



Creativity—A Human Right

Clay Nelson © 15 July 2018

On our last day in Geneva I was running out of museums to visit while Rachel toiled at the UN. I was down to either the history of the watch or the history of the of the International Committee of the Red Cross, better known as the ICRC. I chose the latter. It turned out to be the best of the many museums I had visited. I was deeply moved by the permanent exhibit on its humanitarian work.

Since its creation in 1863, the ICRC's sole objective has been to ensure protection and assistance for victims of armed conflict and strife. It does so through its direct action around the world, as well as by encouraging the development of international humanitarian law and promoting respect for such law by governments and all weapon bearers. Its story is about the development of humanitarian action, the Geneva Conventions and the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

In an engaging manner using sophisticated multi-media, the exhibit told of the ICRC's work to convince governments to adopt the first Geneva Convention in 1864. This treaty obliged armies to care for wounded soldiers, whatever side they were on, and introduced a unified emblem for the medical services: a red cross on a white background. In 1907 the second Geneva Convention was adopted to extend protections to sailors in maritime war.

During World War I, deficiencies in protecting prisoners of war and political prisoners became evident. In 1929 the third Geneva Convention was adopted concerning the treatment of prisoners.

The exhibit then spent considerable time on what the ICRC confesses its great moral failure. While it was aware of the atrocities being perpetrated on the Jews, they had no legal framework as an organisation to intervene. At that time the Geneva Convention only protected combatants in war, not civilians. In 1949, this omission was corrected with the fourth Geneva Convention concerning the protection of civilians. Amongst other things it gave ICRC representatives access to prisoners of war and political prisoners that they might advocate for them and keep them linked to their families.

You might be wondering what this story has to do with creativity? The final exhibit was in a room with no audio visual bells and whistles. There were just small niches in the walls—a lot of them. In each was an object of art, some primitive, some sophisticated, but all beautiful. They were made by prisoners out of whatever material they could find: bits of wire, scraps of wood and paper, fragments of cloth, even a bar of soap. They had turned rubbish into something beautiful. Each had then been given to their ICRC representative who was the one person in their life who treated them with respect, helping them to remember their humanity. I spent a long time in this room. It felt like a pilgrimage as I visited every niche as if each was a shrine dedicated to creativity being a fundamental human right. I left touched by the sacredness of the room and surprised that I had never considered creativity as being a human right, but of course it is. Creativity has been part and parcel of our being from the beginning.

Forty thousand years ago humans blew red ochre handprints on to cave walls. Over 300 caves in Spain and France contain mind-blowing art. This art is found from Romania to

Africa to Argentina; from the pyramids to Stonehenge.

Matthew Fox, a progressive Episcopal priest, writes in his book *Creativity: Where the Divine and the Human Meet*, “We are creators at our very core. Only creating can make us happy, for in creating we tap into the deepest powers of self and universe and the Divine Self. We become co-creators, that is, we create with the other forces of society, universe, and the Godself when we commit to creativity.”

Science writer Jonah Lehrer, in his book *Imagination: How Creativity Works*, echoes Fox less poetically. He simply says, “Creativity is our natural state.”

I can’t argue with either, for now it seems obvious creativity is a human right, but why had that escaped my awareness?

Part of the answer may be my failing to see myself as creative. Perhaps someone stepped on my budding creativity as a child. I don’t know. If so, I don’t remember. The only possibility was my violin teacher who had a stroke and died after my lesson when I was six. It was not surprising as he spent most of my lesson in red-faced fury. In fairness, my efforts were awful.

Whatever the reason, I had plenty of evidence that I wasn’t creative. I don’t play an instrument anymore, my singing is hardly melodious, if I have managed to draw a straight line it is with a ruler, having little sense of rhythm my dancing is at best amusing; my attempts at poetry have been painfully prosaic.

Now I am fully aware that my evidence was in truth excuses to not recognise, honour or exercise my creativity. Being creative is not a competition. I once enjoyed playing the tuba in the band even though it only had a humble role. I love singing as much as anyone no matter how off-key. With photoshop I can not only draw straight lines but indulge my artistic whims. I enjoy dancing no matter how gracelessly. My poetry still sucks. I’ll just enjoy those with the gift like TS Eliot, Mary Oliver and Emily Dickinson.

I think there is another reason I and others fail to see their creativity. In this particular, early 21st century era of human history there is a myriad of opportunities to become alienated from what is natural, to forget our connectedness, to grow distant from more grounded, holistic ways of living that might more readily nurture and call forth our creativity. We live in a society that doesn’t typically invite us to be creative. In other words, we are being cut off from our natural state, denied our human right.

There are probably numerous reasons for this. One that bothers me is the high value that has been placed on standardised testing in schools. We have been teaching our children, with unprecedented singular focus, how to comply with standards determined in bureaucratic offices. We have been educating our children into a very specific kind of intelligence, into a very rigid mould. We have been educating our children to think alike. We have not been educating our children to think around, underneath, above, through and beyond standards. We have not been educating our children to transcend standards, which is precisely what creativity is for, and precisely what we need as a society in order to solve our most pressing problems and to make advances in science and technology, business and finance, the arts, religion—any field that impacts our lives and life on the planet. Jonah Lehrer describes human creativity as a bundle of distinct mental processes that combine to give rise to new thoughts, new images, new visions, new combinations, new connections, new ways of relating, new ways of solving problems, new melodies, new harmonies, and so on. This is our natural state, but we have been not currently educating our children into their natural state. If anything, we are educating them out of their natural state. And tests of American school

children over decades verify this. While their intelligence is growing, their ability to be creative is falling and has been do so steadily since 1990.

I can see why there has been a push to standardise our children. They can more easily be slotted into the economic system with less disruption, but the price for doing so is high. It is a means of depriving our children of their human right to be creative for their benefit and for all. For that reason I am delighted that New Zealand has only recently abandoned national standards. In a world that values standardisation, I think there is another reason we fail to claim our natural state of creativity. It's risky.

The literature on group creativity in institutions says in a corporate science lab, in a school or university faculty, in government, in congregations—any place where people work together to reach certain goals—over time certain ways of thinking tend to become dominant. Certain methods of research or teaching tend to become standard. Certain business models tend to become more or less given. The way we do things, the way we think about things, the way we talk about things, the theories we accept as most accurate, the protocols we use—all of it, over time, becomes etched as if in stone. When this is the case, the people involved become boxed in; they become creatures of habit often without recognizing they're just repeating long-established, rote patterns. They become less and less creative, even when they're working in traditionally creative fields.

In order to have and express true insight in such a calcified context, one must become, essentially, an outsider. One must raise their hand and say, "Wait a minute, there's another way." That's risky. it comes with potential costs: marginalization, alienation. What if I meet resistance? What if my boss isn't interested? What if my minister isn't interested? What if I'm perceived to be injecting too much chaos into the system? What if I'm perceived to be a trouble-maker? What if they ignore me? Having and expressing a truly creative insight in an institution that isn't predisposed to innovation always entails some level of risk.

Exercising our natural creative state requires some courage. We might find that courage when we remember the wholeness we felt in past efforts to be creative. We must stop sabotaging ourselves or letting a standardised world stifle our creative urge to be ourselves.

Matthew Fox believes that we must return to an understanding of the artistic and creative urges as inherently spiritual. He laments the tendency in the west to make art the purview of professionals and reminds his readers that, in the not so distant past, people had little opportunity to simply "watch" or "listen" to music or paintings or dance or theatre. Before the advent of recording devices, most people made their own music, learned to draw and dance, and used their creativity in a variety of simple ways. Today much of our creative spirit has been dampened by the tendency to think we have to be talented or strive for perfection in our creative endeavours. But as poet Lisa Colt writes, "perfection is nowhere" and that's just what Matthew Fox is trying to teach about art and creativity and its place in our spiritual lives.

It's a powerful message and one I want to reiterate here. The act of creation — whether a painting, a poem, a dance, a sermon, a lesson plan, or even a government report — this act of creating is one of the most spiritual things we can do. Why is this? Because our spirituality is, I believe, that part of our being which is continually evolving and growing in response to the world around us and the world within us. If we stifle our creativity, we run the risk of smothering our spirits. Spirit needs the lively interaction of creative hearts and hands and minds to keep it alive and growing. People can actually die when deprived of beauty. And I have seen the spiritual death that occurs when people lose or have forced out of them the ability to be creative.

So, I challenge us all to take the risk of being creative, and let's see what it does to our spirits. If we can recognize that each of us will express our creativity in our own unique ways, take failure with good humour, learn from our mistakes, and keep trying new things, we will become a creative community making a difference in the world. It is our human right. It is our natural state.