

## **Risking Creativity**

- a sermon reflection compiled and presented by Dawn Daniels, UUFCM Minister

Sunday, May 6, 2018

“All the arts we practice are apprenticeship. The big art is our life.”

- *M.C. Richards*

## **Story for All Ages**

[What Do You Do with an Idea?](#)

- by Kobi Yamada and Mae Besom

## **Reading**

Excerpt from *Creativity: Where the Divine and Human Meet*

- by Matthew Fox

What do we do with chaos? Creativity has an answer. We are told by those who have studied the processes of nature that creativity happens at the border between chaos and order. Chaos is a prelude to creativity. We need to learn, as every artist needs to learn, to live with chaos and, indeed, to dance with it as we listen to it and attempt some ordering. Artists wrestle with chaos, take it apart, deconstruct and reconstruct from it. Accept the challenge to convert chaos into some kind of order, respecting the timing of it all, not pushing beyond what is possible – combining holy patience with holy impatience: That is the role of the artist. It is each of our roles as we launch into the twenty-first century, because we are all called to be artists in our own way. We were all artists as children. We need to study the chaos around us in order to turn it into something beautiful. Something sustainable. Something that remains.

## **Sermon Reflection**

Our worship theme for the month of May will be an exploratory - and hopefully imaginative – dance with the question “What does it mean to be a people of creativity?” While it would likely be an interesting discussion to talk about the source of our creativity and its associated ideas, dreams, and inspirations – for that is often where many rational folk get bogged down in reflecting on creativity. Is it as the ancient Greeks and Romans thought...something bestowed and controlled by the gods or is it something inherently and wholly human in its origin and outcome? Honestly, while that might be fun, I think it is a waste of time to spend our precious energy in fussing about the origins of creativity than it would be to reflect more deeply on how it functions, how so often we misunderstand its availability to us, and how so often we readily dismiss or over-analyze its presence within and/or around us. Chaos – wherever it reigns - in our body politic, our cultural/communal living, in our familial or personal lives - is not only the prelude to creativity – it also serves as a siren song, if you will, calling out our creative abilities in response.

One of my pet peeves in this life is linked ironically to the topic of creativity. It has to do with what I believe is a limiting linkage between creativity and talent, particularly in performance ability. As a spoken word artist for most of my adult life, I often get comments from audience members praising my creativity - which is in itself,

not the peevish part – that comes in the follow-up remarks such as – “I wish I was so creative!” It doesn’t really matter what art we’re talking about – singing, acting, painting – any performance or fine arts – we take a dangerous turn when we limit our view of creativity to artistic expression, and it becomes even more disabling when we judge our own creativity through the lens of comparing ourselves to others. The irony in this is that I am guilty of the same limiting disabling behavior in my own creative life.

Let’s take a moment to listen to what some other voices have to say about creation and creativity (*At this point, a series of nine readers rose from their seats in the sanctuary to read aloud the following quotes*):

Every act of creation is first of all an act of destruction.

~ *Pablo Picasso*

“Anxiety is the hand maiden of creativity.”

~ *T. S. Eliot*

“Creativity is allowing yourself to make mistakes. Art is knowing which ones to keep.”

~ *Scott Adams*

“Art, freedom and creativity will change society faster than politics.”

~ *Victor Pinchuk*

“Passion is one great force that unleashes creativity, because if you're passionate about something, then you're more willing to take risks.”

~ *Yo-Yo Ma*

“Creativity involves breaking out of established patterns in order to look at things in a different way.”

~ *Edward de Bono*

“There is no innovation and creativity without failure. Period.”

~ *Brene Brown*

“It's impossible to explain creativity. It's like asking a bird, 'How do you fly?' You just do.”

~ *Eric Jerome Dickey*

“Creativity takes courage.”

~ *Henri Matisse*

Elizabeth Gilbert, author of the wildly popular book *Eat, Pray, Love* has spent a lot of time researching and reflecting on the subject of creativity – I highly recommend her TED talk “Your Elusive Creative Genius” in which she dispels the notion that “genius” - particularly creative genius- is the purview of only a select few in this life, but rather something we all have access to, or as scientist Jonah Lehrer supposes that “creativity is our natural state” as human beings. She also has a new book out building even further on her thought titled *Big Magic – Creative Living Beyond Fear*. **Creative living – living a life that is more driven by curiosity than by fear.** This leads me to a question that feels most relevant to our spiritual lives: how do we return to our natural state? How do we access the creative essence at the heart of who we are?

This question feels relevant because in our lives—in this particular, early 21st century era of human history—in this particular location in which we find ourselves (western, industrialized, technologized, capitalistic, militaristic, democratic United States of America)—there are 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.

[...]

We feel the risk of creativity most keenly when we are fearful and anxious about the future, when we are comfortable with and set in our habits. Creativity calls us to confront our fears and anxieties and it calls us out of our habits. In order to let a new future emerge—in order to be creative—we need to be willing to set a piece of our frightened, anxious, comfortable, habitual selves aside and listen deeply for new connections, new relationships, new visions. To do this we need to be able to recognize and suspend our assumptions, to hold them out in front of us so they have less influence over our thinking, so we can encounter new ideas without being judgmental towards them, without saying “No, this will never work.” Only when we set a piece of our fearful, anxious, comfortable, habitual selves aside can we create space for new ideas to take hold in us.

~ Josh Pawelek [“Risking Creativity”](#)

I want to share with you now a story – a story I have been telling for a very long time in my work as a spoken word artist – it is my adaptation of the old English folktale, “The Pedlar of Swaffham.” It speaks to the taking of risks in following our dreams...in risking creative living.

Once upon a time there was a poor tailor who lived in the old English town of Swaffham. Every day he walked out of his cottage door, past that great oak tree that grew beside it, and sold wares from the knapsack he wore on his back. His little dog would follow along, yipping at his heels. Everyone knew when the pedlar was coming for he sang out “Knickknacks! Bric-a-Bracs! Fine and shiny things!”

Some days he sold enough to buy himself a loaf of bread for his dinner and a bone for his dog. But there were many nights when he went to sleep hungry.

One such hungry night, he had a dream. In the dream he heard a voice that said: “Go stand on London Bridge and you will hear good news.”

In the morning he remembered his dream. As he walked out his cottage door, past the great oak tree that grew beside it, he wondered, “What could a dream like this mean?”

The next night he had the same dream. Once again, he heard the voice say, “Go stand on London Bridge and you will hear good news.”

In the morning he remembered the dream again. As he walked out of his cottage door, he stopped to lean against the oak tree and wondered aloud to himself, "What could a dream like this mean?" On the third night, when he once again heard the voice, he sat bolt upright in his bed and decided to leave for London in the morning.

He set out at dawn, knapsack on his back, little dog at his heels. As he walked down the road, to help pass the time, he sang to himself a song of his own making:

"As foolish as it seems,  
sometimes it's wise to follow your dreams.  
Follow, follow your dreams, your dreams,  
follow, follow your dreams."

He walked, and he walked, and he walked for a week. At last he arrived in the royal city of London. In these olden times, London Bridge was a great stone expanse with shops lining its sides. He went directly to the middle of the bridge and, just as the voice in the dream had instructed him, he and his little dog just stood there – waiting for good news.

He stood all day – he stood all night. He stood through the rain 'til the sun came out. No one stopped to speak to him.

Finally, a shopkeeper, who had been watching him the whole time, approached the pedlar and said, "Pardon me sir, but I have been watching you from my shop window for days now. I am curious to know what you are doing on London Bridge? You don't sell anything and I haven't seen you beg. Yet, you stand here day after day. Tell me please – what are you doing on London Bridge?"

The pedlar blushed and said, "I hardly know you to tell you such private things...but then again, you are the first person to speak to me since I arrived in London. So, perhaps I will tell you...you see, sir, I had a strange dream for three nights. Each night I heard a voice which said, 'Go stand on London Bridge and you will hear good news.' Now I know this doesn't make much common sense, but sometimes common sense makes no sense at all. I am a man of feelings...I felt I should come...and that is why I stand on London Bridge."

The shopkeeper, who had been listening with an expression of disbelief, began to laugh. He laughed so hard he had to hold his generous belly. He laughed so hard a crowd gathered round to find out what was so funny.

"Listen to this!" he cried to the crowd. "Here is the biggest fool you will ever meet. He is standing on London Bridge because he heard a voice in his dream!"

Everyone in the crowd began to laugh and call the pedlar a silly fool. But the pedlar just stood there. When he didn't move, the shopkeeper – enjoying the taunting – drew the crowd in even tighter and said, "Ha! Following dreams? What a foolish man you are! Why I myself had a dream just last night. I dreamt of a place I've never even heard of – a place called Swaffham, I think it was – I dreamt that if I dug in the ground in front of an oak tree that grew beside a poor pedlar's cottage, I would find a treasure. Now do you think I would be foolish enough to leave my home and my work to follow some silly dream? Do yourself a favor, sir – go back from where you came."

The pedlar's face spread wide with a smile. "I certainly will go back," he said, then turned and ran all the way home to Swaffham.

When he arrived at his cottage, he took a shovel and began to dig in the ground in front of the great oak tree that he knew so well. Sure enough, he found an iron box. When he pulled it up out of the ground and brushed away the soil, he saw that there were words inscribed on its lid which said,

“Travel far,  
travel wide,  
the greatest treasure is deep inside.”

With shaking hands, he opened the box and saw that it was filled with gold and jewels. He gave half of the treasure to the poor, for he himself had known hunger. He then used the treasure to build a church – a gathering place – that stands to this day at a crossroads; a place for travelers to find rest and reflection before proceeding on their journey.

There was just enough of the treasure remaining to allow the pedlar and his little dog to live comfortably for all of their remaining days. Every now and again, the people of Swaffham would see the pedlar walking along the road, singing his now familiar song...

“As foolish as it seems,  
sometimes it’s wise to follow your dreams.  
Follow, follow your dreams, your dreams,  
follow, follow your dreams.”

### ***Closing Words***

“Each New Day”

- by Peter Friedrichs

Why is this blank page  
staring back at me,  
mocking, like an affliction,  
and fraught with dread?  
How can it hold such sway,  
this simple emptiness?  
Might it instead be a gift  
left on my doorstep overnight,  
waiting to be broken open  
with the dawn?  
A present, eager to emerge

if only I had the sense  
to hold the paper  
over a candle flame,  
its lemon juice message  
appearing, like magic,  
clear and true?

Each new day is like this,  
pure air, devoid of density,  
but for the weight of our own  
invention.

Birds do not worry the morning  
or fret the rising sun.

They wait, expectant,  
until its rays kiss their downy necks.

Then, stretching,  
they turn to face the day,  
And sing.

“We have no hope of solving our problems without harnessing the diversity, the energy, and the creativity of all our people.”

~ *Roger Wilkins*