

Don't Listen to van Gogh

Vincent van Gogh was one of the greatest painters ever. One thought he had was wrong and causes lots of trouble. Find the home site of author Bill Allin at <http://billallin.com>

If one is master of one thing and understands one thing well, one has at the same time, insight into and understanding of many things.

- [Vincent van Gogh](#), Dutch post-impressionist artist (1853-1890)

You may have heard of Vincent Willem van Gogh. To some people he ranks among the best painters ever. To others he's the guy who cut off his ear. To some extent, both beliefs are wrong.

As a great artist, he should have sold many of his paintings during his lifetime, at least to pay his way in the world. Though he produced more than 2000 works of art in the ten years in which he was a painter, having left his jobs as teacher and missionary, he sold either not one single painting or perhaps one (expert opinions vary). His brother Theo supported him financially, including, presumably, his habit for the narcotic liqueur absinthe.

Two painting commissions from his uncle failed when the uncle was disappointed with Vincent's work. Though his work was praised during his decade of painting, people were not lining up to buy his work. If you worked steadily for ten years to produce something, were praised for it, but it failed to produce any income for you, would you be considered or would you consider yourself a success? Whatever was said after van Gogh's death would never have reached his ears.

Or should that be ear? He didn't really cut off an ear. He did have a row with his friend Paul Gauguin and he did cut off part of one ear lobe, but the two may not have been related. Vincent was very ill by the time he sliced off part of his ear. His illness affected his vision and his overall health as well as his mental health.

Given that van Gogh's paintings sell at prices among the highest paid for any paintings in the art world today, we can conclude that he was a great artist. But was he any good at anything else? His quote claims that, as he had mastered and understood one thing well, he should have insight and understanding of many things.

He wasn't much good at shooting. Before his death at the age of 37 he walked into a field and shot himself in the chest with a pistol. Since he didn't die, he walked home and took to his bed where he died two days later. He was a drug addict (or an alcoholic, if you will), he cut off part of his ear for no apparent reason (the spat with Gauguin is likely a red herring), he failed to kill himself in a suicide attempt and he caused himself (no doubt) considerable pain for a couple of days before he finally died. And he couldn't sell the art he produced even when one publication called him a master and his showings received rave reviews for the most part.

On what basis may we conclude that the expert painter van Gogh had insight and understanding of many things? I submit that the quote that began this article came out of a session he had under the influence of the bitter liqueur absinthe. The man was high. And likely out of his mind. A genius of an artist, for sure. But not someone whose advice we should follow.

In fact, this quote is an excellent example of one of the greatest--yet hidden--follies of our time. People who have expertise in one thing assume that they deserve recognition for being knowledgeable in everything. They're wrong.

You wouldn't go to an auto mechanic with a medical problem. You and the mechanic would go to a medical doctor with your medical problems. Doctors don't usually fix their own cars, yet ask a mechanic about how he gets treated by doctors with car problems. Doctors assume that because they can analyze a medical problem a patient has, they can likely diagnose mechanical problems with their cars. They can't.

Computer experts are notorious for claiming expertise beyond the realm of their knowledge. Computers, their software and malware that attacks the latter are so complicated these days that no one can be an expert on all aspects of computers. A designer of computer hardware likely knows little more than the average computer user (or auto mechanic) about software or malware, though they happily express opinions on both when asked.

A software writer may be a genius at the computer keyboard, but know nothing about hardware other than what he needs to know to write his software. These experts (within their respective areas of knowledge) may receive high praise for their work at conferences, but they may not know how to dance, how to form and maintain a healthy relationship or how to fix their own cars.

In this, the age of specialization, people with expertise in one area need to understand that they are not generalists, not experts in everything. Their opinions on subjects outside their areas of expertise may be nothing more than hot air.

More importantly, we more average people need to realize that someone who is an expert in one thing may know less about just about all other subjects than a grade ten dropout. The dropout must learn a variety of skills and accumulate an abundance of knowledge in many areas in order to get a job and to gain some respect for himself in the communities to which he belongs. In most areas of human endeavour, a middle aged person who didn't complete high school may have more knowledge and understanding on more different subjects than someone of the same age with a PhD.

Let's recognize experts for what they are, people we consult when we need their specific skills and knowledge. Beyond that, they may be friends or tennis partners, but they may have incomplete or even wrong information on many other subjects. Let's grant them the respect they deserve, but not more.

Bill Allin

Turning It Around: Causes and Cures for Today's Epidemic Social Problems, a guidebook for teachers and parents who want to grow children who lead balanced lives, not skewed by experts who know little about child development but have lots of opinions about it.

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