

## ***The Relationship Between Spirituality and Artistic Expression: Cultivating the Capacity for Imagining***

***By Christine Valters Paintner, Ph.D.***

*The heart of human identity is the capacity and desire for birthing. To be is to become creative and bring forth the beautiful.*

John O'Donohue (1)

In this article I explore the relationship between spirituality, creativity, and the arts, and show that cultivating the arts as a spiritual practice is a path to freeing our imaginations and developing valuable skills for vital living in the world.

### **Defining Spirituality**

There are three dimensions of spirituality that I consider especially relevant to exploring its intersection with artistic expression. First, spirituality can be considered a search for meaning in life. The psychologist Viktor Frankl developed a school of therapy around this profound human need after being in a concentration camp and discovering that those who were able to create a sense of meaningfulness fared much better than those who did not. He described the search for meaning in one's life as "the primary motivational force" in persons. (2) By cultivating a sense of meaning, spirituality can provide an orientation to our lives, a set of values to live by, a sense of direction, and a basis for hope.

Second, spirituality can help us to cultivate a relationship to mystery. In our search for meaning we discover a hunger for something that is beyond the limits of our capacity to fully describe in language. We come to recognize there is a depth dimension to the world beyond surface appearances. This is the presence that great mystics have described as the God beyond all names. It also is an awareness of the presence of love in the world where there might only have been hate; hope where there might only have been despair; being where there might have been nothing. Spirituality facilitates an encounter with the presence of mystery in our lives and nurtures a relationship with it.

Third, spirituality is about transformation and should challenge us to stretch and grow through commitment to a set of practices. In our search for meaning and relationship to mystery, spiritual traditions have advised particular ways of entering more deeply into this

search through a set of practices or disciplines. Practices help us to cultivate a way of being intentional about our spirituality and help us shape our lives around the meaning and mystery we are discovering through this commitment.

## **Defining Creativity**

Creativity is a powerful shaping force in human life. It is an intangible human capacity of a transcendent nature – it moves us beyond ourselves in a similar way to spirituality. The psychologist Rollo May describes creativity as “the process of bringing something new into being,” (3) something that did not exist before – an idea, a new arrangement, a painting, a story. Ellen Dissanayake, an anthropologist, suggests that the act of creating is actually a biological need that is basic to human nature. She describes creating as “making special.” (4) Creativity includes the arts, but really encompasses the whole of our lives. Every act in which we “make special” can be a creative one.

Carl Jung believed images are expressions of deep human experience and our authentic selves. They are the natural and primary language for the psyche and only secondarily do we move to conceptual thought. Jung saw images as clues to the un-lived life that move toward some form of outward expression and urged others to look at the images of their lives in a symbolic way so as to reveal deeper meanings and their fuller, more authentic selves. (5) The arts help us to access this storehouse of images within ourselves and create a sense of meaning.

700 years ago the Sufi poet Rumi wrote about two intelligences. The first is called acquired knowledge or book learning. It is the kind of intelligence that helps us to get ahead in the world and is tested to see how well we retain information. Rumi describes it as “getting always more marks on your preserving tablets.” This is the intelligence of our schooling and striving to succeed. Rumi also describes another kind of tablet or intelligence: “one already completed and preserved inside you./ A spring overflowing its springbox.” This intelligence is not the kind that moves from the outside in, as in traditional learning. “This second knowing is a fountainhead from within you, moving out.” (6) Creativity is about honoring another kind of intelligence that originates from within us rather than from outside sources.

In our own times, Howard Gardner, a professor of education, says there are not one or even two intelligences, but perhaps eight or more. The American educational system emphasizes linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligence, rooted in a left-brained, highly verbal and analytical mode. This emphasis is measurable through testing. However, Gardner claims, we also have spatial, kinesthetic, and musical intelligence. Others include interpersonal, intrapersonal, natural, and possibly even existential. (7) With so many potential faculties of knowing, we limit ourselves by accessing only two or three. What could we discover from the spiritual dimension of our lives if we expanded our access to ways of knowing and used multiple entry points to experience and create meaning? Painting, movement, poetry, and song all draw on these different kinds of intelligence and serve us well in the spiritual life.

## The Power of Imagination

We live in a time when our capacity for imagining is being thwarted by television programs and video games that encourage us to tune out of life and become passive consumers rather than active imaginers. We have become paralyzed by our own busyness. Everything about our culture encourages us to keep busy. We do not slow down enough to really contemplate things and listen to the ways we are being drawn to live in response. The news gives us 30-second sound bites that render us feeling helpless, rather than empowering us to act. Yet we live in a time desperately hungry for new ideas and visions, new possibilities in a world gone awry with war and ecological destruction.

Our imaginations are constrained and narrowed by the limiting ideas and contexts in which we live. We are lulled into passivity, and our creative capacity is dulled through a constant barrage of media images and frenzied life pace. In a culture that demands we hurry up and do, produce, move faster and higher up the ladder, become breathless, worship speed and efficiency, it can be a real challenge to find space. And yet, for me, here is another important place where the spiritual life and the creative life converge—in the profound need and longing to make space and listen to the depths of experience that call me beyond myself in search of greater meaning in my life, into a relationship with mystery, and toward greater cultivation of spiritual practices. We can't simply "find space" —instead we have to be intentional about creating space in our lives.

The imagination is fundamental to all human activity; indeed, exercising imagination is the creative and critical, intuitive and integrative process central to human becoming. It gives us the power to remember the past, to shape our desires, and to project possibilities for the future. The scholar Wendy Wright aptly describes the imagination as:

the crucial capacity of the human person to create a world – either the familiar world of the everyday or a world not yet visible. Our relentless human search for new ways of being and relating, our dreams of beauty, our longings for mercy and justice. . .(8)

As such, the imagination is the central faculty of creativity, allowing us to imagine the unseen and give form to the new. The imagination is what allows us to see meaning hidden in the depths of the world. Creativity is at the heart of many human pursuits: art-making, dreaming and discerning our futures, creating loving relationships, playing in our leisure time, generating new ideas in the workplace, building new visions for what is possible for our communities, and working toward justice.

Each time we put together a new class or revise an old one, we engage in a creative act. In fact each class session offers us the opportunity to engage creatively and stay open to new possibilities and create ways for our students to expand, rather than limit, their own imaginations.

How does one become creative? More particularly, how does one birth a life in creative and beautiful ways? What riches lie within the power of imagination and creative activity to nurture education? Freeing the imagination is at the heart of this potent process. One way we can practice freeing the imagination is by engaging in the practice of art-making.

## **Artistic Expression as a Spiritual Practice**

Unfortunately modern, Western culture has largely emphasized the verbal and analytic in our educational processes and has removed the creative arts from everyday experience by professionalizing them. Consumerism further places value only on art that sells, rendering the focus on art-as-product or commodity. Unless we have been trained as artists, too often we shy away from engaging in the arts. Yet the process of art-making itself can be a path of discovery.

While in graduate school studying theology I discovered the therapeutic field of expressive arts and found it to be very liberating. The focus in the expressive arts is on the process of art-making rather than the art product itself. In this way, art-making becomes accessible to anyone, because the creative process is central to the journey of discovery, rather than what the final product will look like. The focus of the expressive arts is not on a specific technique or the quality of the product itself. It is on the power and process of symbolic expression in any of the arts for healing and integration.

The spiritual life, like the expressive arts, is largely about process rather than product. A dominant metaphor for spirituality is the journey, which evokes a sense of constant movement and progression. We never fully arrive but are always unfolding and discovering. Spirituality is also about a process of integration – of slowly bringing the whole of our selves and our experiences to our crafting of meaning.

Engaging in the arts as a spiritual practice means honoring the process of meaning-making, of cultivating a relationship to mystery. Paolo Knill, one of the founders of expressive arts therapy says: “The practice of the arts, as disciplined rituals of play in painting, sculpting, acting, dancing, making music, writing, story-telling, is and always was a safe container, a secure vessel to meet existential themes, pathos and mystery.” (9) The arts do not provide linear explanations of how things function, but point to the complexities and ambiguities of living. They both reveal and conceal and invite us to rely more on intuition than on logic or reason.

When the goal is process over product, the arts can create a safe space for experimentation and for exploration of new possibilities. They also create a meditative space in which one is held in the present moment. The arts afford us insights into life and access to the movements of spirit in our lives that are not available through cognitive ways of knowing. We can suspend our judgments and embrace intuitive and image-centered ways of knowing. The arts not only transfigure the ordinary, but they also are integrative, uniting our intellects with our bodies, emotions, desires, and will. Since the arts are rooted in the existential capacity of the imagination to transcend literal reality, they present us with alternative ways of being and present insights only available through non-cognitive means. In art-making we have the freedom to reclaim our feelings, voice, and truth and give meaningful expression to our commitments, values, and ideas.

By giving attention to the process of art-making we may begin to notice stirrings within ourselves – resistance, insight, joy, sadness — all of which are food for self-insight and spiritual growth. By engaging neglected dimensions of ourselves, we begin to bring a holistic approach to our spirituality and reclaim the inner intelligences and wisdom that Rumi invites us to consider.

Graham Wallas, a social psychologist of the late 19th and early 20th century, suggested that creativity has four main moments or stages to it: preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification. (11) These can be roughly expressed as preparing to do the work, those times when we need to step away from the work for insight to occur, those moments of insight that often are called inspiration, and finally the work of creating itself. The practice of art-making requires spaciousness and time for incubation, which in our busy lives can help us to slow down. There is also a rhythm of receptivity and activity that is central to creativity. Engaging in the arts could help us to be more present in any given moment and to nurture our creative rhythms.

By making the arts a spiritual practice we discipline ourselves to make time for our relationship with the sacred or depth dimension through the conscious act of creating. We slowly learn to surrender to a process greater than ourselves and loosen our tight grip of control. We can cultivate a sense of spontaneity and playfulness that opens up our imaginations to new possibilities. Art-making encourages curiosity and wonder. The arts help to awaken us and enliven us. Engaging in creative acts is a vitalizing activity. The experience of being fully present has been described as being in a state of flow or altered awareness where our sense of time changes. We become lost and absorbed and yet are fully present to what we are doing.

Theologian Jeremy Begbie observes: “The urge to make and enjoy art seems to be universal: the impulse to scratch out images on stone walls, revel in the delight of notes strung together, shape and re-shape words into patterns, and so on.” He goes on to say that these activities go beyond entertainment and self-expression, that “they can also reveal, disclose, open up the world we live in, and in unique ways. In other words, they can be vehicles of discovery.” (10)

The regular practice of art-making is a path of discovery and can help us to cultivate creative ways of being in the world. Ultimately, our greatest creative act is the living of our daily lives. Creativity is about making space and listening deeply to our lives and the world around us; seeing beneath the surface of things to the depth dimension of the world; opening ourselves to the newness that stirs there; developing a relationship to mystery; cultivating a sense of spontaneity and playfulness; and giving form in a loving and intentional way to our commitments. All of these processes contribute in significant ways to the creation of meaning in our lives.

## **Conclusion**

The practice of art-making can inform the way we live. I invite you to consider the ways in which you might engage the creative process more intentionally in your teaching, classes, and mentoring, both through introducing the practices of art-making, in particular, as well as through broader attention to elements that nurture creativity. I leave you with some questions: Do you allow for spaciousness in your teaching to foster a sense of creativity, imagination, and openness to exploration of new and alternate possibilities? Does your educational framework involve a rhythmic balance between receptivity and activity? Do you invite students to engage their different intelligences and ways of knowing? Do you encourage students to consider their intuition when choosing a research project? Are you

able to surrender some level of control and allow the creative process to unfold freely in order to usher in a sense of newness? And in your own spiritual life: In what ways do you tend to your own desire and capacity for birthing? Do you have practices that contribute to the cultivation of meaning and mystery in your life? Do you take time to simply play and be spontaneous? When do you feel most vital and fully alive? In what ways do you model a lived way of honoring the creative process? I encourage you to reflect on each of these questions and begin to make the changes that will open up new aspects of self, life, and creativity to you and those around you.

## Endnotes

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