

Chapel Talk
Marie Dillard
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“What is often called exceptional ability is nothing more than persistent endeavor.”
~Pauli Murray.

Art is a perfect example of what is expressed in this quotation. As a multifaceted artist, I know that the process of creating something from nothing can be incredibly hard. Art is often categorized as an exceptional ability—almost as if it is a miracle that I or someone else can play the viola at a high level or be an award-winning visual artist. For Black people, hard-earned accomplishments are often characterized as either a fluke, or exceptionalism. Our hard work and dedication to our craft is overlooked, or is a mystery to be solved. It's as if our God-given talents and natural ability is limited to basketball and entertainment.

For all the Black composers: there are brilliant composers that have too long been neglected in the Western tradition, like Florence Price (1887-1953), and Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (1875-1912).

And the Black photographers like Gordon Parks, James P. Ball, Glenalvin Goodridge, and Augustus Washington.

And the Black Poets like Lucy Terry Prince (1730-1821), Angelina Weld Grimké (1880–1958), Langston Huges, Maya Angelou, and Amanda Gorman.

The Black painters like Kehinde Wiley (Obama's portraitist), Amy Sherald (Michelle's portraitist), Grafton Tyler Brown.

And, Black sculptors like Edmonia Lewis, Augusta Savage (1892–1962), Selma Hortense Burke, and Brooklyn-based artist Bisa Butler who creates contemporary quilts that are life-sized historical portraits of Black people whose stories may have been forgotten or completely overlooked in history.

Beauty is in the eye, the ear, and the fingertips of the beholder. The creation of that beauty comes from the divine. He who holds the power, tells his story, divine or not. The key to understanding the truth in a story is to look and listen for the voices and silhouettes that have gone unheard and unseen. This is true for the arts. In any museum, great concert hall, or other place exhibiting the great artists, ask yourself who is missing, what isn't being said. HStory, especially when it comes to the Western Arts, is often biased, incomplete, and unchallenged.

The story I am about to tell you might seem unrelated, but I promise I will tie all together at the end.

I'd like to posit that Black American history is its own persistent endeavor in whatever creative shape it takes. So much of my identity and culture comes from a relatively small, 83-acre farm in southern Virginia. Origin stories for Black Americans can be difficult to document. I am part of a lucky few. The Great Migration brought my paternal great grand-parents from North Carolina to rural southern Virginia, and later my father's generation completed this cycle in American history with family moving to DE, CA, TX, WI, and NJ. It happened in persistent waves.

James Rufus Dillard was born in 1911 in Freeman, with parents from North Carolina with a sense of agency—a sense of control and the awareness of his ability to set an intention, think his own thoughts, and execute the bodily movement necessary to accomplish his goals. Deciding not to sharecrop, but instead to own his own land and to instill this value in his children, was instinctual for him. He was a gifted writer and a dreamer. My grandmother Ellen Marie Dillard, born 1915 and affectionately known as “Marie”, was enterprising. She had the best-raised cage turkeys for miles, evidenced by the number of people who were lucky enough to score one for their holiday feasts. Her creative sensibilities were reflected in her gardens and her quilts. As descendants of enslaved Africans in America, conscious volition and deliberate action were telltale signs of a level of freedom. The story of this freedom is lost for many. I have some of her quilts and his words.

My Black American family isn't exceptional, nor is what happened in terms of our good fortune a miracle. What I am sharing with you is one story of 42 million persistent endeavors to be free creative beings. What you are witnessing is not a fairytale, it isn't linear, it is often messy, and it won't be stopped. Nevertheless, we continuously reach for what seems impossible while making history—American history. The arts and the Black Americans who pursue their creative ventures are one part of the history of humanity—no more and no less. The stories of the great works of Black composers, musicians, poets, sculptor, photographers and other creatives have gone too long unrecognized, overlooked, and uncelebrated, until now.

Nothing has been spoon-fed, nothing has been free, it has all been earned. So now, I'm asking you to smash the bias and create a new narrative for Black artists and creatives. Seek out what has been previously unrecognized, overlooked, and uncelebrated by visiting an exhibit of a Black artist, or research and read about the artistic and creative contributions of Black people throughout history. Celebrate their contributions along with others. And, if you're brave enough, pick up a:

pen, a paint brush, a pad and paint,

or a bow, a banjo, a conductor's baton

or camera or some clay.

Take inspiration from the great Black artists and creatives and rewrite the narrative of Blacks in the arts. But, begin with your own persistent endeavor for truth. Let's get free y'all!

Thank you.