

#21 Thomas Ball

On a recent visit to the National Portrait Gallery in Washington DC, in one of the rooms, I happened upon a sculpture of a little girl—La Petite Pensee—that so captured my heart, I couldn't stop looking at her. What she was telling me, I have no words to describe. But I didn't want to leave her. When I got home, I couldn't stop thinking about her. I wondered who the artist was who could have created such an exquisite work of art. His name was Thomas Ball and I found an autobiography of him online. At the end of his book was advice that he gave to young artist friends and as I read it, I thought, these words are for you, too, because I see you as artists—creators of children's hearts, caregivers of their inner kingdoms. And sometimes the work is discouraging. We feel ordinary and inadequate. We feel like we aren't doing a very good job. The work isn't turning out the way we hoped it would. So let me repeat his words:

“My most bitter tears have been shed at the completion of some work, when I felt that I had done all I could do, and yet found it so far from what I had hoped to make it, and that it must go out to the world with all its imperfections. Falling upon my knees in agony, praying for comfort and faith to believe the present disappointment to be for my ultimate good, I have arisen comforted and strengthened in the hope that perhaps I had worked better than I knew...Imperfect and unsatisfactory as all my work seems to me, I shudder when I think of what they might have been, and what I might have been, without the firm belief that He was ever at my right hand as long as I was true to myself—to bear me up when I would have fainted; to help me when my strength left me.

“I write this for the encouragement of my young brothers in art; not those arrogant and proud ones who believe in nothing but their own strength and will, jealous at even a hint of any assistance from a higher power...But to that sensitive, retiring one who shrinks from the sound of approbation—to him I would say Corragio! [Courage] You are stronger than you imagine; be but sincere and conscientious in your efforts; work away with all your might. Strive to live a pure and clean life, and to improve the talents God has given you, and leave the rest to Him. He will not let you fail. Keep up a good heart; cultivate a cheery disposition.”