

Spiritual Pathways of the Soul by Rev. Doug McCusker

Who considers themselves to be an artist?

Who thinks of themselves as creative?

I believe that the power to create exists in all of us; that creativity is an essential expression of our being. It is not something we do just for fun in our spare time, or is only performed by a few talented artists. When we experience life, we help to create the world. Living is not just recreation it is re-creation.

I recently had a conversation with one of our congregants who has been living with terminal cancer for seven years. Every day to him seems like re-creation, a new beginning. He reminded me that the ancients associated breath with the spirit – “respiration.” To live we must breath, and in that breath of life comes the spirit of life. When we infuse the spirit of life at birth, by connecting to all of creation, we tap into that font of being which is known as the soul. Conscious awareness of our soul happens when we are truly inspired, as is consumed by the spirit of life, and able to access our own creative energies.

Last week I talked about the physical form, the body, with which we connect to the material essence of the universe. Today, I want to focus on the soul, that part of us that connects to the non-form potentiality of the universe; the cauldron of creation that we all have deep within us. Rollo May, the psychoanalyst who wrote the seminal book, *The Courage to Create*, defines creativity as bringing something new into being, passing from non-being into being, from potential to real. When we create, we pull form out of chaos.

In the fall, I co-led an Adult Religious Education class called Spirit in Practice. One of the lessons was about soul-practices. I led a brainstorming exercise where we thought of all the ways in our ordinary lives that we express inspiration and creativity. Within 10 minutes we came up with tons of examples like gardening, problem solving, cooking, storytelling, driving, writing, parenting, leadership, advocacy just to name a few. It became obvious to us how pervasive creativity is to our existence. When we pull form out of chaos, no matter how grand or mundane, we are navigating the spiritual pathway of our soul. If you have ever lost yourself in creative work where time seems to drift away, then you have experienced inspiration and soul transcendence.

Back when I was an undergraduate at William and Mary in the late 70's, I volunteered to be on the yearbook committee. I asked to work on the sports section and was assigned a couple of pages to produce. As the deadline drew near, the sports editor either quit or was removed for reasons that I never understood. All of a sudden I was knighted the editor, and with that honor I inherited the deadline. Now I was not just responsible for a few pages, but an entire section of the book.

It seemed like an insurmountable task. I knew that I would have to pull an all-nighter or two. I and a few of my co-workers worked well into the night and one by one they left to get some sleep. At one point I was alone and there were still numerous pages to complete. These were the days before computers. There were piles of photos, half-written copy and lots of space to fill up. I was beginning to panic. So to clear my head, I went outside and shot some basketball. I felt like a zombie.

After about a half hour I started seeing the pages in my head all laid out in perfect balance. The photo captions started rolling off my tongue. I threw the ball down and ran back to the art studio feeling like I was possessed. In what seemed like a dream, I pulled it all together before the sun rose. When my colleagues returned they applied the finishing touches and we were done.

I was so high with inspiration that I couldn't sleep. I felt like a God creating the universe. Up until then I did not consider myself to be especially creative. But somewhere deep inside me, a creative dam had broken and out of my pores came imagination, clarity and insight. There's no drug that can top that experience.

Our creative souls need nurturing and understanding. I believe that we are each highly creative with important gifts to share, words to speak and write, lights to shine on ourselves and others. In order to do this work, our souls need tending, weeding, nourishing in our interior gardens.

The sacred Hindu scripture, Bhagavad Gita says

You have a right to your actions,

but never to your actions' fruits.

Act for the action's sake.

And do not be attached to inaction.

Self-possessed, resolute, act

without any thought of results,

open to success or failure

Our attachment to outcomes is a problem that hinders more than just our ability to express ourselves creatively. Over and over again in our lives, this issue is a stumbling block. It could even be said that the core of the spiritual traditions of humankind is the encouragement to become free from such attachments. Worrying about how someone will respond keeps us from speaking up. Concern about failure keeps us from taking a risk and trying something new. Again and again we find ourselves hampered by our attachment to the outcome of a given

situation. When we let go of results and let our souls shine the creative process takes over.

When my wife, Marie and I became parents I truly learned what is meant by the phrase “more of an art than a science”. I don’t care how many parenting books you read, when it comes down to it, you have to be creative to be a successful parent. What works one day, doesn’t work the next. And when the child starts learning to express themselves with language and desires, you can throw out the books.

Don’t get me wrong, there’s definitely technique involved, and you have to establish limits. But dogmatic rules only get you so far. Parenting takes patience, presence, passion and practice - the 4 “P’s” of any creative endeavor. Together, they equal love and devotion. Parenting is a process of nurturing creativity in another.

At its core, the creative act is an encounter. The painter encounters the landscape. The philosopher encounters an idea. The parent encounters the child. We all encounter the world around us. Rollo May describes this encounter as wholly involved, absorbed, totally present, a heightened awareness and consciousness. Purpose, dedication and commitment deepen the awareness.

From a physical standpoint, during a creative act we activate the part of our nervous system that is associated with the “fight or flight” reptilian part of our brains. Creativity causes anxiety and joy at the same time because we are casting off from familiar ground. It’s as though we are suspended in the air until we can re-orient ourselves with something new.

When we take that leap into the unknown we see our world differently, and this amplifies our awareness. It can be small things like finding crocuses hidden under the leaves in the early spring, or solving a riddle. It can be bigger things like spinning a bowl from a lump of clay or weaving a garment from a ball of yarn. Or even bigger still, it happens when we open our eyes to a new reality – an “aha” moment. We are changed and so is our world.

Creative breakthroughs occur when our unconsciousness breaks up that which our conscious mind is desperately holding on to. And it usually happens when we let go of results. Like when I went out to play basketball while struggling with the yearbook pages. That’s because we ease our inner controls just enough for an unconscious thought or feeling to emerge.

This is what the Zen Buddhists describe as mindfulness. In these moments the reality of the universe is revealed that doesn’t depend on our subjectivity. Thich Nhat Hahn says “where mindfulness is, true life, solidity, freedom and healing also manifest. Mindfulness meditation is the exercise of letting go and letting happen.

I love the way Madeleine L'Engle describes these moments: "*Kairos*. Real time. God's time. That time which breaks through *chronos* with a shock of joy, that time we do not recognize while we are experiencing it, but only afterwards, because *kairos* has nothing to do with chronological, linear time. In *kairos* we are completely unself-conscious and yet paradoxically far more real than we can ever be when we are constantly checking our watches for chronological time.

The saint in contemplation, lost to self in the mind of God is in *kairos*. The artist at work is in *kairos*. The child at play, totally thrown outside himself in the game, be it building a sandcastle or making a daisy chain is in *kairos*. In *kairos* we become what we are called to be as human beings, co-creators with God, touching the wonder of creation."

But we can't get too relaxed. In fact, creativity requires tension as we struggle against limits. Heraclitus, the Greek philosopher tells us that the river is constituted by the tension between the flowing water and the banks. Without the limits of the banks, the river would not exist. Our consciousness works the same way as we grapple with the tension between possibilities and limits: the non-material soul, and the material body.

There is a wonderful short film called "SALT" about the Australian photographer Murray Fredericks. About ten years ago, Fredericks began making five-week annual trips alone to remote Lake Eyre and its enormous salt flats, the lowest point in Australia. He went, he says, in search of "somewhere I could point my camera into pure space." The salt flats are so white and uniform that they seem to stretch 360 degrees to the horizon with no breaks.

After a while you lose your orientation as the sky and ground merge. When objects appear in the distance they are distorted with no recognizable shape like a mirage. Fredericks said that if he is out there too long he starts to lose his sense of identity because he has no limits to contain his consciousness. His thoughts become distorted as his senses lose their bearings. It's like Heraclitus' river without the banks.

Humans create form in their world not only by thinking but by feeling and willing. This is how we make meaning in our lives. We are constantly creating our self and our world around us. This is the basis of process theology as developed by the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead. We are always in the process of becoming, as co-creators of the world with God.

God is changing along with us. God is part of the whole process not apart from it. God represents the creative possibilities toward the common good, but it is our choices, the limits, which create the world that we live in. Whitehead wrote that "Descartes was wrong. 'I think therefore I am' is insufficient. It is never just bare thought or bare existence. We are aware of emotions, hopes, values, in addition to existence. These are subjective reactions to our environment as we are active in our nature. These form the whole experience of our identity."

In this life we never outgrow our ability to self-create or change the world. Yet many people, young and old, retreat to mind numbing conformity, passive escape or cut themselves off from the community. They turn off their creativity convinced that they have nothing to offer. In a sense they have ceased to be alive, at least consciously alive. Their soul goes quiet, no longer pushing against the limits of life.

Recent research has revealed that a regular regimen of brain exercising that forces us out of our routines into creative space can delay and in some cases prevent brain disorders such as Alzheimers and Dementia. They say we should learn a new language, train ourselves to be ambidextrous, drive our car backwards in an empty parking lot, travel to an unfamiliar part of the world. The key to all these activities is to push our senses beyond their comfort zones where new meanings are waiting to be found; to push against our self-imposed limits. Not only do our brains stretch but so does our souls, our spirit for living.

I hope it has become clear to you in this sermon series on spiritual pathways, that we are constantly integrating our minds, bodies and souls in our response to the awe, wonder, joy and grief of being alive. When we talk about the free and responsible search for truth and meaning that is what we are talking about. When we declare in our mission statement that we are seekers of spiritual growth that is what we are seeking. There are a gazillion ways we can go about it, but to truly live, we must engage with the experience of life.

We must activate our minds with the universal consciousness of our true selves. We must connect with our bodies in a life-long pact of sensory experience. We must create the form of our world out of the spiritual chaos of our souls. These are all part of the spiritual journey called life. We do these things individually and together. What will you do to form the future? What will you create with your immense power to change the world? May your path be true, your spirit be awake and all your senses alive so you don't miss a thing.