

“To Create from Our Hearts”

May 6, 2018

The Rev. Janet Parsons

What a joy it is to be back here among you today! The last time I participated in a service here in this sanctuary it was for Reverend Heather’s installation. I am full of warm and happy memories and grateful to Heather for proposing that we exchange pulpits today.

It is a joy to be here, and a joy to see spring appearing. After the very long winter, we are watching new life emerge, practically by the hour. Our topic for the month of May is Creativity, and it is simple and joyful to think about all the ways that life is returning. In these days we witness the force and the power of life itself, the very creativeness of life, on display.

In the spirit of Creativity, we are going to have some fun with our postlude this morning. Our music director, John Kramer, has offered to improvise a postlude for us, at the end of the service. To do this, John is going to need all of our help. We are going to practice Creativity, offering our ideas for hymns to John for him to work with and mold into a new piece of music. I am going to pause in just a moment and give you time to think about hymns that speak to you in this beautiful place and time. What emerges for you?

In doing this, we are honoring the creative process: the creativity that emerges when given the time and space, and that emerges when a gathering of people share their thoughts. In this moment you are being invited to be co-creators of our service.

And in doing this, we are also noting how different creativity is from perfection. If John wanted a perfectly executed postlude this morning he would not have offered to share this with us. He would have just come over here yesterday and practiced a piece over and over. But the urge for perfection can sometimes stifle creativity. What will emerge this morning will be sparked by the energy of this community, and just right for this service, in this moment. And as a response to this moment in time together, the postlude may not be perfect, but it will be excellent. I invite you now to ponder that idea, and also now, as we pause, to call out suggestions to John.

Thank you! I’m looking forward to hearing what will emerge in a little while.

One of the great mysteries always pondered by humans is where creativity comes from. As we read together a few minutes ago, “Whence comes that drive in us?” In ancient times creativity was spoken of as something outside of ourselves, something almost supernatural. The ancient Greeks spoke of ‘daemons’ or ‘muses’. Those of us who write or compose easily fall into that sort of thinking - hoping that the Muse will show up soon. A colleague of mine commented recently that she always hopes that her sermon-writing Muse will show up on Tuesday or Wednesday, but sometimes it doesn’t arrive until Thursday or Friday. The ancient Romans named the creative impulses ‘geniuses’. This is a word whose usage changed over the centuries

– rather than thinking of a person as a genius, as we do today, the ancients believed that some people *had* a genius.¹

This belief in supernatural presences became less common during the Renaissance, when humanism began to develop, and the understanding grew of creativity and inspiration emerging from within a person. As author Elizabeth Gilbert put it, “there was no more room for mystical creatures who took dictation from the divine.”

And yet, those shining creative moments, those sudden inspirations, those “Eureka” ideas, do happen. Could they be divinely inspired, or are they the product of our own intellect and environment? Or, is it possible that they could arise from multiple sources?

Although many of us still are hoping that Muses will show up and rescue us, preferably early in the week, neuroscientists are beginning to try to shed some scientific light on this question. Dr. Rex Jung, a neuropsychologist at the University of New Mexico, has been studying the difference between intelligence and creativity. He has observed that the brain contains different networks, that operate in different areas of the brain and at different speeds. He compares intelligence to a superhighway, with thoughts and ideas moving quickly back and forth between different areas of the brain. The pathways for intelligence and knowledge are wide and straight. Creativity operates more on the back roads, the side roads of the brain, taking more circuitous routes, and taking its time to make connections and develop new ideas. Looking at the science, it seems clear that creativity comes from within us, is part of our wiring, and is a key aspect of our humanity.²

Dr. Jung points out that just as there are different spaces within our brain where different activities take place, so too are there different times in our lives – times when we emphasize acquiring knowledge; when we are in school, or reading the newspaper; and times when we need the space to put new ideas together – to daydream, to let our minds wander and make connections. Suddenly a Eureka moment can emerge, and it might feel supernatural in its suddenness. But perhaps the moment emerges from an opportunity to slow down, from time and room for growth.

An 11-year-old girl finds two broken links from a bracelet, and keeps them tucked away for years. Upon finding them in a dresser drawer, she suddenly recognizes them as earrings. We can never predict when the connections might happen that offer a creative moment, and suddenly something that appeared to have no value becomes very valuable indeed.

“You may find sometime a treasure on your way.”

¹ https://www.ted.com/talks/elizabeth_gilbert_on_genius/transcript?referrer=playlist-where_do_ideas_come_from

² <https://onbeing.org/programs/rex-jung-creativity-and-the-everyday-brain/>

We often think of creativity as a solitary pursuit – the starving artist alone in the unheated studio, the writer or composer locked away in a garret, toiling, rejecting human companionship, perhaps crushed by rejection. And always the victim of a miserable childhood. But creativity is also found in the connections between people, in the cooperation that leads to invention. Often we call it ‘synergy’: an interaction between people that leads to a new idea more compelling, more valuable than the thoughts originally proposed. We are engaging in that kind of creativity this morning, in offering John our ideas for a postlude. Together, we are collaborating on something new, something that could only have come from this community, during this time together. If we were to try it again next Sunday, the result would be completely different. Such is the creative impulse, fleeting, here and then gone, and yet at the same time dependent on human thought and participation. Truly, creativity is an ongoing process, a never-ending source that draws us toward growth. It is a process, and a paradox as well.

In the effort to understand creativity and its source, is there room for Spirit? At a time of the year when life is bursting forth all around us, with color and growth and birdsong, the idea of a creative, animating force, a creative process, can be easier to imagine. What is this?

Poets, philosophers and theologians all have different names for this force, this generative power that fosters creation, and creativity. Ralph Waldo Emerson described this force as The Oversoul, describing it in these ways: “There is deep power in which we exist and whose beatitude is accessible to us...when it breaks through our intellect, it is genius; when it breathes through our will, it is virtue; when it flows through our affections, it is love.”³

A beatitude, Emerson called this power. A blessing. The name I use for this animating, life-sustaining power is Love, pure and simple. There is a loving energy that generates life and fosters it, and the way that it appears to us in our human lives is through creativity.

Creativity is not the same as talent. Most of my life I thought that in order to be creative, you needed to have a particular talent. But as time goes on I see the ways in which creativity has been present for me: in raising a family, in responding to a call to the ministry, even in gardening and photography. These are all ways in which I have responded to the calling of Life and Love, ways I have contributed to and nurtured life’s power.

In our reading, Rachel Naomi Remen noted that “creativity requires courage.” Courage, meaning ‘of the heart.’ Creativity is both within us and around us, and at the same time it is present in our response to what life and love summon from us. It arises when we say ‘yes’ to a calling, when we step through a door that suddenly opens. It is present when we see something in a new way – a problem we’ve been trying to solve, perhaps, or a scene we have wanted to paint, and we respond by doing something, trying something, that has not been

³ Excerpts taken from *Singing the Living Tradition*, #531, The Oversoul

done before. We respond creatively to the invitations and the demands of our human lives, and to do so requires courage.

Philosopher Mark Nepo wrote, "Every being on Earth is created to be a conduit between the Universal Life-Force and the moment coming alive. Being such a conduit is our birthright. When the gift of life moves through us, we are enlivened to be completely who we are."⁴

Too often, we focus on perfection. We emphasize talent, as I noted earlier. We grow up absorbing the message, "Practice makes perfect." And certainly practice is important, and we seek to grow and to master skills.

But the intent of creativity, whether we know it as the life force, as blessing, as Love, or as God, can never be perfection. Love calls us to fruition, to wholeness, to use the gifts we have been given, the ideas that inspire us. Love calls us to try new things, to see things in a new way, to bring forth all that is within us. Love calls us to excellence. Creativity asks us not to be perfect, but to flourish. It invites us to the excellence born out of Love. It asks us to change, to grow, to adapt. Creativity asks us to share in the Love from which it emerges, and to respond with courage, with our hearts.

"Whence comes that drive in us?"

We look to the starry sky
And love storms in our hearts.

Whence comes that storm?
The journey of love is a very long journey...
You may find sometime a treasure on your way."

My friends, the arising of creativity can never be fully explained. Creativity contains paradoxes: it exists both within us and around us. It emerges in our solitude, and in our community life. It offers itself to us, and yet requires us to respond. It is both a process, and a result. It invites us not to perfection, but to excellence. And like every form of love, it will not leave us where it found us, if we have the courage to respond, to say 'yes', to allow ourselves to open to new possibilities and new ways of seeing and doing and thinking.

The journey of love is a very long journey...
You may find sometime a treasure on your way."

Blessed Be.

⁴ Mark Nepo, *The Endless Practice*, p. 251