reality? Through interpretation the artist makes the reality comprehensible to people. A man, a woman has made contact with the real world and has been influenced by it. They bring back a message, like in Plato's *[Allegory of the Cave](#)*. They tell of a universe both beyond and within our narrow points of view.

The artist engenders the reflective spirit of the universe. To create, the artist must first reflect within herself, and then express externally the truth he's realized. There are beautiful and happy truths and ugly and sad truths. The artist must express them all. More than this, the artist must put her work out there. The work contains a message, a message of a universal truth. The artist must find a way of communicating that message through performance, exhibition, publication, sale to another person or some other means.

### The Artist's Vision

The scope of the artist's vision is illustrated in my



*Madonna and Child*

photograph *Madonna and Child*. I encountered this real life nativity scene while traveling in Guatemala in 2004. The image captures the three universal qualities. The first is the uniqueness of each element in the

scene; the mother and child, the smoke rising from the cooking pan, the child's chair. The second is the individual story wrapped up in each element; the bond of love captured in the girl's eyes, the transformation of heat energy and oil that will cook the family's meal; the empty chair that proclaims the child's honored place in the home. The third is the unity of the elements; the complex weave that places each part in context, the story that can be told about this mother and child and the lives they lead.

The artist creates. The artistic piece might be reasonably representative of reality, or it may not

be real at all, except to the extent that it represents a product of the artist's imagination. The artist brings form and substance to a truth, a vision, a perspective. The artist is both the mother and midwife for original thoughts.

The artist synthesizes. He captures the essence of the individual elements and the unity of the relationships between them. More than that, she establishes a relationship between the objects and subjects in the artistic piece and the person who is the observer or listener. He leads the observer or listener to the truth.

The artist abstracts. She isolates the truth from the cacophony of images, sounds and ideas around us so that it can be seen or heard. The artist brings sensible form to thoughts, ideas, memories, hopes, and dreams.

### **Collaboration and Collectivity**

Art is often a solo endeavor, but it may also be collaborative expressing that propensity towards unity. Certain forms of art require close collaboration between several or many artists. Think of a dance that may involve not only the dancer, but also the choreographer, the musicians, costume, makeup and stage design artists, lighting and sound specialists, and perhaps someone to direct and produce the piece. Many people come together to express the vision. Beyond expressing a simple truth these collaborations have the capability to lift the spirit and draw not only an observer, but also an audience of observers into a higher and common collective experience.

Artists collectively weave a tapestry that reveals the world over time. This collectivity of thought,

of realization and of expression is nothing less than the universe reflecting upon itself. Artists are the soul of a collective consciousness that is enveloping the Earth. Each artist ties a knot or adds a thread to the tapestry.

### **Expressing the Message**

One may make money as an artist; but more often he does not. Sometimes people pay for the privilege of receiving the message. Sometimes they rail against the message, especially if the message is not what one wants to hear. People often want to avoid the truth. They hate the messenger. The artist-as-prophet must be prepared to take risks. It's easy to express beautiful truths. It's hard to hold your art up as a mirror to reflect the evil, exploitation or destruction in the world.

But let's not get too serious or morose here. The artist must rejoice as much as she criticizes. The message of a friendly universe, a friendly God, a friendly world and a humanity that is pursuing happiness must dominate the prophetic artist's message. Humor

and wit must be a large part of the prophetic artist's repertoire. Joy, hope and happiness must be key objectives. A walk through a gallery should be accompanied by a wry smile, a chuckle and animated conversation. A performance should exhilarate, inspire and motivate the patrons. My photograph *No Admittance* is an example. It's a serious message delivered with some humor. Yes... We must deliver the hard messages. We must challenge the authorities. But prophetic art must instill hope and never despair. Nudge, nudge. Wink, wink. Know what I mean?



*No Admittance*

So what's the point? The point is that someone must reflect back to the mass of humanity the truth of the world and universe around us. Each artist has an opportunity individually and in collaboration with other artists to express the message of a creative universe. Whether that message is communicated to one person or a planet of people is immaterial. With the creation and then

expression of each new thought the universe gets a little bit bigger.

(Endnotes)

1 These three qualities have been further developed by the "geologist" [\*Thomas Berry\*](#).

2 For more on prophets see my essay [\*Anyone can be a Prophet\*](#).

3 Carole is my artist-wife.