

# **“The Art of Life”**

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto  
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In the first few weeks of good weather this spring, several weeks into the pandemic lockdown, we noticed a renaissance of a classic art-form: the chalk drawing.

Many children live on our street, and several of them were spending lots of time drawing on the sidewalk and even out in the middle of the road.

One young boy, in particular, had filled up a very large area in front of his house with delightful chalk drawings of imaginary superheroes.

When asked about this, from a safe distance, he was happy to tell us about each particular hero-figure, and to say, proudly “I’m a very good artist.”

As indeed he is.

There were so many good things about his art-creation, quite apart from his considerable skill.

He was cheering up the people going by.

He was finding joy and adventure in his own imagination.

And he was also expressing, it seemed to me,  
faith in his own ability—perhaps the ability of all of us—  
to get through this difficult time.

He was quite literally drawing on his inner superhero,  
and, in doing so, saving us.

On one hand, it was “only play.”

On the other hand, it was profound wisdom.

In recent months, many of us have found solace and strength  
in creative activity, whether it be drawing, or journaling,  
poetry-writing, songwriting, playing the ukulele, painting,  
needlepoint, carpentry...the list is endless.

If you're already engaged in one of these activities,  
I hope you keep it up!

And if you're not, I encourage you to consider giving it a try.

Especially in times of stress,  
creative expression is powerful medicine.

It can help us get through our days,  
enable us to connect with others,  
and nurture all aspects of our growth.

In a very real sense,  
as we create art,  
art creates us.

The late novelist Kurt Vonnegut put it well,  
when he urged a group of students to:

“Practice any art, no matter how well or badly,  
not to get money or fame,  
but to experience becoming;  
to find out what’s inside you; to make your soul grow.”<sup>1</sup>

## §

In 2016, an article appeared in Business Insider magazine,  
entitled: “7 Science-Based Reasons Why You Should Make  
Art, Even if You’re Bad at It.”<sup>2</sup>

It seems to me the reasons are even stronger,  
now that we’re in this particular situation.

Researchers found that after just 45 minutes of art-making,  
levels of cortisol, the stress hormone, were reduced.

Additional studies showed that even free-form painting  
with no particular goal reduced stress in college students...

And that art classes benefited people  
who were caring for ailing loved ones.

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<sup>1</sup> Kurt Vonnegut, 2006, letter to students of Xavier High School in New York City. <https://lettersofnote.com/2013/10/28/make-your-soul-grow/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.businessinsider.com/why-you-should-make-art-even-if-youre-bad-2016-6>

Research cited in the article also found that creative work provides a healthy distraction from sadness, improves connections in the brain, and sometimes even allows us to work through problems by turning them into narratives.

Those are just a few of the many benefits.<sup>3</sup>

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It's also known that creative work can help us find a state of what's called "flow"—a sense of full immersion or engagement with life.

We can find this in many experiences, including exercise and sports, making love, or losing ourselves in nature.

Creative activity is another way to bring about that state of being.

And it doesn't necessarily have to involve a grand original project, either!

In recent years, adult colouring books have become extremely popular.

Many people find them a calming way to pass the time.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.businessinsider.com/why-you-should-make-art-even-if-youre-bad-2016-6#7-making-art-can-help-you-achieve-flow-7>

Looking through one colouring book recently,  
I was immediately struck by the presence of mandalas.

Mandalas are circular geometric patterns  
that are used for contemplation in many faith traditions,  
including Hinduism and Buddhism.

The fact that mandalas have turned up in adult colouring  
books makes perfect sense!

It doesn't matter whether we find them in the magazine rack  
at Shopper's Drug Mart or in a more "sacred text."

Colouring a mandala is an opportunity for everyday  
contemplation, inviting us to engage with the  
circles within circles of life,

And connecting us to generations before us.

## §

You can find sacred objects everywhere,  
and welcome them into your life  
for the healing and solace they provide.

And indeed, art-making can be practiced  
with any everyday materials,  
whether they be stones on the beach,  
or an ordinary pen and notebook,  
an arrangement of flowers,  
a meal presented on a plate,  
an image of the sky captured on your iPhone.

What's important is the attitude of wonder,  
awe and playfulness we bring to the experience...  
not so much the finished product we create.

In our culture, we unfortunately have been distracted and  
misled by an over-emphasis on product and market value.

This consumer orientation to art  
discourages the artist within each of us,  
as we evaluate our work  
based on the demands of the market,  
rather than the needs of the soul.

Yet, even living in this culture, as we do,  
and whether or not we choose to share our work,

We can always tap into the creative process  
and the well-spring of awe and wonder.

## §

This sense of wonder is, for many people,  
deeply connected to the spiritual life...and so  
it was with the late Ojibway writer Richard Wagamese.

Each passage in his beautiful book "Embers" was written  
after a time of morning prayer and ritual.

He wrote: "You stoke the fires of creativity  
with humility, gratitude and awareness.

You need to ask for the gift to be directed.

Writing is a spiritual process.

To be a creator you need to connect with Creator.”<sup>4</sup>

And in this brief passage, he describes the feeling of awe and wonder that is the birthplace of creativity:

“The scrim of cloud beyond the lake is purple,  
moving into pearl grey,  
and I feel drawn to music, poetry and  
a quiet idyll by the fire.

Writing begins there,  
where the spirit moves and I’m working,  
even when I’m not.”<sup>5</sup>

## §

“Where the spirit moves and I’m working,  
even when I’m not...”

This seems, to me, to affirm that creativity comes from something beyond or beneath our conscious awareness...

Something moving in us, that we are called to bring forth.

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Wagamese, *Embers: One Ojibway’s Meditations*, (Douglas & McIntyre, 2016), 92.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, page 87.

This is in keeping with the Jungian perspective, which sees creativity as arising from the unconscious...

Allowing us to make connections that transcend our judging and dividing minds.

As creativity is connected to this deep well of spirit or soul, it can bring us unexpected gifts of healing and insight.

Many years ago, when I was struggling as a young wife and mother, I was painting with a skilled therapist, creating what I thought were completely abstract watercolour shapes in an almost dreamlike way.

When I put down the paintbrush, I saw, to my surprise, that I had unconsciously created a radiant picture of a family with two children.

It revealed something that was deeply important to me.

Even now, I find that a song or a drawing can express something I hadn't yet articulated for myself.

When you experiment with creativity, you might ask yourself, what is this picture, arrangement of stones, woodworking project, teaching me?

What images or symbols are emerging?

Am I longing for balance, freedom,  
simplicity, intensity, softness, sweetness or something else?

Every quality of life can be revealed  
through our creative selves,  
offering insight that can guide us in complex times.

If your spiritual understanding includes  
a Higher Power, God, Creator, or True Self,  
you might imagine that source of wisdom  
speaking to you through your medium.

If you hold a more humanist understanding,  
you might reflect instead on the cognitive  
or psychological benefits of creative play.

Either way, you will experience the benefits.

## §

Sometimes, we might incorrectly think that art  
must arise only from the appreciation of beauty  
and harmony in the world,

Or that the work we create must always  
be beautiful or pleasing.

But that doesn't reflect the world in which we live.

When we open ourselves to wonder,  
taking in what is around us, in all of its particularity,  
we may not see balance and justice and peace.

In fact these days we're likely to see quite the opposite.

So, how can we make art out of that?

One of my favourite sayings, from the Sufi tradition, is something I keep on my desk:

“You are sharing in the totality of cosmic pain.  
You are called upon to meet it in joy instead of self-pity.

The secret is to offer your heart as a vehicle  
to transform cosmic suffering into joy.”

The way I understand this,  
is that by simply being attentive to the world as it is,  
by opening our heart to it all,  
and then engaging with it creatively...

We hold it, in a form of loving embrace  
that is larger, and that is healing.

## §

I've spoken in the past to you about the  
Australian cartoonist Michael Leunig.

He started out as a political cartoonist, and continues to  
create art that offers commentary on the world's situation.

In recent months, I've noticed a distinct darkening of his  
outlook.

Known for works of childlike winsomeness,  
he now shares with us his evidently deep sadness at the state  
of the world.

Great art often bears witness to tragedy and sorrow—  
and so, if you find your own creativity leaning in this  
direction, do not be dismayed.

In an essay entitled “Art, Spirituality and Innocence,”  
Leunig wrote:

“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.”<sup>6</sup>

## §

Finally I'd like to return to the reading that I shared a few minutes ago, the poem by Rumi.

It's a very short poem, but there's a great deal in it, starting with the simple matter-of-fact statement:

“Today, like every other day, we wake up empty and frightened.”

Many of us might be able to relate to that feeling of waking up with a sense of deep need.

But I notice that he doesn't say “worried” and frightened. He says “empty.”

So the question is, how can we be filled?

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Leunig, “*Spirituality, Art and Innocence*” Keynote presentation delivered at 10th Dialogue Australasia Network Conference, 11 April 2015.  
<https://www.leunig.com.au/spirituality-art-innocence>

Rumi said, “don’t open the door to the study and begin reading.”

Today 700 years later, we might say “don’t turn to email or Facebook, CP24 or CNN.”

Instead, “Take down the musical instrument.”

Reach for an instrument of creativity.

A paintbrush, a notebook, a guitar, a garden spade...

Any instrument that allows us to tap into the well of creativity:

The well that springs from the unconscious,  
from a source that is bigger than our intellect and ego.

“Let the beauty we love be what we do.”

Let us become the beauty we seek,  
become the change we wish to see.

Let us bring that change to life on the page.  
Channel our inner superhero and render it in chalk.

For after all, there are...

“Hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.”

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It's safe to say that many people,  
Perhaps some people here today..

Were not encouraged to understand art-making,  
or for that matter prayer, this way.

That is, to see creative activity as expressing  
reverence to God or to Life.

Some of us might have been taught that to make art  
was selfish or frivolous or attention-seeking.

But, understood in the light of spiritual growth,  
creativity is perhaps the furthest thing from an ego-trip.

It is a connection with something far beyond  
our own ego-concerns...

It is an invitation to engage with “the forces that create and  
uphold life,” to borrow a phrase from our Unitarian  
Universalist sources.

It is an invitation to nurture and grow ourselves  
into people of courage and maturity...who can engage  
more fully and fearlessly in the work of love and justice.

Creativity is the kneeling and the kissing of the ground...  
The ground of the Earth and of Being Itself...

It is the loving that gives us life...  
That shapes us and renews our spirit  
even in times of darkness.

It's my hope that in the coming days,  
each of us may find some measure  
of that life-giving Creative Love,

In at least one of the hundreds of ways.

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