



Creativity

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The Merriam Webster's Online Dictionary defines the word "creative" as

- 1** : marked by the ability or power to create
- 2** : having the quality of something created rather than imitated : IMAGINATIVE
- 3** : managed so as to get around legal or conventional limits <creative financing>;
also : deceptively arranged so as to conceal or defraud

Anyone with children or an elusive friend or family member knows that last definition of the word creative, "deceptively arranged so as to conceal or defraud." Our topic for this morning is not definition #3, but the first two definitions of the word "creative" - the ability to imagine or create something that does not exist first within oneself. As our member, Donna Hoffman, discovered in her thesis on creativity, everyone has creativity. To evoke it, we must ask ourselves "how to interpret what [we] know" and wait to see what happens.

This definition of creativity reminds me of the first source from Unitarian Universalist faith "Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and openness to the forces that create and uphold life." Creativity comes from within and can be expressed in a multiplicity of ways. There is the musical cabaret of Lady Gaga (and I do think part of our societal fascination with her is the mystery, bravery, and then allure of her exceptional creativity), the wry and penetrating observations of poet Billy Collins, and the delight of your child's artwork on your refrigerator at home. Creativity is an opportunity to see through the lens of someone else and a wider lens onto human life.

Direct experience is why I invited our children to come today in their pajamas, with a favorite stuffy. What do they choose to wear for fun? What does a super hero or princess say about a child? Children's pajamas are costumes. Who do our children dress up to be? What are their dreams? Which stuffed animals speak to them and why? Is it the animal, the look of the eyes, the softness of the fur? There is a creative story to all of these choices. I hope you saw it up here, and felt a spark of joy and appreciation.

My first introduction to creativity was through my oldest sister, Janet, an extraordinarily creative visual artist. Last January you heard my letter of appreciation to my middle sister, Joann. My oldest sister, Janet, received a similar letter a few months later, and

much of it was devoted to her creativity. Now, her creativity first delighted, then mystified and exasperated my parents, but it opened a door of wonder and curiosity to me that has never closed.

Janet had my sister Joann and I dress up in my mother's old slips when we were children and memorize and then act out scenes from Shakespeare's play *A Midsummer's Night Dream*, which is where I first met Mr. Shakespeare. On long car rides she told us the story behind Wagner's Ring Cycle (which is where I first met opera), and recited the poem "Jabberwocky" (where I first met poetry). My sister was like a walking, talking, drawing, directing cultural enrichment program. And though my sister might tell you that she has burned a few too many bridges in her lifetime, she is the person I would most like to live like, because she embraces each new day with a curiosity and wonder that constantly shifts her interior world, and causes her to create pencil drawings, costumes, gardens, and now that she is studying to be a chef, food.

The breath of life is in her very creativity and I am sure each of us can think of someone in our lives like that. Maybe you are that person. Janet inspired me to be creative and to appreciate her creativity, but I don't have her raw talent. However, from her I learned about the joy of the experience and the process. At the end of the day (and the start), it is not about the end product – the creation, it is about the experience and connection. Many of us are too rigorous in our creative standards – forgetting that it is about the process and connection (to ourselves and ultimately, others). We crush the joy out of the process and connection, throw away our creative endeavors if they do not meet certain standards, or just stop creating.

Another challenge to creativity is that so many of us think it is for some artist, not you and me, everyone. But as Affrilachian poet Frank X Walker explains

I believe that the highest quality of life is full of art and creative expression and that all people deserve it. I believe in a broad definition of what art is and who artists are: Barbers, cooks, auto dealers, janitors, and gardeners have as much right to claims of artistry as designers, architects, painters, and sculptors. Every day our streets and school buses become art galleries in the form of perfectly spiked hair, zigzagging cornrows, and dizzying shoelace artistry.¹

Creativity does enhance quality of life. You and I know that, just by attending a play or reading a good book we feel energized, inspired, moved, provoked, engaged. This summer I took my stepson to a country western concert at the Ohio State Fair. I am not a major country western fan, but Darius Rucker is a great singer and musician, so I had a wonderful time, and when he closed with the best live version of *Purple Rain* I have ever heard, I was hopping around screaming. I still think of him singing that song like he owned it and I feel joy, wild joy (of course my stepson had never even heard of it). If I think of him singing it for more than 10 seconds, I will break into singing it myself.

Creativity connects us to ourselves and then others. There are days, in my fantasy world, that I yearn for what used to be known as the "salon," when people came together to read, recite poetry, listen to live music, and discuss issues. There was creativity and community. How stimulating!

¹ Frank X. Walker, "Creative Solutions to Life's Challenges," *This I Believe* (2006).

We have this misguided notion that artists create in a vacuum, but everyone creates in community, and creations stimulate community. Consider this story from *This I Believe* by Mel Rusnov entitled “The Artistry in Hidden Talents”

While earning my engineering degree, I worked as a waitress in the dining hall of a retirement community. One day during a break, I discovered a piano in a meeting room. I sat down to play a few Bach Two-Part Inventions. Those crisp, driving rhythms and harmonics flew out into the hallways. Residents, numb from ceaseless easy-listening radio, tentatively peeked in, then sat to listen. Disbelieving, they saw plain, old, invisible Mel, the lunch waitress. “She plays the piano!” “Where did you study?” “How long have you played?” “Can you play Rachmaninoff?” They no longer wanted me to quickly and quietly disappear from their dining tables. “Mel, wait a minute. Who do you think was better, Gould or Horowitz?”²

Ms. Rusnov also tells a wonderful story about sitting next to a colleague in a cubicle for years and years, and never knowing he had a gorgeous tenor voice until she attended a holiday concert and heard him sing, to her surprise “The sweetest, most touching performance of ‘Silent Night’ I had ever heard.” It was this surprise performance that encouraged her to return to the piano after years away. I also imagine that Mel and her colleague have a lot more to discuss than just engineering these days, just as she had more to discuss with her nursing home clients after they heard her play. Creativity builds community.

As a minister concerned with faith development, it is clear to me that creativity helps us to know ourselves and brings us closer to other people. Self-awareness, community development, and love are perhaps the greatest challenges and learning experiences in our faith lives. I would argue that we can’t love others until we know and love ourselves, and creativity is essential to unfolding the puzzle of who we each are and who we can live our best lives. Love is what makes this earth heaven. The absence of love can make it hell.

Brain research also tells us that creativity is good for our health. Apparently creativity engages both left and right brain functioning. According to a *Newsweek* article on creativity, “Creativity requires constant shifting, blender pulses of both divergent thinking and convergent thinking, to combine new information with old and forgotten ideas. Highly creative people are very good at marshalling their brains into bilateral mode, and the more creative they are, the more they dual-activate.”³

According to a 2001 study by Dr Gene Cohen from the Center on Aging, Health and Humanities at George Washington University “The very act of engaging one’s mind in creative ways directly affects health.” In his 2001 study he examined the effects of different pursuits on people 65 to 100 years old. He separated participants into one group engaged in non-creative community activities, and the other engaged in a community-based arts program. The group who participated in creative activities “had started few medications, experienced fewer falls, and made fewer doctor’s visits.”⁴

This study fascinates me because both groups participated in community activities, so they both engaged in conversation and work with other people, but only the group

² Mel Rusnov, “The Artistry in Hidden Talents,” *This I Believe* (2006).

³ Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman, “The Creativity Crisis” in *Newsweek* (July 10, 2010).

⁴ Anna Kuchment, “Creativity and Aging” in *Newsweek* (December 10, 2008).

participating in some form of creative activity received health benefits. Maybe that left-right brain dual activity helps with balance. I don't know, but something powerful happens to an individual who creates.

Some of us also see creativity as secondary or unnecessary, perhaps a luxury. Apparently it is much more essential than we think. *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman believes there is a competitive advantage to creative energy (and he believes this creative energy is fueled by diversity). He explains "Countries that choke themselves off from exposure to different cultures, faiths, and ideas will never invent the next Google or a cancer cure, let alone export a musical or body of literature that would bring enjoyment to children everywhere."⁵ Certainly diversity exposes us to different foods, clothes, looks, languages, literature, art, film, and music which can fuel creativity.

Research supports the cultural necessity of creativity. Apparently the "correlation of lifetime creative accomplishment was more than three times stronger for childhood creativity than childhood IQ."⁶ We have come to believe that smart children contribute more as adults. Apparently creative children contribute more than smart children (so don't despair if your child is distracted at school but draws an amazing car, or creates an entire world of make-believe – "paracosm").

Creativity is a significant leadership competency area. Creativity creates new technology, medical innovation, energy efficiency, water treatment plants, highway overpasses, and solutions to blown oil wells, among many other things. Creativity makes our economy thrive. This same article also notes that creativity scores have declined among American children for the past twenty years (it is not yet clear why). I am choosing not to focus on this, but you might be interested to read more.

In the essay "Creative Solutions to Life's Challenges," Frank X Walker writes

I believe that what we often call survival skills is simply creativity at work. When I think about how my mother fed all seven of us, making us think that every day was a "different meal," I still appreciate how much a creative cook can do with a single potato. And it wasn't just in the kitchen. She would flip her old Singer sewing machine upright, study pictures in books and magazines, then make ethnic versions of those same dolls and stuffed animals to sell at church fund-raisers. Without a TV in the house to distract us, we made the dolls come to life, filling the hollow fabric sleeves one fistful of cotton at a time. My mother made her own clothes and all my sister's prom and wedding dresses. I always knew when she was making something, because she'd be singing or humming. She sang all the way through her home correspondence courses in floral design and interior decorating.⁷

I like the idea of survival skills as creativity at work, and the appreciation of creativity as ingenuity and innovation. Creativity is never perfect, does not need order, or money so that it can take shape. Fine arts are not more worthy than folk arts or the photographs you take or the dresses Mrs. Walker sewed. In their article "The Creativity Crisis," Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman explain "It is also true that highly creative adults frequently grew up

⁵ Thomas Friedman, "Broadway and the Mosque" in the *New York Times* (August 2010).

⁶ Bronson and Merryman.

⁷ Walker, 250-251.

with hardship. Hardship by itself doesn't lead to creativity, but it does force kids to become more flexible – and flexibility helps with creativity.

Creative adaptations fascinate me. Those of you who know my fiancé, Earl, know that he can build or repair almost anything. His fix-it list is astonishing. He has never been trained as a mechanic, yet he removed and replaced his truck motor this summer (without half of the required tools). The list goes on and on. When we were remodeling the bathroom together, my job was to get all the old glue off the back of the tub after Earl ripped off the molding. When this proved to be a slow task, Earl disappeared and then reappeared with his blowtorch (which I had never used) and instructions on how to use it and not start a house fire. My task was completed in ten minutes.

What makes Earl go for the blowtorch when most others (like me) would scrape and scrape? Well, it helps that Earl has worked in construction and knows tools and materials respond in what ways. But it is much more than that. On any worksite he constantly innovates. Since his creativity is in a trade profession (and not a fine art), I think it is often overlooked by others, but on a daily basis I find him shockingly creative. When I ask him how he learned to do all these things I get one answer and one answer only, “When I was growing up I didn't have a pot to piss in.” Starting at a young age he figured everything out on the fly and still does. He does not panic, he makes do and innovates. Hardship can lead to flexibility which can lead to more knowledge and more creativity.

Creativity can also help us bear hardship and pain. Many of us know about play and art therapy – a safe way for children and adults to share their stories. I am sure Mrs. Walker could get away from the stress of feeding seven children when she was sewing. For a time she was humming instead of worrying, a wonderful coping skill. Writer Gregory Orr knows the saving role of poetry in his life. At the age of twelve he accidentally killed his younger brother. He explains

One consequence of traumatic violence is that it isolates its victims. It can cut us off from other people, cutting us off from our own emotional lives until we go numb and move through the world as if only half alive . . . When I write a poem, I process experience. I take what's inside me – the raw, chaotic material of feeling or memory – and translate it into words and then shape those words into the rhythmical language we call a poem. This process brings me a kind of wild joy. Before, I was powerless and passive in the face of my confusion, but now I am active: the powerful shaper of my experience. I am transforming it into a lucid meaning.⁸

And probably bearing an unbearable loss.

I hope you are encouraged to go out and find creativity in unexpected places, especially yourself. My only advice is the same that Donna shared this in our earlier reading. Don't tell yourself to be creative. Rather, interpret something in your own personal form that appeals to you. Go out and dust off an old hobby, or continue the one you have. Start a new one. Know your creativity is not a luxury, but a necessity for you and this world. Have an internal experience and share it with others, and in so doing become self aware, engaged with others, and able to feel and give and love.

⁸ Gregory Orr, “The Making of Poems,” *This I Believe* (2006).

