



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen, Parish Minister
The Reverend Don Randall, Community Minister

“Creativity and Spirituality”

© by Karen Bergmann and Virginia Carver

Two reflections delivered on July 13, 2014

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

Centering Thoughts

Because creation is always an act of faith, and faith is a spiritual issue, so is creativity. As we strive for our highest selves, our spiritual selves, we cannot help but be more aware, more proactive, and more creative. Julia Cameron, THE ARTIST’S WAY

There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all time, this expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and will be lost. Martha Graham

*The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.
Marcel Proust*

Opening Words, Michelle Leebens-Mack, Lay Minister for Connections

I never thought of myself as creative. I cannot sew. I cannot sing. I cannot paint. Then, I attended a summer, lay-led service, much like this, at my congregation in State College, PA. The theme of the service was Creativity and it was led by the esteemed professor of materials science, Bob Newnham. He shared with us his work on crystals, his story of exploring and creating, pulling out from beneath a podium, models of the crystals that he researched, smiling with pride and joy. This made me rethink what it means to be creative.

Then, there is the story of the retired UU minister, the Rev. Robert Fulghum, who wrote the book, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. So, let me ask you all here – Please raise your hand if you can sing. Please raise your hand if you can paint.

Following the success of his first book, Rev. Robert Fulghum, was invited to speak at many kindergartens and college classrooms. When he visited the kindergarten classes, everyone raised their hands when asked these questions. But when he was speaking before an auditorium of college students, only a few individuals would raise their hand. What happened between kindergarten and college?

Ours is a Faith that is grounded in exploration.

Our third and fourth UU Principles call on us to continually explore and grow.

Ours is a Faith where you can’t go to just one book to find the answer.

Ours is a Faith where we are called to look in many sacred texts, to explore many sources to examine our beliefs.

Ours is not a faith that has one end point.

We recognize that we are never too young or too old to find a new kernel of truth.
Our Faith is one where we are constantly re-creating ourselves.
Ours is a faith that expects us to be creative.

Creativity & Spirituality, Karen Pinkie Bergmann

I've always had a complicated relationship with the word "spirituality." As an atheist, I don't believe that any part of us endures after death, so the traditional definition of "spirit" holds no meaning for me. The more anthropocentric definition of "spirit" resonates more with me – that is: "the things that make us human." First and foremost for me in that category is the spontaneous creation of art for art's sake. Other species show signs of intelligence through problem solving, language acquisition, or using tools, and can even be trained to use paints or other human-created media, but only humans create art with the sole intention of admiring its beauty – not to attract a mate, as birds might, or any other hidden utilitarian function.

So, why do we make art: music, dance, visual art, et cetera? I believe it is to communicate emotions or to evoke an emotional response. The harder question for me to answer is: why are some people more drawn than others to the creative process? Again due to my atheism, I don't think our destinies are determined for us, but perhaps some people are born with a genetic predisposition to certain talents. Once they are born, though, they must decide at some point to cultivate those talents, and this is, for me, where creativity and spirituality intersect.

As it turns out, mastering the creative arts takes years and years of dedication and hard work. In order for artists to cultivate the ability to express any and all sentiments as we wish, we must practice. For me, practice (some parts of it, at least) is meditation, and meditation is an expression of spirituality. This is not the part of being a creative person that non-artists usually see – the hours spent alone with the artist's vehicle of expression – and many artists guard this time jealously. We want to present to you, the public, a finished, polished product, but we could not offer it without many hours of private honing and refinement of our skills.

So today I'd like to show you some of what I do "behind the scenes" as a musician, and invite you to enter my meditative and spiritual space. I will play for you part of an exercise that I do almost daily, which is meant to increase finger strength and independence and improve intonation accuracy. I approach it in the same way that Buddhists might approach a walking meditation in which they strive to be fully aware of every movement of their body in every moment. As I'm doing this exercise, I must control bow speed and pressure; avoid any tension in my fingers, arms, shoulders, neck, and back; be ready to adjust my finger placement for optimal tuning; and many more details and processes. So, please, join me for a moment in my creative spiritual practice.
(Exercise composed by Janos Starker)

On Creativity, Virginia Carver

When I was invited to talk about creativity and spirituality what immediately came to mind was the Sistine Chapel where God is reaching out to Adam and granting him some mysterious gift. I once read that that gift was intelligence, but I prefer to think it was creativity given generously to all of the world. This may seem a daunting gift when viewed only in the light of well-recognized geniuses such as a Mozart, Michelangelo, Picasso or Einstein. My own view prefers to see creativity as a pervasive force throughout the universe and appearing in all kinds of forms, not just bounded by a frame or a musical score but frequently going beyond boundaries and in some cases breaking

through life like a wild revelation. Yet in other cases it can be as simple as the way I decorate my home, the way I make a meal, the way I dress and my pursuit of original projects. . . not only in my profession as a dancer, but in collage, and poetry. I consider that living your own unique and authentic life is certainly a creative endeavor, yet we fail to acknowledge that and often think we somehow didn't get the gift.. Like the quote Dan Everett used a few weeks ago: "If you think you are a failure, redefine success." If you think you're not creative, redefine creativity. Rex Jung, a neuroscientist I heard on Krista Tippett's Sunday morning show defines Creativity as "anything that is novel and useful". That certainly broadens the territory.

Different people have sophisticated philosophies about why they create and what they hope to achieve. Over the years I have found myself drawn more and more to Beauty and it is beauty that, for me, is the interface between creativity and spirituality. . . not just beauty as associated with the artist but also beauty found in the work of the scientist. Mathematicians speak of beauty in their calculations. . think of fractals. . . based on complicated mathematical ratios producing repeating patterns like on the cover of today's program.

At one time nearly all art was associated with religion and was the sole purpose for making art, but art is no longer relegated just to the praise of gods. It has slowly descended from the heavens down to the earth relegating almost anything as subject matter for its themes. Now we are free to lift up the everyday, the mundane to make it seem special. Viewing Monet's "Water Lilies" can be a meditation. . . the poems of Mary Oliver amaze us with the wonders of the natural world. Spirit wants to manifest itself in form.

Creativity in the service of Beauty uplifts me. . makes holy and sacred our world and all that is in it, bringing value in a way that no other endeavor can do as well as bringing a humanizing element to our lives capable of touching the full range of our emotions. Beauty also has a sense of rightness and order about it. In "Ode on a Grecian Urn" Keats tells us that truth is beauty and beauty is truth.

Ananda, the beloved disciple of the Buddha, once remarked to his master, "Half the holy, O master, is friendship with the beautiful, association with the beautiful, communion with the beautiful."

The Buddha replied, "Say not so, Ananda, say not so. It is not half the holy life. It is the whole of the holy life."

The dancer has a unique expression in that she leaves no artifact. . . no pottery vase, no sculpted figure, no words for posterity yet she can bring the spirit of life as celebrated by the truth of its very fleetingness, and the beauty of human form in motion. My hope is that my art has brought joy, beauty and delight to a world badly in need of it.

All religions speak to the worth of beauty. Let me close with the words of Rumi which will be followed by a cello/dance meditation.

Let the beauty you love, Be what you do

There are hundreds of ways To kneel and kiss the ground.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. What are ways that you are creative?
2. What things are you proud to have created?
3. How are spirituality and creativity connected for you?
4. Think of a creative activity or moment that you experienced as religious or spiritual.