Charles Johnson on “Whole Sight: The Intersection of Culture, Faith, and the Imagination” (2007 Katz Distinguished Lecture)

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Welcome to Going Public, a podcast from the Simpson Center for the Humanities at the University of Washington. I’m Caitlin Palo, Program and Events Manager at the Simpson Center.

This episode is part of a special series for 2023-2024 featuring some popular talks from our annual Katz Distinguished Lecture series. This month’s episode features Charles Johnson’s talk from 2007 titled “Whole Sight: The Intersection of Culture, Faith, and the Imagination.”

From his creative beginnings as a political cartoonist and journalist to his acclaim as a novelist, essayist, short story writer, screen- and teleplay writer, and university professor, Charles Johnson’s life is a model of interdisciplinarity. ​​He is Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Washington and is the author of *Middle Passage* published 1990 and winner of the 1990 National Book Award. He is co-author with Patricia Smith of *Africans in America: America’s Journey through Slavery* (1998), the companion book for the 1998 PBS series of the same name. Johnson was named a MacArthur Fellow in 1998 and received the Academy Award for Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 2002.

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**Charles Johnson**:

On September 12th 2003, I have the privilege of delivering a lecture on the craft of writing called storytelling and the alpha narrative on Bainbridge Island for the organization called Fields In. This lecture was later published in the winter 2005 issue of the Southern Review.

During the Q&A after this talk, I said something about the importance of finding one's passion in life, how one's passion or desire always has a greater place in one's life and one's profession or various occupations, how it demands a special kind of cultural and spiritual faith, and how, for example, artistic passion if properly understood will lead a man or a woman to imaginative and intellectual realms they never in their wildest dreams thought they would visit.

Quite possibly, I even quoted that night from one of my favorite statements by the late great meditation teacher from India,m Eknath Easwaran, who was also an English professor, a Sanskrit scholar, and a prolific writer and translator. I discovered his work in 1981. And for the last 26 years, I've had his words taped to my desk. What Professor Easwaran said was this, "A well-spent life is one that rounds out what it has begun. The life of a great artist or scientist is usually shaped by a single desire carried through to the very end."

Now, after this lecture, a very nice middle aged Black man approached me. On his face was a look of confusion. He pulled me aside and he said, Dr. Johnson, "How do I find my passion? I've been looking all my life and I don't know what it is." I think I replied hastily and too incompletely by saying, your passion is something that finds you. It's something you surrender to, something you embrace because you have no other choice.

Looking back, I wish I'd had more time that evening to discuss the question of having a lifelong passion in the career of an artist or a scholar, especially if he or she is a Black American. Tonight, I would like to revisit that question from four years ago and perhaps provide a more acceptable and complete answer. In order to do this, I must take a two-pronged approach. I have to talk about the universal logic and discipline that lies within the passion for the creative process.

But art does not happen outside history. Art is always forged in the tempestuous crucible of a particular historical moment. It is a specific hour in cultural history, in the enveloping society, and in the state of one's profession at a moment in time, which define and determine the real creative and imaginative possibilities for the work of any artist, scientist, educator, or scholar.

His methods, the styles the artist selects from, even the questions he will ask, all these are shaped by the specific cultural and historical forms in play and sometimes out of play when he begins to create, especially during his years of apprenticeship or when he is a student.

And so I would lie and I would do wrong if I neglected in this lecture to address the question of art and race. Or if I fail to say something about the kind of America that shaped my own vision of the artist's duties and responsibilities, if you can be patient with me, I will try to juggle these two balls at once. And as I go back and forth between them, I'll try not to lose sight of either one.

In the 1950s when I was in elementary school in Evanston, Illinois, I was not the best of students in all my classes. This was because there was only one area or activity I was truly passionate about and that was drawing. Art class was where I got all my best grades and praise from my teachers. As a child, I would often retreat into drawing as a refuge.

In my pre-teens, there was something magical to me about bringing forth images that hitherto existed only in my head where no one could see them. I remember spending whole afternoons blissfully seated before a three-legged blackboard my parents got me for Christmas drawing and erasing until my knees on the kitchen floor beneath me were covered with layers of chalk and the piece in my hand was reduced to a wafer thin sliver.

Inevitably, by the time I was 13 or 13.5, the passion for drawing led me to consider a career as a professional artist, which I became when I was 17 and published my first illustrations with a Chicago company and also my very first short, short stories in my high school newspaper.

Over the next seven years, between '65 and '72, I published well over 1,000 illustrations and drawings, two books of political cartoons, and I taught people how to draw in an early PBS series called Charlie's Pad, which was broadcast in 1970.

While drawing was my passion, I also enjoyed writing, but mainly for fun. From the age of 12, I filled up diaries, then in college, journals in which I'd write long essays to myself, grappling with ideas and feelings and cultural questions. I needed to externalize on the page as a way of freeing myself from them. But as I said, the visual arts were for me at that time primary.

From the Evanston public library, I lugged home every book on drawing, painting, cartooning and I pored over them because for me it seemed that each canvas, each drawing, each image was a portal that ever so slightly changed my way of perceiving and imagining the world.

The work of others fed my own passion to create. Because the ultimate way to respond to a work that one has received as a gift and loves is by answering it with a creative gift of one's own, one offered in the spirit of what a Buddhist calls Dana or giving, which is one of the 10 paramitas or virtues.

Up on Capitol Hill at 1351 East Olive Way, my 25-year-old daughter Elisheba, who is a conceptual artist opened last February her first business fair gallery cafe, where each month she features the work of a new artist. And you can also get a wonderful portobello mushroom with Dijon sandwich there too.

So far she has exhibited the work of between 12 and 15 painters, installation artists, and photographers. Each month, I look forward to opening night with the same thrill I had when I was a teenager because the gift of art like the experience of meditation is always an invitation for the mind to slow down and pay attention, for the audience to be quiet and listen, and listening without the ego in the way is always an act of love.

Novelist and critic Albert Murray says that fine art is distinguished by four things, its range its precision its profundity and the idiomatic subtlety of the rendition.

When we find ourselves in a gallery or in the transcendental space created by a novel or a poem or in a theater, standing before such a work as Murray describes, we are gently invited to cast aside our presuppositions, to let go for just a moment our conditioned ways of seeing the world and all our explanatory models for experience.

Each powerful encounter with art gestures towards the goal of the philosophical method known as phenomenology, which was never about creating new knowledge, but instead only promised to deepen our perception of what we think we already know. This method reminds me of how Buddhist teacher Bhikkhu Bodhi describes the important practice of right mindfulness.

He said, the task of right mindfulness is to clear up the cognitive field. Mindfulness brings to light experience in its pure immediacy. It reveals the object as it is before it has become plastered over with conceptual paint overlaid with interpretations.

That experience of being shocked into new ways of seeing and knowing, of having the pedestrian replaced by a feeling of mystery and wonder, of having mystery and wonder revealed in the pedestrian, was something I hungered for as a child. I felt it was as necessary for my spiritual and emotional and intellectual life as food was for from my body. Therefore, I took in everything my teachers placed before me.

But you have to remember that this was in the 1950s and early 1960s. And works by Black authors or artists of color were nowhere to be found in the canon or curriculum at the integrated colleges, secondary or elementary schools I attended. Black studies courses did not exist until 1968 and 1969. And I was privileged to participate in the establishing of one when I was an undergraduate.

Even in the early 1970s, it was rare for the work of a Black author or artist to be accepted by major white publishers. In the universe of American education, these works by Black authors were dark matter, invisible to the eye and unknown. And yes, I was sometimes tempted to condemn the white teachers and professors I had since the 1950s for not placing this history, this art, this literature before me.

But I realized now that they had not been taught or exposed to any of this and therefore, they had nothing of this sort to transmit to the children of color who filled their classes when Brown versus Board of Education went into effect in 1954.

So in the 1960s and earlier, a Black student had to be an autodidact, someone who became skillful at doing research on his own and teaching himself what our schools did not offer.

I'm giving emphasis tonight to the importance of an expansive consciousness that sees the work of our predecessors from all corners of the world, all their attempts to conjure sense from experience as being our rich human inheritance.

Almost 200 years ago, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in his journal of 1845 that quote, "Every history in the world is my history. I can as readily see myself in the Vedas as in the New Testament, in Easop as in the Cambridge platform or the Declaration of Independence."

In the America that Emerson envisioned so long ago was also, he said, quote, "An asylum of all nations, the energy of Irish, Germans, Swedes, Poles, and Cossacks, and all the European tribes, of the Africans and the Polynesians who will construct a new race, a new religion, a new state, a new literature, which will be as vigorous as the new Europe, which came out of the smelting pot of the Dark Ages.

Emerson saw no one as being a stranger and nothing of the human experience as being alien or foreign to him. Everywhere in his transcendentalist writings and speeches, we come across Emerson's absolute certainty that he is the other. That the divisions we have created or erected between races, genders, religions, and classes are simply, as Francis Bacon would say, "idols of the tribe." In a moment, I will say a little bit more about the other idols of the cave. They relate to art and scholarship.

If Emerson significantly begins our cultural discussion of self and other in the 19th century, the late writer named after him, Ralph Waldo Ellison advances and deepens that project in the 20th century. In the 1940s, when he wrote his masterpiece Invisible Man, Ellison says that he discovered that what he discovered is that, quote, "by a trick of fate and our racial problems notwithstanding, the human imagination is integrative and the same is true of the centrifugal force then spirits the democratic process.

African philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah, who was trained at Cambridge and taught at Harvard, has his own way of expressing this most fundamental of truths. In his important book, In My Father's House, Appiah says, quote, "We are all already contaminated by each other." This mutual contamination, cross-fertilization, or creolization is something Ellison and appiah and all people of color are obliged to learn quite early in childhood if they are minorities.

In school, it was incumbent upon them to know the white humanities curriculum and its assumptions as well and as thoroughly as the white students in class beside them, approaching with openness and humility and sometimes clenched teeth all those works composed by whites for whites, with people of color never part of the author-audience equation.

They learned to momentarily identify with though, not necessarily internalize the themes, figures, and tropes of the racial other, to absorb the products of the Greek and the Judaic, the Roman, French, and British, to emotionally empathize with and project themselves behind the eyes of whites as diverse as Homer and the Beowulf poet, Shakespeare, Goethe, and Dostoevsky, Virginia Woolf, and Sylvia Plath.

For children of color, this understanding of the racial other in the sense that Emerson dreamed of in his journals has always been a matter of survival. They had to know how to carefully and critically read American society from at least two perspectives, from the perspective of how these products are given to whites by whites and also from the perspective marginalized and often invisible of Black history and experience.

A Czech proverb captures this nicely-- "You live a new life for every language you learn." As does a saying by Charlemagne-- "To know another language is to have a second soul." Substitute culture for language, which is one of the defining constituents of culture.

And it's clear that every immigrant of color understands what it means to live this dual profoundly integrationist position in a Eurocentric society, whether he is living in Los Angeles, Paris, Berlin, Amsterdam, or Brussels.

So the Black student from his or her earliest years learns to read phenomena from a multicultural perspective, first in terms of what they know about the enormous contributions African-Americans have made to this country since the time of the 17th century colonies, a knowledge received from other Black people and from unrecorded stories transmitted by family members and friends, which only recently entered into our history books and into mainstream media.

Secondly, they had to understand as any social or racial outsider must, the relative cultural formations of a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant society because such intimate knowledge of the white other was necessary for navigating successfully through America's institutions, schools, jobs, social situations, et cetera.

For want of a better phrase, I've been calling this way of perceiving the world an 'aleph consciousness'. At the suggestion of Seattle writer Kathleen Alcala, who was at the Bainbridge Island event I mentioned earlier, I borrowed this term 'aleph consciousness' from a short story by Jorge Luis Borges, called the aleph, where he describes the aleph as, quote, "the place where all the places of the world seen from every angle coexist."

It is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet. And of its shape, Borges says that it, quote, "is that of a man pointing to the sky and the earth, to indicate that the lower world is the map and mirror of the higher." From its vantage point, Borges says, "one can see," quote, "simultaneous night and day."

Historically, Black Americans, Asians, and Hispanics had to develop this epistemic skill and doing so required a lot of work for an entire lifetime. Let me see if I can give you an example for how someone develops a nuanced polyvalent aleph consciousness. In Ralph Ellison, emergence of genius, literary critic Lawrence Jackson relates an incident at Tuskegee Institute, which proved to be crucial for Ellison's development and is useful for our purposes here.

"The most significant discovery of 1935 for Ellison," says Jackson, "was T.S. Eliot's poem The Waste Land." With a prodigious expenditure of energy, Ellison stepped up his reading in order to nail down the poem's meaning. He looked up Eliot's seven pages of references with Professor Sprague's collegial advice informing his search and began to unpack the layers of the poem.

The library explorations took him into new territories of geography and anthropology. Ellison began with Jessie Weston's from ritual to romance, nearly a guidebook to quote, 'elucidate the difficulties of the poem,' end quote.

Wetson revealed the Arthurian legend and Fisher King myths directly behind Eliot's poem. George Frazer's multi-volume The Golden Bough provided him with an overview of human ritual and culture. Ellison revived his dusty Latin skills drilled into him at Douglas High School in Oklahoma in order to understand a generous Ovid quote, which Eliot found indispensable, as well as a smattering of French he'd obtained in the fall.

The exhausting research netted him intimacy with many of the major canonical Western texts not staple in the Tuskegee curriculum, such as the Aeneid, Ovid's Metamorphoses, St. Augustine's Confessions, The Inferno, Spenser's Prothalamion, Paradise Lost, The Tempest, and Antony and Cleopatra.

In the weeks following the historical education and literature and anthropology, he came to the work of Ford Madox Ford, Sherwood Anderson, Gertrude Stein, and More Hemingway. In other words, Ellison's education demanded of him that he intimately know jazz and the sources for all the references in Eliot's poem, Black History, and St. Augustine's Confessions.

The works of the Harlem Renaissance and Sherwood Anderson, what a Eurocentric curriculum provided and what a deliberately censored at the time. It required a certain generosity of spirit because this approach to learning is conjunctive, not disjunctive, not either/or, but rather this and this and this and of course that too.

For Ellison understood like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Emerson that everything in life and culture is interrelated and interconnected, the Black, the white, the Western, the Eastern connected as King said, quote, "in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny."

This idea of creolization is also central to Buddhist thought and is expressed by the truth of dependent origination, pratityasamutpada, which says that nothing comes into existence independently and that all things in this universe depend on all other things for their being.

At this point, I must add that when a young Black artist in the 1960s or for 100 years before that fully realized just how much of the history and experience of his family and ancestors had been erased, deleted, or rendered invisible by the dominant society.

He also came to understand on the deepest levels of his life that as an artist, he had an important personal duty to fulfill, to make visible the invisible in his work, to disclose in his creations all those things that have been deliberately concealed, wiped away in our schools, in our popular entertainment, and in the national consciousness.

For example, the experience of the slave trade. What exactly it was like to be on those ships that sailed with Black cargo for 300 years. In my era, a young Black artist or scholar discovered a crucial part of his work involved restoring meaning lost in American history, and pursuing with a sense of adventure the exploration of new meaning after the era of segregation ended.

I wanted to explain to the nice man I met on Bainbridge Island that a project, a passion such as this is not something the artist chooses, rather it chooses him. The moment he or she picks up a brush or a pen, he understands that his art can never have the luxury of being just entertainment or a form of escapism. On the contrary, it must be a probing of reality because art has a phenomenological duty to perform the duty of disclosure and not just for Black Americans, but for all humankind.

Such a personal passion once discovered electrifies the artists and scholars' imagination and interest in almost every field known to man. He is driven to find the remnants of himself and his ancestors who are hidden just off to one side of the official historical record.

He finds himself in the sciences, for example, in the work of geneticists who when they add up the tiny genetic variations that make one person different from the next, discover there are more differences within so-called races than between them. In other words, he finds himself, his possibilities in all the arts and sciences.

To think of the arts and sciences properly then is to understand that all our perspectives, all the disciplines we pursue take us directly to a common situation, a common history from which all meanings evolve.

As phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes in Adventures of the Dialectic, quote, "My own field of thought and action is made up of imperfect meanings, badly defined and interrupted. They are completed over there in the others who hold the key to them because they see sides of things that I do not see, as well as one might say my social back.

Likewise, I am the only one capable of telling the balance sheets of their lives for their meanings are also incomplete and are openings onto something that only I am able to see. I do not have to search very far for the others. I find them in my experience, lodged in the hollows that show what they see and what I failed to see.

Our experiences thus have lateral relationships of truth altogether, each possessing what is secret to the other. In our combined functionings, we form a totality which moves towards enlightenment and completion. We can never be locked in ourselves." End quote.

I like to believe that this is what novelist John Fowles meant when he coined the phrase 'whole site'. It is what I initially found in the worlds of visual arts. When confronted by art, we can never be locked in ourselves. Art, art is the bridge to the other, from one subjectivity to another. And so the experience of art is if not universal, then at least intersubjective. And that is the best we can hope for in either the arts or the sciences.

Art has an epistemological mission and a profound contempt for cultural provincialism. But besides being a pathway to knowledge and a correction for calcified ways of seeing, art does something more-- a lifetime devoted to one or several of the arts leads to a profound sense of humility and thanksgiving.

For me, when I was a kid, there was only one burning passion that I had, art. Initially, nothing else interested me. I only wanted to create. But like a thread, one pulls on, say, a sweater. That single passion to create and clarify first for oneself, then hopefully for others leads in an interconnected universe to all that one sees. It is interwoven with, for example, a deepening interest in the creations of other artists, their biographies, and the critical response to their works.

I don't know if this sounds like a strange idea to you. I don't know. Today, the public has the popular conception that all writers and artists do is emote and express their feelings. The general public also seems to believe that what they see in a book spilled from the writer in finished form as a first draft. I'm sure those of us here know that for every page a writer saves, he often throws out 20.

There's a lovely little book called The Educated Imagination by critic Northrop Frye, which I've had my students read for the last 30 years. And I suggest you read it too. I give it to my apprentice writers because it is funny and humbling and wise.

For example, Frye says, quote, "It's not surprising if writers are often rather simple people, not always what we think of as intellectuals, and certainly not always any freer of silliness or perversity than anyone else. What concerns us is what they produce not what they are. And poetry according to Milton who ought to have known is quote, 'more simple, sensuous, and passionate than philosophy or science.'"

Frye also says this, quote, "A writer's desire to write can only have come from previous experience of literature. And he'll start by imitating whatever he's read, which usually means what the people around him are reading, or excuse me, are writing. This provides him with what is called a convention, a certain typical and socially acceptable way of writing."

This description by Frye of how the writer begins has always struck me as accurate. But I would beg to differ with this quote from Milton. The reason is because the kind of writer I'm talking about, one who is truly passionate and driven by the desire for whole sight is not comfortable with placing different disciplines like philosophy and poetry and history in little boxes or creating artificial barriers between them. I've always seen this as a form of segregation, what I call creative and intellectual apartheid.

To a great degree, such divisions are also idols of the cave, idols of the cave, in which our education and relative cultural conditioning cause us to fail to see the interconnectedness of all human efforts to make sense of the world. For we remember that Plato chose the dialogue, a dramatic form to express his ideas.

And throughout the history of Western philosophy, especially existentialism, we see that these two fields-- literature and philosophy-- are frequently sister disciplines. History is also of acute interest to writers of literary fiction because what is history, but the telling of stories.

Journalism, newspapers have often been called the first draft of history. The 80th draft is perhaps a fine work of historical scholarship, like Stephen Oates's Let the Trumpet Sound a book I relied heavily on when I spent seven years writing my last novel Dreamer, about the last two years in the life of Martin Luther King Jr.

Historian Stephen Oates was very kind to me when I met him at Amherst College in 1998, where he teaches. He had me sign a copy of the novel for him and he said it was the best book on King he'd ever read. I don't think he was just being nice when he said that.

But I know he was being honest when he said that when he was working on his biography of King, he often felt as if he, quote, "had one hand tied behind his back." He wasn't able to imaginatively interpret the wealth of research he had gathered in the way that a novelist could. And he said he was at that time experimenting in his historical work with some of the narrative devices and dramatic strategies he appreciated in fiction.

Just as Professor Oates borrows from the toolkit of the novelist, so too will the novelist appropriate some of the concerns of the historians.

The artist who practices whole sight, the one haunted by a single desire, an overwhelming love will as Frye says, "learn from the conventions of his particular moment in cultural history." But he or she will go beyond that. Specifically, he will like an archeologist look toward the past as he contemplates the future of his field.

If he is a writer of novels or short stories, his love of these forms naturally drives him to analyze and take apart the major works in these two genres, as Ellison did with Eliot, to study the biographies of the men and women who produced stories and novels that advanced the evolution of these forms from their beginnings in the 18th century works of Samuel Richardson's like Pamela and Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe in the case of the novel.

And in the case of short fiction, from Edgar Allen Poe's invention of the modern short story and his theorizing about it in essays like on the aim and technique of the short story to the degeneration of the form into a formula by the early 1900s. And the revolt by short story writers like D.H. Lawrence and Sherwood Anderson against his formalism in the 1920s.

In other words, the love of fiction drives an artist to understand as deeply as he can the theory and practice of his predecessors. So that he can know at his own moment in history what new works are called to promote the evolution of his craft. Out of his enthusiasm for art comes a love of the achievements of others.

And out of that, there arises the natural movement of the artist from his workshop to the classroom, to a desire to teach, and in my case, during the last 36 years to over 300 lecture podiums like this one in Cane Hall, in countries as diverse as England, the Netherlands France, Germany, Czechoslovakia, Portugal, India, Indonesia, Spain, and Japan.

Why? Well, the best way to polish and hone one's craft is to teach it. And one of life's great pleasures is sharing what one loves and has learned with others.

If that Emersonian and Ellisonian passion leads the artist to realizing he must also become a literary critic, someone who can take the temperature of art produced in his own time, and evaluate the significance of art from the past, then this single desire as Warren spoke of also effloresces into an appreciation of Eastern and Western philosophy, especially aesthetics or theories of art.

When I was 18 years old, a professional cartoonist and journalism major, I knew nothing of philosophy. But at the school I attended, all journalism majors had to take two required courses in philosophy. One was logic, which my wise teachers at the time knew was a very good thing for a journalist to know something about. The other course I took my first year in college was a huge lecture course on the philosophy of the pre-Socratics, taught by a young professor named John Howie.

Somehow, I don't know how, and with some gift he had, I don't know what, Dr. Howie was able to sing the 2,000-year-old ethical problems confronting Heraclitus and Parmenides, in such a way that I realized for the first time that many of the social issues I was publishing drawings about in the late '60s were problems debated and discussed with sophistication more than two millennia before the birth of the American Republic.

He made me see that the questions we ask determine the quality of the answers we get. Sitting in the sea of students in Dr. Howie's class, I realized that my passion for art demanded a lifelong passion for philosophy as well. Everything in the well spent career of an artist flows from one original seed, one passion, quote, "carried through to the very end."

The roots of the tree is the desire for art. As that seed flowers, producing new passions, branching out the artist's body of work into essays, aesthetic manifestos, cultural criticism, and other dramatic forms such as screenplays and appreciations of the artists and scholars on whose shoulders he stands, it also produces, as you might guess, a love of language that shows us the possibilities of the English tongue and equally a love of foreign languages too.

Such a literary artist may love language so much that he reads the entire compact edition of the Oxford English Dictionary with his magnifying glass in hand as my own teacher John Gardner once did. And as I did when I was a graduate student and went through every word in the 2,129-page Unabridged Webster's New 20th Century Dictionary. That's what I gave myself when I was 25, took six months to complete. And I never dreamed in my youth that I'd now be in my ninth year of Sanskrit study.

Foreign languages were never my forte. And I've forgotten almost all the French and Spanish I once knew. But a love of art in general led me in my teens to Eastern art. I studied over and over the Ten Ox Herding Pictures of 12th century zen artist Kakuan Shien and other Asian artworks as if they were the visual equivalent of a mantra.

In Liang Kai's 13th century sketch, The Sixth Patriarch tears up a Sutra, I saw a spontaneity in his brush strokes that seemed analogous to the sudden, instantaneous experience of Satori, favored by Chan zen Buddhists.

In Ma yin's Landscape in Moonlight, AD 1200 and Gao Kegong's Landscape After Rain, AD 1250, my eyes moved over paintings that gently nudged me into new ways of seeing. Ephemeral cliffs and mountain peaks were forms briefly manifest from a fecund emptiness, shunyata, that mysteriously was also a plentitude of being.

Such forms arose, trees clouds, people were captured on silk, but were ever on the verge of vanishing back into the undifferentiated, the non-dual, leaving no trace of themselves like waves on water.

Both these works were fine examples of how the beautiful was attained in Buddhist art, namely by dissolving the false distinction or duality between the beautiful and the ugly. It was the realm before their ontological and epistemological separation by mind, by language, and obscuring by relativity that I was seeing in Eastern art.

So a passion for art based on the Dharma led me to first practice meditation when I was 14 years old, to write the novel Oxherding Tale when I was in my 20s, and to embrace the life of a lay Buddhist and upasaka in my 30s.

And that passion segwayed into the joy that comes from translating works that have meant so much to me for 40 years. Theravada and Mahayana Sutras, large portions of the Bhagavad Gita and the Advaita Vedanta classic Ashtavakra Samhita. And seeing how many credible translations and interpretations are possible for a single sloka or verse of four lines, eight syllables each.

The same is true of my hunger for science now. Just one great love, art, it seems to me, opens one up to the entire vast world of human experience. During this long journey, the aleph consciousness, the soul of the artist becomes enriched and expansive. As Ellison once said, the work of art is, quote, "the completion of personality."

During the 15 years I was privileged to know the late playwright, August Wilson, August Wilson, the novelist John Gardner for 10 years and Seattle painters Jacob Lawrence and Gwen Knight, I saw as soon as we met that it was this single passion around which they structured their daily lives for decades.

And what one discovers after such a creative and critical passage is just how little we know the limits of knowing always give us a healthy sense of humility. We see that in the 4.5-billion-year history of the Earth, modern humans have only been around for between 100,000 and 200,000 years, the mere blink of an eye in a universe that is about 13.5 billion years old.

Cosmologists say dark matter and dark energy, which was discovered only nine years ago make up 96% of the universe, with what we can see and measure accounting for only 4%. In other words, we find ourselves living in the midst of a great mystery. So the very idea of whole site in the arts and sciences can only be an ever receding idea like the horizon, something we strive for. At the same time, we know that our knowledge is always partial, incomplete, and provisional.

As Bertrand Russell observed, "what we know is always vanishingly small." Art then is a daily reminder of this mystery. Obviously, the mystery is us. After I complete each new story, essay or lecture, I marvel at and I am thankful for the strangeness and beauty of a bottomless passion that leads to work across so many related disciplines.

And sometimes late at night, around 5:00 AM, when I'm finishing a new piece, I remember the famous Chinese poem by Pang Jung, how wonderful how marvelous. I fetch wood I carry water Thank you.