

Art Flows Down

For Father and Son, Talent is a Grace

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When Jerome Jones and his wife, Kemery, learned they were having a son, Jerome knew just what to do. Two months before his son was born, the father-to-be painted the nursery where young Jeromyah would spend his first precious years of life. In so doing, he relied on two of his pillars to help prepare a place for his child: his art and his faith.

"Instead of painting cartoon characters, I wanted to paint a realistic landscape that celebrated the wonder of creation," says Jerome. A lion. A koala bear in a tree. Elephants and parrots. Colorful hot air balloons drifting against the powder blue sky and white cumulus clouds carried scriptural messages. "These balloons became vehicles I would use to take Jeromyah through the spiritual laws, values, and principles of the universe."

On the closet door, Jerome painted Jeromyah's name, the alphabet, and numbers on brightly colored building blocks. The space above the window became a sunrise. And naturally, the ceiling represented the heavens. "This 360-degree mural was my gift to our son to teach him to love life because life is a maze and love is amazing."

The images were bright, colorful, playfully designed to please the young child's eye. And yes, they were prayers – blessings to surround Jeromyah in his waking and in his sleep.

What Jerome did not realize at the time was that they were also an invitation, and that before very long, Jeromyah would be following in his father's artistic footsteps.

Jerome has been a working artist all of his adult life. He presented his first one-man show at age 15. The success of that show, other exhibitions, and commissions that came after, plus a degree in painting and printmaking from VCU, launched a career that has been going strong for 35 years. He is probably best known for his portraits, with subjects including Stevie Wonder, Cal Ripken Jr., Muhammed Ali, and Nikki Giovanni. But he also does landscapes and is committed to his long-running series of scripture-based works he collectively calls Teaching the Word Through Art.

You can bump into Jerome's work in everyday places, like VCU Medical Center, the Arthur Ashe Center, and the Randolph Community Center – which is just the way he likes it.

"Most of the public might never go into an art museum," says Jerome. "So I want to put art into the barber shops and the libraries and the community centers."

And his son's nursery. When Jeromyah, now 22, talks about the effect his father's everyday art had on his life, his face is serene. When he says his father's nursery painting was prophetic, he means it literally. Jeromyah knew what he wanted to be as early as three.

"People never resisted asking me what I wanted to be when I grew up," recalls Jeromyah. "With no hesitation I would declare that I am an artist. I was taught that the moment you speak that short statement 'I am' into this natural world, and believe it when you say it, then instantly what you said you are becomes a reality."

True to his early declaration, Jeromyah has joined his father in the family business. In 2011, Jeromyah earned a degree in comprehensive art from Hampton University. His work hangs in Virginia Union University, Hampton University, and Open Arms Family Support Services, LLC.

But being an artist is not just a career choice for the Joneses. It is part of a calling, and that calling is part of a larger divine plan.



"Being able to paint is a gift from the Heavenly Father and Master Artist," explains Jerome, and it is clear that when the Joneses talk about art they talk about faith, and when they talk about faith they talk about life, and when they talk about life they talk about art. You cannot pull on one thread without the entire tapestry responding. Terminology remains remarkably consistent from subject to subject.

Jerome, for example, lost his own father when he was 14. It was far too young for any son to lose a father, and yet Jerome says, "The way he cared, the things he shared and left behind create internal paintings within my mind." And of his own approach to parenting, Jerome says, "I paint mental pictures for the heart of my son to illustrate life lessons that he must learn to receive the

blessings."

Following the thread through the rest of the tapestry, listen to Jeromyah on being a son learning about the world from his father: "Sometimes when my father walks, I stop and watch. Then I look down at the prints he made just from his feet and realize I'm observing a work of art."

The similarities are so striking that in 2009, Capital One showcased Jerome and Jeromyah in a show called, "The Art of Father and Son as One," which was recently reprised at the Black History Museum in Richmond.

The similarities are so striking that one is tempted to ask the question: Has this young man been given room to breathe? To form his own identity? In other words, it's tough not to be cynical.

But get together with them in the same room and cynicism shall not abide. What emerges is a father, fully proud of his son, of the choices he has made and the basis on which he has made them. And a son, free to choose his road, having chosen the same road his father travels. Not to follow, but to walk alongside.

The standard course, the expected narrative, is one of the son rebelling against the father, defining himself in opposition. But Jeromyah rejects that narrative, and instead makes an altogether more difficult and less popular choice. To celebrate the things he shares with his father. To strengthen the ties that bind as opposed to severing them. Not cool – but it is profound. Maybe even radical.

Radical enough, in any event, to wash away any stain of cynicism that taints the canvas.

Besides, it's not like there haven't been differences along the way. Jeromyah says he wanted to get his big break while he was young, and felt college would be a distraction to his art career. Jerome continued to encourage his son toward college and now, with the benefit of hindsight, Jeromyah says, "I believe encouragement is the catalyst to a child having The courage to walk into their calling."

And so here they are, father and son, partners in a challenging profession that is bigger than business because art is a potent vehicle for relating the truth. And the truth? The truth is, well, everything: art, life, faith, love. For the artists Jones, these are all synonymous, and when you talk about any one of them, you are talking about all of them.

"I hope my legacy will be that I taught the art of life through the love of art," says Jerome.

"At the end of the day I want people to know that I was an apprentice to the heavenly Father who effectively turned scriptures into pictures," says Jeromyah.

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As the two artists share their stories and their hopes, another one of Jerome's paintings comes to mind. In some ways, this more recent painting is like an update of the nursery he painted all those years ago. The vision brought forward into present day.

A father and son sitting at a table, playing chess, except that the chess pieces are tubes of paint. Lying open on the table beside the players is a Bible. In the background is a summer country landscape. Trees, rolling hills, a collection of barns. And three pillars, unifying foreground and background and drawing the eye towards a central symmetry, around which everything is perfectly balanced.

The art of the father and son as one.

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