

30 November, 2008 * “Sometimes the Muse Visits at Midnight”
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What if the world runs out of songs? This something I’ve worried about, or at least wondered about, in the middle of the night.

I’m confident that the world will never run out of jokes (because there will always be new situations to poke fun at). I know that the world will never run out of stories to tell (because of the rich material we humans supply for one another). But music seems a different matter. There are, after all, only seven musical notes, and a handful of sharps. Doesn’t it seem only a matter of time until those notes are used up, and no more songs can be created?

No. Of course not. There will always be new music in the world. I’ve come to realize that “running out” of songs is a foolish thing to worry about. It is, moreover, scarcity thinking of the highest order: a fearful belief that the creative spirit – one of our most life-giving powers – is in short supply.

Let me remind you that as people of a liberal faith, our Unitarian Universalist tradition calls us to trust in the *abundance* of all that sustains and strengthens this vibrant, patchwork world. *There’s more love somewhere*, says one of our hymns. *We’ll build a land*, says another hymn, *where justice rolls down like waters*. *May we be filled with loving kindness*, we sing frequently. We affirm that – just like love, justice, goodness, and compassion – creativity is an unlimited, unbounded phenomenon, far outreaching our ideas of it.

Notice that I’m not interested in dallying over definitions of “creativity,” here. Whether you call it insight, innovation, or thinking outside of the box, I’m interested in exploring creativity as an inherently *spiritual* concept that involves us as whole beings: bodies, minds, and spirits.

The Judeo-Christian tradition holds that human beings are created in the image of God – making *us* creators; creative beings. From a humanist perspective, we human beings are the primary shapers and redeemers of the world. If it’s true that a problem can’t be solved by the same mindset that created the problem, then we are responsible for, and privileged to, use our creativity to move the world forward...whether the progression of that arc is measured by technology or by human consciousness.

Here, then, this sermon branches into three dovetailing views of creativity, each one informing the way that we might inhabit and incarnate our role as creative beings.

Part I: Your Brain Knows More Than You Do

Think of a time when you experienced an “aha” moment. When the solution to a problem pops into place with a *ting* of surprise and satisfaction, psychologists and neuroscientists call that “the insight experience.”¹ Since our 5th UU Source calls us to *heed the guidance of reason and the results of science* (and since I find it comforting and empowering to understand physiological parameters of the abstract), I’m intrigued that cognitive neuroscientists have spent the last fifteen years designing studies to “figure out what happens inside the brain when people have an insight.”²

Most of us are well-acquainted with the initial stage of this process: impasse. Mental block. It’s what happens next – the breakthrough – that scientists are beginning to understand.

For you science wonks, here’s how insight works: neurons in the right hemisphere of our brains are continually gathering information, and searching for solutions to puzzles or novel situations. When insight occurs, there’s a spike of gamma rhythm as neurons form a new network. But here’s the thing: before we’re even aware that our right hemisphere has clicked onto this insight, our prefrontal cortex has recognized it, during its work of seeking out new associations. The prefrontal cortex functions like a conductor or director, and, in the words of one scientist, “makes all these plans without telling you about it,” beneath the level of consciousness.

Our creativity and inspiration, therefore, unfold without our full awareness – and yet scientists have found specific ways to tease it along. First, insight (or creativity) won’t occur without being in a relaxed state; “trying to force an insight can actually prevent the insight.”³ (As two different researchers put it, “That’s why so many insights happen during warm showers,”⁴ and “There’s a good reason Google puts Ping-Pong tables in their headquarters.”⁵) Concentrating too hard actually forces off creativity; it’s “essential” to let “the mind wander.” Scientists have also pinpointed early morning as the best time to coax revelation to the surface: “right after we wake up...the drowsy brain is unwound and disorganized, open to all sorts of unconventional ideas.”

(It occurs to me that one role of religious community is to spread the “good news” – I’m just doing my part this morning, by encouraging you to lie in bed, take warm showers, and play Ping-Pong more often.)

For all their tips and experiments, neuroscientists still admit that the process of insight “will always be a little unknowable... At a certain point, you just have to admit that your brain knows more than you do.” In other words, by trying to purge the mystery from creativity, even neuroscientists find themselves ever more pulled *into* mystery.

Part II: Sometimes You Just Have to Talk on the Banana

Mystery and warm showers aside, I’m convinced that creativity and imagination are

fostered – or hindered – by the choices we make about how we engage life. To illustrate that point, you’re about to see a DVD clip of two nationally-recognized education specialists... actually, they’re internationally famous for their pioneering work in the fields of creativity and early childhood development.

...at this point, the congregation watched a clip of Ernie & Bert from “Sesame Street,” in which Ernie convinces Bert to speak to Gladys the Elephant on a banana.⁶

(Two parenthetical comments. First, if you’re visiting us today, please don’t go home and tell your friends that Unitarian Universalists watch “Sesame Street” during worship. It’s a holiday. Irreverent reverence. Second, when our capital campaign raises enough money for a 9’ x 12’ drop-down video screen in our new Sanctuary building, I promise that you’ll get more profound sermon illustrations than this one.)

If Ernie & Bert are too frivolous for you, here’s another light-hearted way of getting at the same message: a cartoon by artist Michael Leunig called “The Great Divide – The Haves and the Have-Nots.”

This cartoon features simple pen-and-ink illustrations to fit the captions:

Those who have a twinkle in their eye....

Those who have not got a twinkle in their eye.

Those who have sung in the moonlight in a forest glade with tears of happiness upon their cheeks....

Those who have not.

Those who have run off with the gypsies and danced rapturously and feasted and slept in their arms and still have sweet memory of it.

Those who have not.

And just repeating, those who have a twinkle in their eye.

Those who have not.

You understand the point: imagination doesn’t arise from the grim; creativity can’t emerge from a straitjacket of seriousness. In order to be imaginative, we sometimes need to fling ourselves off the ledge of rationality. Children – with their imaginary friends and their wide-eyed wonder – understand this all too well. It’s we adults who have forgotten how to suspend disbelief and enjoy silliness. We forget that sometimes you just have to talk on the banana. And we forget how to flirt with the Muse, and seduce her into weaving her magic into our ideas, our work, our lives.

Part III: We're Visited by the Muse, But Aren't the Muse Herself

The concept of a goddess or spirit who inspires the creative process appears in many cultures,⁷ but the prototype (and the word “muse”) comes from ancient Greece. When I speak of my Muse, it’s a conveniently secular way of acknowledging that I’m not alone in the solitary endeavor of sermon-writing. It’s not just me: last week, my friend and colleague “PeaceBang” lamented on her blog:⁸

I have wracked my brains, prayed for and begged the Muse to inspire me for the winter holidays... I wanted... a wonderful creative surge, but when my Muse showed up recently she was cranky, had obvious bed head and snapped at me, “Why don’t you just do something nice and traditional, for God’s sake?”

“Well excuse me,” I responded. “You’ve always seemed to have fun with this in the PAST.”

“Yea, well it’s been ELEVEN YEARS and I’m TIRED,” she spat back. She wrapped her kimono snugly about herself, turned on her maribou trim-slippered heel, and went back to bed.

My Muse neither wears kimonos nor gets cranky with me. She *is* erratic, however, sometimes neglecting me for days at a stretch before dropping in like a rude houseguest at ungodly hours. While the creative spirit may be finicky and occasionally fragile, it also has a transcendent element – ultimately, it resides not *within* us, but around and beyond us. (I graduated from college with a degree in neuropsychology. Today I’m a minister because of my hunger to believe in the “something more” that extends beyond our neural pathways and gamma rhythms.)

The novelist Kingsley Amis counseled that the art of writing comes from applying the seat of one’s pants to the seat of one’s chair, which I’ve found to be true, but that doesn’t explain the “something more” that happens next. It’s what authors refer to while discussing their novels or screenplays and explain, somewhat mystified, that characters entered their heads fully formed, asking to appear on the page or to alter an already-planned plot. That’s where I see “the Muse” – or, when I’m feeling generous, “God’s Muse” – in action. It’s what humans have nodded to as “divine inspiration” for most of our history.

So many people are afraid to be creative, because we fear that the Muse will pass us by when we beckon her, and we’ll come up short. But we have misjudged our relationship with creativity – and no one has expressed this more articulately than Elizabeth Gilbert (author of *Eat, Pray, Love*). She’s pointed out⁹ that during the Renaissance, artists emerged as “sort of a breed apart;” they were seen as creativity *personified*, both blessed with their gift and cursed by the pain and suffering that goes along with carrying its burdens.

History provides no shortage of famous artists crumbled under the pressure to outdo themselves with each creation. I would too, if I believed that there were an inner well of creative powers – all mine, and of finite supply – within me, rather than abundant, living springs all around me that never run dry. We ought not mistake the gift for the vessel. To switch metaphors, “We are the musical instrument but the music is a gift from an outside force.”¹⁰

“I believe,” says Elizabeth Gilbert,¹¹ “that creativity is a living force that thrums wildly through this world and expresses itself through us... a mighty and holy gift....” We open to this force, receive from it, and (if we’re smart) we follow its patterns and its tides.

Whatever your understanding of how the mysterious force of creativity operates in our lives, may you remember that you are a creative being, may inspiration and insight flow from you, and may we use our gifts of creativity to bless the world.

Endnotes

1. All quotes from Part I are from “The Eureka Hunt” by Jonah Lehrer, in *The New Yorker*, July 28, 2008, pp. 40-45.

2. Lehrer, p. 41.

3. Lehrer, p. 41.

4. Lehrer, p. 43.

5. Lehrer, p. 44.

6. You can view this clip at www.youtube.com/watch?v=51ZhEjB_KvU

7. Wikipedia reminds readers to “compare the Roman inspiring nymphs of springs, the Camenae, the Völva of Norse Mythology and also the apsarasa in the culture of classical India.”

8. See www.peacebang.com/2008/11/17/hiber-nation/

9. In her recent public lectures. This was beautifully captured by blogger Jan Harris (“The Ups and Downs of Art and Life”). See <http://purplebirdart.blogspot.com/2008/04/elizabeth-gilbert.html>

10. Again, the perceptive summary of Jan Harris.

11. In an interview. See <http://www.barnesandnoble.com/writers/writerdetails.asp?cid=1014388>.