

“The Gift of Creativity”

Rev. Lynn Harrison

First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

8 January 2017

N.B. These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship, supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Late one night in the early 1980's, Carolyn McDade was a member of the Arlington Street UU Church in Boston.

She was a leader in the efforts at the time to oppose U.S policies in Central America.

Carolyn was a busy activist, often on speaking tours and organizing sanctuary for political refugees.

It was grueling work, and one night she felt especially burned out.

“I feel like a piece of dried cardboard that has lain in the attic for years,” she told a close friend when she arrived at her house seeking comfort.

Reflecting later, McDade said, “I was tired, not with my community but with the world.”

Her friend simply sat with her awhile, being present to her deep fatigue. And then Carolyn went home.

“I walked through my house in the dark, found my piano, and that was my prayer: May I not drop out.

It was not written, but prayed. I knew more than anything that I wanted to continue in faith with the movement.”

That song that arose as a prayer, we now know as “Spirit of Life.”

Carolyn McDade shared it with the women she worked with...and from there the song took on a life of its own.

It quickly became popular in many faith and activist communities and eventually was included in our hymnbook, *Singing the Living Tradition*.¹

“Spirit of Life,” which sprang out of deep need, came to its author as a gift...and then was offered to the world as a gift as well.

Shared at first informally. And shared...not sold.

A gift of untold value...to the person who first received it on that empty night, and now to us.

§

Right now, we’re coming out of a season when gifts of all kinds have proliferated.

If you’re like me, you may still be finding bits of tissue paper around the house.

As we move into the month of January, “Creation” is our congregation’s theme...

And today we’re talking about the gift of creativity.

A gift not of matter, but of muse.

As I’ve been writing this reflection, I’ve found that the gifts have been springing up everywhere.

I’m reminded of the old story, in which a student asks the composer Johann Sebastian Bach, “Where do you get the ideas for all of these melodies?”

And the old man said, “Why, when I get up in the morning, it’s all I can do not to trip over them.”

Ideas are everywhere.

Raw material for creation and creativity is everywhere.

As Unitarian Universalists, we affirm this abundance in the first of our six Sources of wisdom:

¹ “Carolyn McDade’s Spirit of Life,” UU World
<http://www.uuworld.org/articles/carolyn-mcdades-spirit-life>

Our first and most immediate source of insight is “The direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, that moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.”

In the living tradition of Unitarian Universalism, which maintains that revelation is not sealed, creation and co-creation is woven into our institutional DNA.

Through our First Source—and through our Fourth Principle which affirms “the free and responsible search for truth and meaning”—we are encouraged to create in whatever way we are “inspired.”

That is, in whatever way we are filled with spirit or with energy and joy.

§

I was very fortunate to grow up in family that encouraged creative expression.

And I was delighted when Diane chose the story about Noah’s Ark this morning for the Story for All Ages.

When I was about ten or eleven years old, I made a Noah’s Ark out of clay and this morning I brought along the little Noah and a couple of giraffes.

Growing up, I never thought of myself as particularly religious.

But in addition to the clay Noah’s Ark I made, I also made a complete set of figurines for the Christmas nativity story!

That might have been a clue I was destined for the ministry!

In any case, I’m grateful that for many years now I’ve turned to creative work as a source of joy.

And I think there’s another important connection to be made when we think about the Noah’s Ark story.

One possible interpretation of that familiar fable is that Noah built a vessel to hold creatures that came in two by two...

So that new connections of attraction and fertility might regenerate a barren world that had been flooded with destruction and despair.

Today, as we also face a world so full of sorrow...so wounded by violence and injustice...so barren of hope at times...

We are called to bring forth new life, through the creative connections we make...

Through clay, through colour, through conversation...

Through image, through imagination...

Through dream, dance...or even dessert!

As human beings, we are born creative.

And our creativity can lead us to a renewal of the spirit and an awareness of our deep connections to Something More than our independent personal selves.

It can awaken our awareness of the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

And, I believe, it can help us heal that web, as we connect with others.

Creativity can bring new life to us when we're bone-dry...and it can be the catalyst for social change as well.

As the author Toni Morrison wrote, "This is *precisely* the time when artists go to work.

There is no time for despair, no place for self-pity, no need for silence, no room for fear.

We speak, we write, we do language. That is how civilizations heal."

And a note of compassion for ourselves here.

Lest we worry that if we feel sad or afraid we may not be able to create...

Rest assured that when we bring our whole selves to the page or to the instrument, whether our mood be light or dark...

We open ourselves to the creative forces that can renew us.

§

Emily Carr was a woman who thought deeply about creativity, as she wrote and painted throughout her life.

In the reading David shared earlier, we heard her ask the question:

“Why want to paint? When the thing itself is before one, why not look at it and be content?”

But there you are. You want something more.

It is the growth in our souls, asking us to feed it with experience filtered through us.”

The growth in our souls asking us to feed it.

To me, this sounds like an echo of Carolyn McDade’s experience, when she was dry and empty.

When she prayed her way into a new song...

...which then became a gift to herself in her difficult life as an activist...and became a gift to all of us, in turn.

Like Carolyn McDade, Emily Carr reflected on feelings of emptiness and fatigue, even failure.

At one point she’s having trouble with a painting of a mountain and she writes:

“I thought my mountain was coming this morning.

It was near to speaking when suddenly it shifted, sulked, and returned to smallness.

It has eluded me again and sits there, puny and dull. Why?”

And then, later...

“My mountain is dead. As soon as she has dried, I'll bury her under a decent layer of white paint.

But I haven't done with the old lady; far from it!”

What a ringing affirmation of the possibility of new life...coming from a place of longing and absence.

Sometimes creativity is not so much about having a great idea, but being awake to the possibilities that still exist, in whatever blank canvas we face.

§

In his book entitled “The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World,” Lewis Hyde wrote:

“For a creative artist, ‘feeding the spirit’ is as much a matter of attitude or intent as it is of any specific action.

The attitude is, at base, the kind of humility that prevents the artist from drawing the essence of his creation into the personal ego.

In what other line of work does the worker say, “I knelt down—I always do after I’ve written what I know is a good piece.”

Hyde goes on to quote the poet Gary Snyder, who completely dropped poetry after a ten-day silent meditation walk, and then said that

“From that time forward I always looked on the poems I wrote as gifts that were not essential to my life. [...]

Ever since, every poem I have written has been like a surprise.”²

When Gary Snyder describes a poem arriving as a surprise, it’s worth remembering that in the Christian calendar, today is the Sunday of Epiphany.

² Gary Snyder in Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World*,” (New York: Vintage, 2007), 192-193.

That word, epiphany, has two meanings.

First, it commemorates "...the manifestation of Christ to the Magi or the Three Kings"...

And second, it's also "the sudden, intuitive perception of insight into reality...often brought about by a simple activity or commonplace occurrence."

The sudden, intuitive perception that comes as a gift.
The beholding of the divine, by seekers on a quest.

Both are revelations, epiphanies.

And each day, new epiphanies can come to any of us...
As we follow our stars and seek what is beautiful and meaningful.

§

Every month at the Imperial Pub down at Yonge and Dundas,
I'm honoured to facilitate something called "The Bridge: Connecting Song and Spirit."

It's a cross between an open mic and a UU worship service...many of you have joined us.

On those evenings, we offer our creative work, whatever it is,
in the spirit of gift-giving and creative interchange.

We work on the assumption that all creative expression is a form of spiritual practice and that art and performance is more an opportunity for community service and personal growth than a path toward fame and fortune.

Our hope is to foster the openness to "the forces that create and sustain life"...rather than encourage judgment and competition.

Not surprisingly I think, some amazing epiphanies have taken place at The Bridge, and some luminous work has been offered.

The next one takes place January 25th on the theme of "Beginnings." You're all invited...but just a caveat, we may need a larger room!

As in all acts of creativity, our challenge is to work within the framework we have...as humble and limited as it sometimes may seem.

§

Knowing that my time now is limited, I'd like to conclude with wisdom from Michael Leunig.

He's an Australian cartoonist, who began his career by drawing editorial cartoons.

In other words, his creativity has long been intertwined with the disheartening and bewildering aspects of life.

As a result, his work is infused with a large measure of what I call soul.

In an essay entitled "Spirituality, Art and Innocence," he writes:

"Often in my work and calling, it has seemed to me that there is another being within, another self – perhaps the true self – which is not beholden to this time and this world;

An eternal collaborator helping me to go it alone in making sense of the chaos scattered before me.

This true self is not something I rise up to, but rather a state I descend to;

A regressive surrender to a deeper, more primal and enchanted place within;

A more free and timeless sense through which I feel beauty amidst the unbearable ugliness;

A poetic vision in which I see a measure of redemption, healing humour, or a deeper and higher picture of life and death on earth;

An inspired liberating perspective which enables me sometimes to find words and symbols, or expressions that may be of value to my fellow creatures as well as to myself.

I am talking about the spirit.

The spirit gives momentum and ease to the soul's natural genius.
The soul is a great genius.”

Michael Leunig continues:

“Might it be that a capacity for wonder; the capacity to remain open to all manner of possibilities –

The possibilities of change, reconciliation and forgiveness,
The peaceful integration of our opposites,
The acceptance and love of the natural world,

The redeeming capacity for love, beauty, joy and humour in a world grown anxious and pessimistic –

Might these seemingly improbable qualities be the creative counterbalance to a lopsided world?

I think so.”³

§

So here we are, in our little boat, in a world that so often seems lopsided and flooded with despair.

As this New Year begins, I wish for you the courage and the curiosity to receive the creative gifts that fall into your hands...

I hope you will enjoy them, playfully and with gratitude...

And then offer them as a gift to others, knowing that in this interdependent web of ongoing creation...and in this time of the world's great need...

Your gifts are needed.

Your gifts are loved.

§

³ Michael Leunig, “Spirituality, Art and Innocence,”
<http://www.leunig.com.au/spirituality-art-innocence>