

Unfolding Creativity

Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD May 21, 2023

In my early years I spent cherished time in woodworking shops – large rooms filled with table saws and belt sanders, collections of chisels, sandpaper, and clamps covering work benches, the aromatic scent of wood finish filling the air as the floor gathered a layer of dust and the thin curls of chiseled wood. I grew up around artists and artwork – my mom a celebrated woodworker. I saw the finished pieces, yes – intricate, gilded frames crafted to enclose colorful paintings and charcoal sketches, or artfully crafted coffee tables with curved, textured, painted legs and mahogany tops. I also saw behind-the-scenes – the rough sketches of imagined pieces that may or may not have come to fruition, the sweat running down an artist’s brow as she sanded and sanded and sanded until her imperfect yet beautifully crafted piece matched the vision she held within. As I grew older, I found this synonymous, in a way, with life. We spend our days hunched over the work benches of our hearts and souls and minds – chiseling, sanding, sawing, and gluing as we craft our own meaning making, our own theologies, our own livelihoods, morals, intentions and purpose, each new day crafting who we are. It takes intention and mistakes and rough sketches and unused wood that is tossed to the wayside. We see the pain of depression chiseled away at while something delicate and handsome is produced; we note the rough edges of a difficult childhood gently sanded away, day in and day out, until a smooth and burnished adulthood is made.

We need not go far to observe the abundance of art offered to us – intricate architecture peppering city streets, colorful paintings of still life lining the walls of museums, novels narrating war or poverty or the ailments of young love, music echoing the laments of joys and of heartbreak. Sometimes we find that one piece that leaves a lasting imprint on our hearts and souls. To me, it was a painting originated decades ago by Pablo Picasso – one of the bust of a woman in lamentation cast in shades of black and blue. I know not what the painting was called nor where I saw it, but it will remain with me in my heart for the rest of my days. In that painting I saw mirrored in the eyes of the sorrowful subject the same pain I witnessed in my

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aunt two decades ago before she tragically died of suicide. I later learned that this painting came from a period in Picasso's life that was influenced after the suicide of his own close friend, let us hold in our hearts Carles Casagemas.

What made this piece of art so impactful? Picasso chiseled away at his pain and in doing so crafted art that spurred meaning and introspection for passersby decades later. The art connected me to one of the most painful, vulnerable times in my life. That painting did not hide from sorrow and pain or present a superficial façade of delight or exultation but authentically embraced that heavy suffering we each experience. It provided beauty not in perfection or in superficial aesthetics, but in genuineness, the emotions of the artist reflected in the paint strokes that crafted those eyes in mourning. There was sorrowful intent in what the artist produced, and a painting that could never be replicated – the blue-black face an artful reflection of Picasso's own unique, distinctive pain.

I frame my life around the lessons of woodworkers and of Picasso – of artists of all media. That is life – we are the subject, the protagonist, the object of study and the artist. Let us craft verse, stanza, and rhyme. I aspire to be the woodworker, everyday hammering away at who I am in order to create who I want to become. Each day I work to sand away some creeping insecurities, to carve renewed happiness from tarnished wood akin to crippling anxieties. I strive to be Picasso, pouring my heart and soul into everything I do producing genuine, unique, inspired beauty – the beauty that we each produce, not necessarily of artwork, but of authentic living. I think of my response to his inspired artwork and am reminded of how far what we design ripples out into the world.

As we work to craft and shape our lives let us pause and reflect on the cracked pot from our Story for All Ages for we, too, are wildly imperfect. We, too, may tell ourselves stories of brokenness instead of beauty. Yet what the pot understood to be a flaw was instead the very thing that allowed it to bring forth flowers. Even though it could not carry water, through its leaking cracks it could nourish a flourishing and lively garden in a way no perfect pot could –

bringing beauty to the world. The cracks nurtured blooming flowers. Through imperfection came creativity.¹ Think of the piercing eyes in Picasso's sorrowful painting – brokenness born of mourning now held eternal in art. Think of a tarnished relationship inspiring poetry, or a bout of depression turning a journal into a private memoir.

This leads me to reflect on the words of actor Matthew Fox, “Art as meditation reminds people – so that they will never forget – that the most beautiful thing a potter produces is... the potter.”² In healing, Picasso's true accomplishment was not this blue lady, but the man he became as he crafted her and healed from his own grief. The woodworker's final product is not her coffee table, but the beauty and inspiration she stokes within while working on her craft. Each of our days is a strung together thread of creations both significant and insignificant, both internal and external. Let us find ourselves in the act of making – while crafting meals, board reports, or murmured prayers. These become art when we attach meaning to them, and they become life changing when met with intention. With this meaning and intention held in each of our days, we become genuine, authentic, innovative, inspiring – everything that an artist needs to be successful.

I invite you to think of your favorite novel or memoir or television series or movie. At this moment I ask us you to consider, are you your own protagonist, or your own antagonist? I aspire to be my own protagonist in this novel that is my life, that is our lives, akin to my favorite fictional heroines – overcoming seemingly insurmountable hardships, turning obstacles into accomplishments and pain into wisdom – that narrative of which we are the inevitable victor, where we are ultimately invincible, stronger because of life's hardships. To be the antagonist, conversely, is to block our own stories, to fight against that which we are offered, derailing opportunities, and choosing easy yet detrimental hardship instead of difficult yet life-giving growth. Who are you in this novel of life? The protagonist or the antagonist? The victor or the menace? The life-giving, or the life-taking? Let us write our own narrative, shape our own lives -

¹ A Traditional Tale “The Cracked Pot”

² *Original Blessing* by Matthew Fox

taking up the pen of determination, the pencil of authenticity, the paintbrush of intention, the chisel of uniqueness.

Picasso and coffee tables, cracked pots and brave heroines. I put these musings into practice in my mid-twenties. For me, that was a tender and vulnerable decade of crafting, constructing, and designing. My theology shifted as I let go of decades of atheism to craft a budding understanding of a loving God. I shaped my vocation by leaving behind my education in healthcare to instead study anthropology and subsequently enter seminary and begin a life dedicated to ministry. Just as I watched my mother do in the woodshops of my childhood, I was sanding, chiseling, gluing, and sawing away at the life I had known to form the life I held true within me. And yet I had not yet done so with the finesse of Picasso. Ministry was so new to me that I lacked the ability to be fully genuine, to bring my vulnerabilities into my craft, to let go of that need to impress and present a learned façade. And in my journey, I faced one of the biggest hurdles on the pathway to Unitarian Universalist ministry – receiving preliminary fellowship. Part of this process included writing and presenting a sermon to a panel. So, I gathered up that insecurity and that façade and that need to impress and wrote an inauthentic, stiff, overly intellectual sermon which I presented as a representation of the person I thought I should be. I preached this sermon to colleagues and received some of the most negative feedback I had been offered to date. Through tears, angst, and tremors of anxiety, I tried again – that behind the scenes work that I saw at the woodshops of my childhood. This time, I allowed my true self to flow through that pen; I worked to bring myself to the art instead of simply producing what I thought was wanted. I crafted a tender and vulnerable sermon of love, loss, family, and the ancestors; of my own theology and meaning making. Through that art of storytelling, I crafted something genuine, authentic, relatable, and beautiful – I produced those eyes that stared back at me from Picasso’s painting of the blue lady. I received preliminary fellowship, and I remind myself of that painful lesson as I aim to minister authentically in each of my days.

While reflecting on these rather tumultuous days I am reminded of the words of renowned artist Vincent Van Gogh, “Normality is a paved road: It’s comfortable to walk, but no flowers grow on it.”³ We are given a choice – do we want a simple life, or a more arduous yet more beautiful life? Do we want to be passersby on this great blue dot called earth, or do we want to be composers? If we become complacent life becomes mundane – we lose so much if we give up our goal of crafting meaning or beauty or life-giving faith – that which we have been reflecting upon all month. We become unfulfilled – a blank canvass, a discarded piece of wood. Life is an invitation to design – to deeply engage with and interact with all that is around us – even if, like the act of true love, it ultimately leads to grief and pain. It is uncomfortable, but flowers grow.

“We are God’s poem,” wrote Reverend Joel Miller, reflecting on a linguistic interpretation of Paul’s words in the New Testament.⁴ What does it mean to be God’s poem through the lens of Unitarian Universalism and of creativity? Our lives are the stanza, verse, and rhyme of all things sacred and eternal; we are the beautifully imperfect prose of all that is, was, and ever will be, birthed of waterfalls and desert winds. This is reflected in our laughter, our tears, our heartaches, our brokenness. Wildly imperfect and as such, beautiful. Deep pain and profound joy – side by side. We are art – strong and proud as the towering, intricate architecture found scattered along city streets; unassumingly complex and thus handsome as a gilded frame carved from hard, brown wood. So let us traverse those uneven, unsteady gravel roads lined with flowers as Van Gogh suggests, this path of what I imagine to be filled with tulips and rhododendrons and lavender and uneven gravel and potholes – simultaneously beautiful, precarious, and filled with promise. Let us craft, construct, and build – no piece of wood left unchiseled; no canvass left unpainted. We are the art, and we are the artists.

May it be so, and Amen

³ *Soul Matters: Worship Research May 2023*

⁴ “Postcards from Sabbatical,” a sermon by Rev. Joel Miller (Columbus Mennonite Church, Columbus, Ohio)