



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Courageous Creativity

Clay Nelson © 9 June 2019

I wonder how many of you think like I have done for too much of my life that you are not creative. I'm not sure where I got the idea I wasn't. After all, when I was in fifth grade Mrs Stapleton took her class to a clay pit. We had to dig up a shovelful. Grind it with a pestle and mortar. Filter it through ever finer wire screens until we had a pile of clay powder. Then we took our efforts back to the class room where she had set up a potter's wheel. After we soaked our clay to make it malleable, she demonstrated how to use the wheel. Looked easy, but as we tried to turn our lump of clay into art, we learned it wasn't, at least for me. My attempt at a vase was hardly a thing of beauty. It had no symmetry and a noticeable lean to the left. Then we had to glaze it. My lack of skill did little to turn it into a Grecian urn. I couldn't help but compare it to those of my classmates. I was embarrassed by my efforts compared to theirs. After glazing them, Mrs Stapleton took them to be fired in a pottery kiln. When she returned the final products to us, she apologised that mine had been left in the kiln too long. The glaze had burned and curled. But she then praised the vase for its distinctive beauty. She would later submit it to the county fair art competition. It received a ribbon. Upon its return from the fair, it resided on the family mantelpiece for years, no longer a vase, but an objet d'art.

In spite of all of Mrs Stapleton's passionate dedication to unleashing her students' creativity, I remained unconvinced as to mine. In my eyes I was merely an accidental artist without a muse. Only the fates, having fun at my expense, had made my lump of clay travesty a thing of beauty.

Years later I reflected on why I was so determined in my resistance to my teacher's fierce belief in my creativity. The simple answer is, I was afraid. If I accepted my creativity as a part of who I am I would have to live perpetually outside of my comfort zone. I would have to expose my vulnerability to the world. Having been frequently bullied by my peers and even a few teachers, my eleven-year-old self only wanted to conform and blend in. To be invisible was my ideal survival strategy. To live creatively risked unwanted exposure. Best to remain safely behind walls of conformity.

That was not easy to do in my family. My parents were idiosyncratic iconoclasts who chose to live life on their own terms. Conforming to societal norms was an anathema to them. My father was a college professor who challenged his students to think critically and outside the box. When a student turned in a paper full of society's expected Pablum, he was not above noting in the margin that it was bullshit. He had a creative nonverbal way of expressing the same at bureaucratic dean's meetings by wearing bowties with Mickey Mouse adorning them. My mother was not much better. She had no filter between what her brain thought and her mouth said. Diplomacy was not her thing. She was blatantly, even if uncomfortably, honest with everyone. They both had an uncanny ability to make their adolescent son cringe. I, therefore, was nonplussed by how much people were drawn to them. They were respected and appreciated, not that they seemed to care what people thought either way.

To whatever degree I have accepted my creativity Mrs Stapleton saw in me, I give credit to my parents who demonstrated the courage it takes to do so. Without courage our creative spark will never ignite a life worth living.

All this is background to why I was blown away by my recent visit to the Frances Hodgkins exhibit at the Auckland Art Gallery. Frances was born 150 years ago in Dunedin, but spent much of her life as an expatriate in Europe. The exhibition traces Frances Hodgkins' creative and peripatetic life through France, Morocco and Spain to her final days in England, examining the influence of location on her development as a modernist painter and the notion of travel and journeying as a source of artistic inspiration.

Her paintings, where every brush stroke was intentional, and the way she chose to live her life with considerable personal sacrifice to further her art demonstrates a courageous creativity beyond all bounds. As it was a difficult life, she once wrote, *"I feel that if I had known what was before me, I should never have had the courage to begin"*.

I'm certainly not an art critic but what struck me about her work is she defied being put into any categorical niche that conformed to the artistic norms of the age. She would write a friend, *I have had to choose between showing my work in the older established shows and the smaller exclusive modern ones with whom I am in sympathy. I prefer not to show at all rather than exhibit with the older traditional set with whom I have nothing in common.* If she had chosen the former it would have been considerably more profitable, but she preferred a hand to mouth subsistence than compromise her creative spark, her divinity.

I am in awe of her courage. It turns out that creativity and courage are closely connected. Creativity and courage are closely connected. Creativity – changing the status quo, thinking independently, going against conventions -- demands courage. Courage is another word for creativity.

There are forces in our world that do not welcome creativity and actively seek to suppress it. It is suppressed when we listen to the people who tell us "you can't do that." Many dreams and hopes are dashed by others who not only don't encourage our wild imaginings, our inner spirits, but actually shoot down our ideas and ways of being.

Status quo thinking is another culprit. It causes us to internalise the attitude that: "that's the way it's supposed to be because that's the way it's always been." Spiritual communities can start to believe that if the cups have always been stacked a certain way, the walls have always been a certain colour, or that we don't have religious education classes for children in the summer that: "that's the way it's supposed to be." A society can get stuck in this thinking too. It can come to believe that because marriage has long been between a man and a woman that: "that's the way it's supposed to be."

Related to status quo thinking is following the rules. Sometimes we have to colour outside the lines. Rosa Parks was supposed to sit in the back of the bus. Henry David Thoreau refused to pay his poll tax because he was an abolitionist and opposed to the Mexican-American War and he ended up in jail. On the other hand, don't run a red light on the way home from church and tell the officer it was your minister's fault. I'm of course talking about acts of conscience and individual expression.

There are many creativity killers. Interestingly, individuals who are highly creative exhibit a very particular and quite different set of traits that resist them. These include:

- The ability to embrace ambiguity and chaos
- High motivation despite obstacles
- Connectedness
- Courage
- Curiosity and thirst for knowledge
- High energy
- Imagination
- Highly intuitive
- Nonconformist
- Passionate
- Perceive the world differently
- See possibility with an open mind and heart
- Positive attitude
- Risk-taker
- Sense of humour
- Vision
- Being fully present
- Childlike playfulness

There is something interesting about these traits. Most of them are religious values or spiritual concepts. And many of them are key aspects of Unitarian Universalism. Many of them are qualities we try to nurture in our community here. These are qualities we identify as being part of a rich spiritual life, and qualities that contribute to the betterment of our relationships and the well-being of the world.

In fact, most cultures recognize a correlation between creativity and spirituality. Julia Cameron, who wrote the book, *The Artist's Way*, says: *Creativity is a spiritual force. The force that drives the green fuse through the flower, as Dylan Thomas defined his idea of the life force, is the same urge that drives us toward creation. There is a central will to create that is part of our human heritage and potential. Because creation is always an act of faith, and faith is a spiritual issue, so is creativity. As we strive for our highest selves, our spiritual selves, we cannot help but be more aware, more proactive, and more creative.*

Unitarian minister Dorothy Boroush wrote,
*Divinity comes to me when I am most creative,
when I am thinking things and doing things
that reach beyond myself
– not knowing,
Only hoping, dreaming –
wanting revelations to connect,
support and nourish.*

One of the best ways to get in touch with this creative spirit – to think and do things that reach beyond ourselves - is through tinkering. That word “tinker” isn’t used a lot today. Today it’s considered a quaint past-time for retirees and people with too much time on their hands, and the term has largely fallen out of use. Yet author Alec Foege describes tinkering as a time-honoured tradition and one we could use more of. While he was thinking of

American tinkerers like Benjamin Franklin, Samuel Morse, Charles Goodyear, Thomas Edison, and the Wright Brothers, I'm reminded of Burt Munro who tinkered in his Invercargill shed with his Indian Scout motorcycle so it would eventually break several speed records on the Bonneville salt flats. There are some modern day tinkerers too. These are people like Jeff Bezos, the e-commerce entrepreneur who founded Amazon. Bezos has been quoted as saying: "Innovation is disruption." He certainly ought to know. Innovation disrupts our regular way of doing things, our entrenched patterns. It is a place where the spirit, the breath of life, that which animates our lives, can surge up.

The truth is we all have something of that creative spirit – of the tinkerer -- in us. We may not be exercising it as much as we could be or as much as we would like. We may not give ourselves enough space to allow the divine to enter through our creativity. We may not give ourselves enough credit for having the creative impulse in the first place.

So I encourage and invite each of you to give some thought to the ways you are already creative in your everyday lives. Notice the small and large ways you already innovate. Is it in the way you dress, the way you think, the way you arrange your home, the imagination you bring to the workplace, the way you raise your children, the way you solve certain kinds of problems? How does your creativity connect you to something beyond yourself, to something of beauty and wonder?

Take some time each day to savour your own imagination and even cultivate it further. Dance, sing, write, play with your kids, tell stories and jokes, take something apart and use it to make something else. Take time to give thanks for your creativity. It is a marvellous gift if we only have the courage to unwrap it.