

Founder's Words on the Philosophy of Sketch

written and continually revisited by Phyllis Novak

SKETCH is an arts initiative that is a collaboration of many voices. It has arisen from the Christian faith community and as such is, at its core or heart, rooted in a Christian view of the world. It draws its breath and its motivation to operate from this core, from this heart. Sketch encourages peace, unity and the celebration of the uniqueness, diversity and the dignity of all people and creation.

Preface:

To put the motivating philosophy of Sketch into words has always been difficult for me, and those who know me can attest to my discomfort with the language that is often used regarding Christian worldview or faith. I've often struggled with knowing how to describe the very thing which I feel is essential to the work of Sketch. I am a Christian and as such it is inevitable that I relate everything in life to the understanding of, and the relationship I have with, Jesus Christ.

Since its inception and throughout its development, I have never been able to divorce myself, nor do I want to, from the profound sense that I have always had, that Sketch is very much a gift to me, to many of us, from God and is also a gift back to God from me, from many of us. So much of the vision of Sketch began with my work at Evergreen, center for street youth (part of Yonge Street Mission) and my prayer life. I write as one incredibly grateful to have thus far been a participant in the unfolding of this work-in-progress piece of art. Even through its enormous challenges I am never able to move away from the awareness that it is an awesome privilege and honour to be involved in Sketch and in the lives of youth who are street-involved and homeless.

In today's world the very word "Christianity" can often carry with it a bitter meaning. In the name of religion many have been wounded. I won't dispute the bitterness as often I have myself experienced anger and confusion toward what has been done in the name of Christ, but it has been done more in support of the institution (or "institutional Christianity") and not in the truth and reality of Christian faith. This is perhaps why I have longed to set up Sketch such that it commits and aspires to be an authentic demonstration of the presence and Love that Christianity truly means to bear to the world through Christ. My desire is that Sketch be a place that strives for unity as together, we journey in our lives always toward more of the fullness of God.

It is a tall order to live in truth, to set up an initiative like Sketch to exist in truth. It requires great humility and vulnerability; a reliance on grace and an active recognition of our need for and acceptance of God's mercy. It means living authentically alongside each other. It means an accountability and transparency of operation to those we serve and the broader community. It involves the willing confession of error and a willing spirit to be taught. It means a commitment to

health of body, mind and spirit. For that reason we respect one another's personal boundaries and encourage the reclaiming of privacy, quiet space, healthy living and relationships that do not create obstacles to our mutual search for wholeness. At Sketch we want to create an atmosphere that is accepting and celebrating of people and of their diverse experiences: one that is conducive to healthy expression and the pursuit of healing; one that encourages the discovery of the emotional, spiritual, physical, mental and whole self; one that recognizes our common humanity and our mutual search for meaning in our lives; and one that also promotes unity and cooperation with one another.

Sketch is not a proselytizing initiative. Its Christian roots and foundation offer it a standard of care, service and integrity by which to measure our individual work performance, our organizational character and our treatment of the community we serve and work amongst. All that is mentioned above is consistent with a Christian worldview. I have drawn and continue to draw my model of leadership and social service for this work from the very person of Jesus and have looked to his life on earth as teaching for my journey.

The Choice of the Arts :

“art is a fabrication that takes you through to a larger truth.” Picasso

So much can be said about the choice of creating opportunities for people to be involved in the arts. Philosophically I believe when we are creating we are connected to the core activity of the Creator and the Trinity. I believe it is natural for us to be creative and that we all have within us unique abilities to make things. This of course, goes beyond the realm of the arts. When we are involved in creativity, our imaginations are stoked, our ideas and stories validated, our embeddedness in overall creation is realized. We suddenly have opportunity to experience our true value, our true belonging. We begin to feel relief from confusion, frustration and immobilization. We start to see that there are options to perceive things differently, to articulate ideas and dreams, and to make choices that can help us move through any situation. For young people especially, as they are moving through adolescence, it is so essential that they learn lateral thinking that is involved in art making (not limited to the visual arts, of course). Choices of media and disciplines and the problem solving and lateral thinking that comes from the creative process, enhance necessary skills for communication.

The other important benefit of involvement in the arts as it relates to Christianity is that the process of making art can move us from places of isolation and alienation to places of unity and community. The arts let us have our own views and articulation but offer us contexts within which to share, explain, challenge and learn from others. This is essential for renewed health when having lived the isolating life of homelessness and/or addiction.

Our world in general does not seek to support community. It highlights individuals and promotes so much self-sufficiency. Some of the core of that is good but I have a firm belief that we need each other and that we are to be interdependent on one another. Sketch has been set up with the recognition that we all have our unique gifts that complement one another and we need to make every effort to work toward unity and cooperation.

SKETCH celebrates creative identity. We want to inspire youth to dream, play and hope, as all young people ought to be free to do. Through engaging in the arts they can discover more about themselves, their worth and their gifts (not exclusive to the arts). As their self-awareness grows they become more aware of choices and options. They are also open to learning about health and wholeness. This can positively influence their journey toward getting off the streets, addressing substance abuse issues and claiming full and active participation in society. Part of this work to serve youth who are street-involved is to reduce the labels and pigeonholes that we as society, including the institutional church, have given them. Sketch seeks to invite youth, to along with all of us, carve our way out of the pigeonholes. Sketch can give youth tools that will enable them to chisel their way into whatever wholeness means for them, through a carving, a poem, a song, a dance, a painting, a doodle, a sculpture...

“When we are writing, painting or composing, we are, during the time of creativity, freed from normal restrictions and open to a wider world where colours are brighter, sounds clearer and people more wondrously complex than we realize.” Through creativity we can become awakened, to ourselves and to those around us. Wakefulness is hard to grasp in our sleeping and fragmented world that predominantly promotes distraction.

Youth experiencing street life are incredibly resilient and have survived much more than we credit to them. We all have much to learn from the unique experiences of youth. The arts are one more avenue to express some of those experiences. The arts put us all in the position of audience or ‘learner’ waiting to be taught, to be moved, and to be affected. When street-involved youth use the arts to express their views, their dreams, their fears, they are in the new position of moving and affecting the lives of others and perhaps promoting change. This can be empowering because on the streets one can feel as though one has no voice and no effect on anyone: no power to change anyone, anything, not even oneself. The arts create neutral territory where youth are not judged by anyone. As their sense of belonging and value increases, they discover within themselves that not all is lost and they indeed possess gifts and hope for a healthy and ‘whole’ future.

FURTHER CLARIFICATION (just more I need to say)

Some elements of a Christian view of the world (expressed very simplistically):

We are all created in the image of God who is compassionate, loving, holy and creative. We have been known before the foundations of the earth were laid. The very ground of our being is in the Love of God. This Love seeks to be recognized, reclaimed, fully embraced and received and then conversely, (at the very same time), it seeks to give itself away, to reach out, to be given as gift to others. This circular motion is best demonstrated in God's love manifested to the world through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. One who sought to fully embody the Love from which he came and who sought every opportunity to give it away.

Christ's life on earth and love urges us to serve one another with an attitude of respect, humility, dignity, great compassion and love. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, we can strive to live in humility, gentleness, mercy, and purity; to keep peace with all and to bear struggles with patience and confidence. We are asked to Love the Lord our God with all our hearts, our souls and our minds. And to Love our Neighbour as ourselves.

Our consent to this journey in our own lives has so much to do with how much we allow ourselves to recognize that (perhaps instinctively) we all desire to recover this Love from which we come. Often we deny its throbbing within us. We push it away, live on the surface where attachments to substances, things, people and institutions keep us from plunging deeper into our mutual yearning. Or if the yearning is misinterpreted and left without direction, any understanding we have of the truth of Love can be broken down. Hence, the possibility of hurting one another and misusing our power to love others, becomes greater.

In many ways Sketch is about allowing this recovery of Love to be what it is mysteriously for each person. It is our common humanity and is what connects us but it manifests itself uniquely for each of us.

The Attitude of Heart at Sketch

We attempt to do all things without prejudice. We are not sectarian and our service is not exclusive. We do not tolerate oppressive or coercive religious practices. We do not wish to impose faith but desire to live it in spirit and in truth. We want to be careful not to get stuck in rigid moulds but to allow the mystery of God to be a welcomed part of our lives. As soon as we feel we have all the answers, we have forgotten the questions.

We realize that we need each other. We are each uniquely gifted and have something to offer one another. We strive to live and work interdependently. The actions of one affect the welfare of the whole and because of this we endeavour to care for ourselves and each other in a way that is healthy and to live our lives consistent with the faith that grounds the purpose of Sketch.

We recognize the young people who benefit from Sketch are vulnerable and with great reason, they struggle with authority, power and trust. We will enter into relationships with great sensitivity to these issues and will hold each other accountable to any misuses or abuses of power. Though we encourage self-expression, we know that there is a cost to that vulnerability and we must attempt never to exploit the expression of young people. We want to restore to them the dignity they have lost or had taken away. Some examples of how we can do this are by listening, communicating effectively, admitting fault and taking responsibility for any harm we may have done to another. We can also do this by developing and modeling healthy relationships with youth and with each other that involve mutual respect and acceptance, listening and learning. We want to seek creative solutions to problems. We don't want to assume we have all the answers. Even if our experience seems to give us a higher knowledge or seems to suggest that we are experts in particular areas, we want to remain in a learning mode and seek one another's input. This definitely means including youth in the problem solving and the creative development process.

The Invitation

As youth discover themselves they are more open to discovering the hunger or need that exists in all of us, to be fulfilled spiritually as well as emotionally, physically and mentally. Sketch can be a safe, non-imposing place where youth can explore their spirituality. Sketch seeks to create an environment conducive to rest, refreshment, compassion, safety, self-expression, self-discovery, healing and options for the future.

Youth who experience street life are so heavily encumbered with hurt, shame, confusion and the oppression of poverty, that they first need to have a sense of safety and restoration, long before they can begin to acknowledge issues of spirituality and faith. Society constantly places on them expectations and double standards of what it is to be valuable and to belong in the world. The church as an institution and organized religion more generally, has done the same. Jesus did **not** come to crush people but rather to give renewed sense of life, to fill us with hope and vigour that comes from the knowledge that the very ground of our being is Love. In that ground of being we are known and loved purely and not measured by our accomplishments or duties fulfilled.

Ultimately, Sketch is about invitation to join us in a feast of colour, shapes, materials, tools, discovery, and an exploration of choices and options for healthy living. In all we do and say, we want youth to know that they are extended a constant invitation and that we are thankful and do not take lightly, the setting of the feast or the privilege to feast right alongside them.