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Believing in light without seeing light

Chase Nordengren | Aug. 2, 2012 Young Voices

At its best, modern art asks us to confront the meaning of art itself: what belongs in museums, what doesn't and whether art's power over us is well-earned. Such is the case with "Annual Light" [1] (1966), a work by Alighiero Boetti currently on display as part of a retrospective of the artist at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Boetti's light is a wooden box with a bare bulb inside it; it is said to illuminate for 11 seconds at random once a year. Reportedly, no one has ever seen the work light up.
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Viewing the box as art, then, is an act of faith. Boetti could well be lying to us: Perhaps the box is hooked up to nothing. Even if Boetti intended for it to light, we still do not know whether he has wired the mechanisms correctly. Further, by moving and unplugging the box repeatedly, as we have, we might well have broken the work. We might never see it light at all.

Our relationship to the box, therefore, bears some striking similarities to our relationship with God. We see, with our eyes, only the possibility of God's light in our world. We fear, sometimes, that we have been tricked into believing that light will come for us. Like Nietzsche, we may even fear that we have killed God's light, that what it was for those of the past it cannot be for us now.

God calls us, St. Paul writes, to faith "as the evidence of things unseen." It is perhaps not a coincidence that the ideals and practices we often feel God call us to -- love built on trusting one another, a world without violence, freedom from want and fear -- are the hardest to see, and the alternatives to those ideals -- intolerance, distrust and fear of one another, succumbing to impulse -- are oftentimes the easiest to see.

Standing in front of Boetti's work, I wanted it to light, at times almost desperately. The idea of being the first person to see it light, the first person to receive the totality of the message the artist meant to convey, is also a form of affirmation: If I see it light, I know I have not been duped or tricked into treating a useless box as art.

Seeing the art where it is hardest to see -- where the work of the artist is the least representational, the least beautiful, the least connected to our emotional lives -- is the challenge modern art often sets before us. Seeing the potential and the power of God's vision for us, a set of notions often radically different from those in easy reach, is one of the central challenges of our faith.

Quakers approach this challenge with yet another metaphor using the power of light. "Inner Light," in Quaker circles, refers to that of God said to be present in all believers. The process of Quaker worship, sitting in silence waiting for that light to reflect in what worshippers reflect upon or say, is itself an act of faith that the light will come and that its occasional appearance will sufficiently nourish the faithful.

The implications of that voice, that contact with God, cannot live entirely within ourselves. Much as the Quakers would hold that their meetings provide the opportunity to check and interweave their interpretations of the light with one another, so too should we all search for opportunities to allow others to ask questions of us, to interrogate our assumptions and to live our understanding of the faith through and with the guidance of a community.

Still, we cannot hide from the individual call to faith. Something as complex as faith in God requires affirming countless smaller faiths along the way each time we make an individual decision to chase after things unseen. Like Boetti's box, nothing we see or sense outside ourselves will ever offer absolute reassurance that our faith is justified or that the God we hold faith in lives. Our feeling, as inexact and plodding as it is, must be sufficient.

[Chase Nordengren is a graduate student at the University of Washington in Seattle, where he studies education policy.]

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