

Contributing to Culture Is Better Than Complaining About It

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By Eric Metaxas

MANHATTAN, N.Y.—When it comes to culture, do you consider yourself a foot soldier or a gardener? Okay, that’s a bit cryptic. But let me explain.

When was the last time you participated in a boycott? Or shared a Facebook post alerting your friends to a dangerous cultural trend?

Good stuff. Now, let me ask you this: When was the last time you went to an art museum? Or bought tickets to the theater? Or listened to a great piece of music? Or wrote a poem and shared it with friends?

I ask because I believe even more important for Christians than being on the frontlines of the culture war is participating in the culture—and, better yet, helping to create and nurture it. If the main contribution that Christians make to culture is complaining about it, we’re doing something wrong.

That’s what my friend Makoto Fujimura says in his new book, *Culture Care: Reconnecting With Beauty for Our Common Life*.

You may have heard me interview Mr. Fujimura before. He’s a brilliant artist and writer who has thought long and hard about the relationship between faith and the arts.

“Culture,” he argues, “is not a territory to be won or lost but a resource we are called to steward with care. Culture is a garden to be cultivated.”

In other words, he wants us to shift our thinking away from the “culture wars” model, in which we think of culture as a battleground. Of course, we need to have convictions about culture, and to stand by them.

But Makoto Fujimura wants to offer a better way for us to influence culture for good. His image of a garden is just one of many he draws from nature, to show how we can carefully and patiently help to cultivate that cultural environment and make good things grow in it.

So how do we do this? He suggests that both Christians and the arts community start by learning to look at each other as potential allies, even friends, instead of as sworn enemies.

He asks us to consider investing in cultural works as we're able to afford it. (As an example, he mentions customers who have purchased his own paintings by giving him a little money every month until they were fully paid for.)

He suggests that leaders in the church, the arts community and the business community form partnerships to help support each other and nurture the culture around them.

He cites the example of singer Mahalia Jackson, who encouraged Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to "tell 'em about the dream," spurring him to make his most famous speech. Such encouragement can flow in both directions.

This isn't always easy work, but it's extremely valuable and worthwhile. It requires thoughtful engagement instead of blanket condemnation, and it may call for us to broaden our understanding and deal with ideas that seem unfamiliar and uncomfortable.

But from such efforts come moments that he calls "generative," or "life-giving."

Christians who enjoy and support art and culture, who make it a priority in their lives, and who reach out to those in the arts instead of reflexively pushing them away, can help bring the culture toward a renewed appreciation of goodness, truth and beauty. And that is good for everyone.

Mr. Fujimura acknowledges that Christians in the arts, or even just Christians who love the arts, can feel caught between two worlds.

But he argues that this is not a bad thing. The person in this position may in fact be playing "a role of cultural leadership in a new mode, serving functions including empathy, memory, warning, guidance, mediation and reconciliation."

One of the best things about "Culture Care" is Mr. Fujimura's optimism about our future—especially if you're feeling a bit weary and battle-scarred from the culture wars.

He firmly believes that, as tough as this cultural moment is, we can turn it into a "genesis moment" by learning to nurture and care for our culture and those who create it.