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IDEALISM AND ART

*“The sculptor turns from the marble to his model in order to perfect his conception.
We are all sculptors, working at various forms, moulding and chiseling thought.*

*Do you not hear from all mankind of the imperfect model?
The world is holding it before your gaze continually.*

*To remedy this, we must first turn our gaze in the right direction, and then walk that
way. We must form perfect models in thought and look at them continually, or we shall
never carve them out in grand and noble lives.”*

Mary Baker Eddy

The above excerpts are drawn from one of my favorite passages in Eddy’s textbook on healing, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* (248). I have always loved that concept: “We are all sculptors . . .” As we co-create the world we want to live in, it is so important to regularly examine the models or ideals we are beholding. Lately, I’ve been giving thought to the vital need our society has to improve its ideals. I’ve also been noticing many of the wonderful ways artists have contributed positively to help us all “turn our gaze in the right direction.”

When the popular superhero movie *Black Panther* was released in February 2018, I noted the many articles and news reports that focused on the ways this film—featuring a majority black cast, strong female warriors, and a brilliantly advanced African nation—was inspiring viewers of all races: focusing thought on more elevated views of what is (and of what is possible) artistically, commercially and politically. I heard an interview of female theatre goers in one African country waiting in line to see the movie for a second time. The thrilled joy in their voices as they described how exciting it was to see a movie portraying people that looked like them in such empowered ways brought me to tears. It

struck me that the joy these women were feeling was a direct result of the models the filmmakers had been holding in thought.

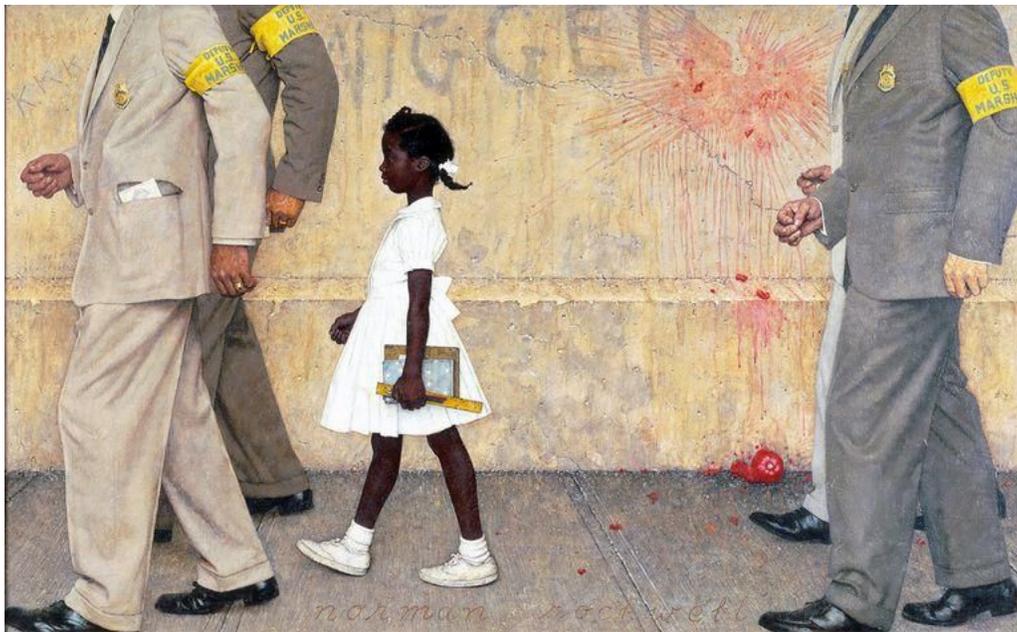
Director Ryan Coogler, costume designer Ruth E. Carter and screenwriter Joe Robert Cole among all the other collaborators on this epic project were guided by more than just the desire to make a kickass superhero movie. There is no doubt in my mind that there was an idealism at work and, I believe, a desire to raise the public's consciousness about a number of important issues. Despite nearly universal praise for their work, there was some thoughtful critique, but even this does not mitigate the importance of their artistic and social accomplishments.

It may seem like quite a leap to draw a connection from a Hollywood blockbuster to a mid 20th-century magazine illustrator, but my thought drifted from the rich, flashy textiles of the Wakandans' beautiful wardrobe to the paintings of Norman Rockwell. His work had always been characterized by a deep idealism, rooted in a love for his fellow man. He strove to portray people of all walks of life with humor, yes, but also dignity. At the heart of his aesthetic, it seems to me, was the desire to inspire empathy and love.

Rockwell noted in his diary a conversation he had with his son Tom that touched on his sense of responsibility in his work. He said, "I'm like the Russian artists. I believe in things. . . they communicate an idealism. Their art has a constructive viewpoint." When Tom asked "Who said art has to do good?" Norman responded angrily, "Don't artists have an obligation to humanity? . . . I think that everybody has a responsibility to everybody else. . . . There's not enough idealism" (Rockwell, N. 400-401).

I find Rockwell's paintings thoughtful, charming, sweet, and often very moving. One of my favorites is "The Problem We All Live With" printed in *Look Magazine* January 14, 1964. It portrays Ruby Bridges, the young African American girl bravely walking to

school accompanied by four white U.S. marshals—two ahead and two behind. She carries her notebook, ruler and pencils in her left hand. Her eyes are focused straight ahead. Just as she is at the center of the “problem” of school desegregation, she is at the center of the painting. The men are only seen from the torso down, walking in lock step, while she is shown in full view, marching forward independently with purpose and dignity—the smallest, most vulnerable subject in the scene, but at the same time the strongest and most courageous. Racial threats and splatter from freshly hurled tomatoes scar the wall they are walking along. We are gazing at the scene from the perspective of the crowd that would have been jeering at the procession.



Norman Rockwell. *The Problem We All Live With*. Oil on canvas. 1964.

The magic of Rockwell’s picture is that despite the threatening atmosphere of this event, I am drawn away from the signs of hateful intolerance to the purity, courage and innocence of the angelic child. Somehow, I am left with a feeling of hope that in the end good will triumph (and I carry this hope even under the strain of today’s headlines). Rockwell had such an extraordinary ability to bring forward his ideals.

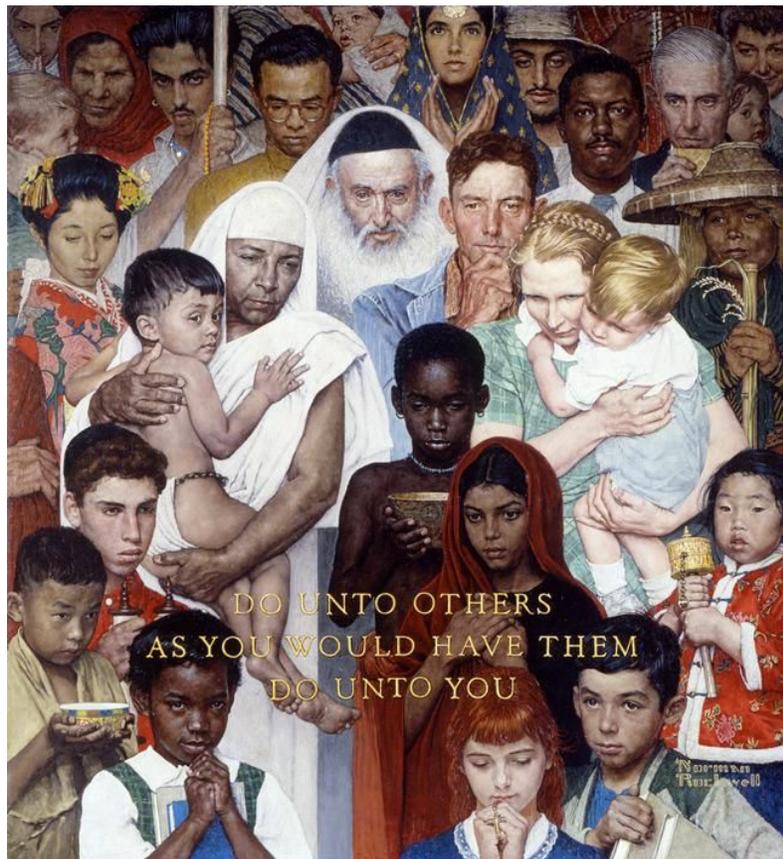
Son Tom Rockwell later wrote: “I can remember Pop being seriously interested in only two political issues, the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty . . . and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960’s. He had always felt strongly about tolerance.” Tom goes on to point out several of his father’s *Post* covers that brought forward this ideal: “There was, of course, ‘Freedom of Worship’ (1943), which is about religious tolerance. . . ‘Saying Grace’ (1951) is really more about tolerance and nostalgia (another favorite theme) than religion, and one of his last *Post* covers was ‘The Golden Rule’ (1961)” (Rockwell, T. 416).

This last painting is possibly the epitome of the power of idealism in art. “In the summer of 1960, inspired by the idea that the Golden Rule was a universal principle threading through all religions, Rockwell decided to capture the concept on canvas. . . After preliminary sketches, he remembered an earlier piece, *United Nations*, that had never been completed. . . ‘I had tried to depict all the peoples of the world gathered together,’ Rockwell said. ‘That was just what I wanted to express about the Golden Rule’” (Perry).

A mosaic based on this painting was installed in the headquarters of the United Nations in 1985 and was recently restored and rededicated in 2014. Speaking at that rededication ceremony, then “Deputy Secretary-General Jan Eliasson ascribed the popularity of the work to its embrace both of multiculturalism and the idealism at the core of the United Nations” (UN News). It heartens me to know that this loving depiction of unity is featured where it can speak its ideal to the leaders and policy makers who so need to look “in the right direction, and then walk that way.”

One Sunday morning on my drive to church I heard a radio feature about the growth of white supremacist terrorism and a discussion about the people who hold to these beliefs. It was, of course, disturbing. I went in to prepare for the service and while I was rehearsing, the concept of idealism in art surfaced in my thought. My present role in this

“problem that we all live with” came to me clearly. I knew that as I read to my congregation that morning about God and our (humanity’s) relationship to Him/Her, I needed to hold to the true understanding about each of us, including those individuals burdened with false beliefs about themselves and others. I needed to see that they do have the capacity to know God, or divine universal Love—that they can feel this infinite Love embracing themselves and they can express love to others. That morning, I held this concept—and this love—at the forefront of my thought and sought to embody it with each breath as I read. I felt that moment-by-moment conviction both grounding my work and giving it wings.



Norman Rockwell. *The Golden Rule*. Oil on canvas. 1964.

This is not to say that my activism stops there, but that It must start there or it will never take off. And the stakes are always high.

Idealism imbues great art with a power to reach and uplift consciousness, and I feel that my deliberate application of this principle in my work gives it an authority and effectiveness that can be gained in no other manner.

Eddy, Mary Baker. *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*. Boston: Christian Science Publishing Society. 1875. Print.

Perry, Patrick. "Something Serious." *The Saturday Evening Post*. Jan/Feb 2015. Web.

Rockwell, Norman, as told to Thomas Rockwell. *My Adventures as an Illustrator*. New York: Abrams, 1994. Print.