

# The Art of Spirituality. The Spirituality of Art.

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Reading: Elizabeth Gilbert "[Big Magic](#)", page 220-221

"An artist is someone who draws attention to what is praiseworthy in the Universe",  
[William Ball](#), author of the book "*A sense of direction*".

## Who am I?

My name is Jewels Krauss, I am an actor, director, and movement coach, and currently preparing for an Expressive Arts Therapy training this fall. I sing in the choir. I am a member of FirstU.

## Why am I delivering this sermon?

A few months ago, Dallas and I were talking about me stepping into a worship leader role (which I will do over the course of the summer) and our conversation led us to talking about art and creativity and spirituality, themes that I am very passionate about. Dallas said "you should hold a sermon about that." And here I am.

This sermon is part personal reflection and part, hopefully, inspiration. It is centered around my personal journey with art and creativity and how spirituality fits into all of that.

## How did it all start for me?

I was raised in what was back then a conservative Christian home. Sermons were filled with words like 'battle of faith', 'hardship', "commitment", "sacrifices"; and so forth. Yet, I was the one in the choir moving my hips to the rhythm and then being called out on that afterwards. The lesson was if you wanted to praise God you must do so orderly and respectfully (and somehow that meant, very still, very stern, very somber.)

When I was in my early teens I saw a play and was spellbound. I couldn't speak for days. I was mesmerized by the ability of those actors to transform themselves and us, the audience. I wanted to be up there. I wanted to be one of them. I wanted to be someone else.

But art, in my household, and particularly in that church, was "of the earth". It was bad. It is where the church and faith and God and state was questioned (which is very true for German theater). Art was deemed dangerous, and not an expression of spirituality. If I became an artist my dad feared I would become an atheist. Well, he ended up being right about that part. I did indeed stop believing in a white male punishing (very moody

and unforgiving) God but not because of art, but because I couldn't understand how creativity, the actual thing that got us here in the first place (the very thing God himself must have used to make us). How that could be deemed bad? Or anything less than a celebration of the divine. I learnt very quickly though that the core of creativity wasn't welcomed in this church. The core being: questions. Asking questions and being curious were considered works of the devil. Well, I had lots of them, questions that is, and they kept on coming. So I left the church and my home country. I left in the search for a divine essence that could hold both – the sacredness of creativity. (I want to add that since then the church of my upbringing has changed and evolved. My Mom is watching this sermon and my parents have been very supportive of my creative journey.)

### **How making art changed, and also me**

Initially my pull to be on stage was about being part of something magical, of creating a new world and allowing others to enter it with me. But it was also about being able to be someone else, other than me. I wanted to be seen, I wanted to be in the spotlight, I wanted the attention of a moment that can be so drawn out in theater. (not like in real life where the moments just fly by). On stage a moment is full of intention and attention and tension – ugh, the best. As I aged however, as I became more and more grounded in who I was as Jewels, my artistry and why and how I showed up in the rehearsal room shifted deeply as well. It became less about me and more about the profound practice of making art. If we let it.

Which brings me to **The spirituality of art.**

One of my most transformative art education was working with the [MT Space](#) theatre in Kitchener Waterloo. I was blessed to be working with Majdi Bou-Matar, the former Artistic Director of the MT Space. His methodology centered around the power of the collective. It focused on bringing your own story, culture, and your accent into the room while at the same time giving yourself over to the thing that wants to come through. He didn't want us to leave ourselves outside the rehearsal room to become a certain way in order to tell our story. He wanted all of us to bring all of what makes us 'us'. The process would start with an idea and then through improv we would create a script. So there was *nothing* at first and then something magical at the end because all of us in the room tapped into this piece that was calling us. The work is created by and with everyone in the room. Every single offering is needed, every mistake moves us forward, or might open another avenue. The work is born by the effort of the collective. It is not an individualistic journey. We bring our individual selves to the table so that something else can be birthed through the collective using all of our voices. And sometimes that means we need to wait. Or sit in/literally move through disagreement. Sometimes we

need to wade through the waters of terrible offers, to find the gem, the beginning of something. But most of all, it requires of us to keep showing up, open palms and heart and to stay out of our own way as much as possible.

I was in rehearsal with Majdi while I was going through the depths of my divorce. I was raw and vulnerable and didn't give a hoot anymore about things that were important to me before... aka looking good or sounding smart. I had no energy for that. I was drained and sad and scared in life and all I could muster was show up for the work, as I was. My improv was gutsy and ugly and real. It was the freest and also the most emotionally raw I have ever been. I think i did my best work then. Not because I was hurting (not because art needs to hurt, I think that myth needs to die; that's another sermon) but because I allowed myself to play from a place I hadn't played before – the place of surrender. I gave myself to the show in a way I hadn't done before. Not from a place of *'I want to be a good actor'* but from a place of *'use me, i am here, show me what needs to be done'*. At one point Majdi came up to me in the middle of an improv, got right into my face and said “stop Jewels!” He was an expert at seeing when actors took themselves out of the play and got into their heads. It would literally hurt him watching that. Before that rehearsal I would be intimidated by his honesty, but in that moment I got that he wasn't talking to me, the artist, telling *me* to stop, but to that part of me that takes me out of play. The part that questions my impulse, that analyzes my instinct and judges before giving it a try. I saw him, and him seeing me and it changed something profoundly in me.

To me that was a spiritual awakening. And it happened while doing art.

### **What is play?**

The Oxford dictionary defines it as *“to engage in activity for enjoyment and recreation rather than a serious or practical purpose.”*

Though to me play is quite a serious business. There is a lightness that comes from engaging in 'play' in the rehearsal room. But in order to do so the wider context has to be that play is allowed, that mistakes are welcomed, that the goal is the journey. In some rehearsal rooms I have been in, play almost seemed childish or bad. The goal seemed to be to set things in stone as fast as possible, to get out of the play part ASAP!! Because that part is uncomfortable. We don't know yet if it will work out. It might very well not. As artists we yearn to know. We want to know where we are going on stage and why and what is coming next. To not know then requires deep breaths and grounded feet. It requires of us to hold our own doubts, and worries, and self-consciousness, and insecurities, hold them as we also listen to what is needed of us. It requires of us to hear the director's *'no, that is not it'* not as in *'you don't have what it*

*takes'* but as in *'keep digging, we're not there yet'*. It requires of us artists to hold both *'this sucks'* and *'we got what it takes to find the answer'*. It asks of us to keep standing in that thoughtstorm again and again, digging our toes deeper into the present moment while keeping our focus on that which has not been created yet. Rehearsals therefore are about holding the possibility for magic alongside the uncertainty of success. It is truly a wild and tender and wondrous ride.

.. such is life.

Which brings me to **The art of spirituality.**

In rehearsal, I've trained my mind muscles enough to be able to hold that uncertainty with excitement and wonder now. When I hear a director say *"I don't know if this works out but let's give it a go"*, my spine stands up straight and my senses are fully alert. I am ready to jump in. I am ready to see what happens. I am willing to figure it out as we go.

*"We fail boldly.[...] On the other side of every failure is wisdom." William Ball*

Funny that I am often not like that in 'real' life. In life, uncertainty makes my spine curl down, inward, and my mind can weigh me down rather than charge my legs for the jump. Jumping in, like I do in rehearsals. I noticed that distinction recently. And it made me wonder.

In the rehearsal room of course the stakes are limited and overseeable. Worst thing, I get fired, nobody likes me, everyone thinks I am a fraud, stupid or outright incapable. Okay. In life though, the repercussions of mistakes can be bigger of course. And they can mean something about my personhood, my value as a person, rather than "just" my artistry. So it's, well, personal.

However, I wondered what if I took a little of the play energy into my everyday life? What if I allowed myself to be more gracious about my mistakes? What if the goal was to explore? To try? And to experience what *trying* is like? Just that. Not the outcome. Not the final performance. But this moment. The rehearsal.

There is a saying that goes *"life is not a dress rehearsal"*. Meaning don't wait for the curtain call (theater lingo for top of the show), live now. And yet, what if we were allowed to see life as a dress rehearsal? Dress rehearsal is when we throw ourselves into the play for the first time with everything – lights, costumes, set design, music, make-up. All hands on deck. Everyone is in. All senses are sharp. Our play animal is in full charge.

We've rehearsed, we've learnt the lines, we know our blocking, and now, we get to play. Not knowing how it will all go.

To my students I often say "instant forgiveness" as they jump into an improv in the rehearsal room or just before a show. Instant forgiveness. That sucked, thank you, move on. That was great, thank you, move on. This worked, thanks, let's use it. Or, that really didn't work at all, let's not do that again, thank you, move on. Move on. Try again. And again. And again.

Yet in life, I so often linger. Linger on the mistakes. On the things I said or did that were silly/not great/embarrassing/wrong. Instant forgiveness. Thank you and move on. When I meditate and patterns show up, thank you, and move on. Try again. Back to the breath.

When I date people and old patterns emerge or a relationship doesn't work out, instant forgiveness and move on.

What if our life was a rehearsal room/dress rehearsal? What if we got to play – in all aspects of life? What if that wasn't only tethered to a stage or an easel or a notebook? What if each moment was a curtain call? Instant forgiveness. Move on. Try again.

What if? What would emerge for you? What could shift?

Art is spiritual because it requires us to step out of our narrative of what is possible. It requires us to dream something into existence that doesn't exist until we do it. And for that to happen we need to be in the present moment, aware of our breath, aware of each other, listening deeply, ready to receive and vulnerable enough to share our offering. And maybe, maybe something will take us by the hand and use us. And maybe, maybe we let it happen. And maybe we soften into looking foolish or silly. And maybe we get to see that in the end moving beyond that, is the whole point. And maybe we then turn around and look at ourselves in new ways.

I think we need that now more than ever.

*"An artist is someone who draws attention to what is praiseworthy in the Universe"* – may you find the things that are praiseworthy in this universe and do just that. Praise it in the way only you can.

May it be so.