

I Can't Draw! (It's Irrelevant)

Theodore Parker Unitarian Universalist Church

May 6, 2018

Reading

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/11/27/what-mary-olivers-critics-dont-understand>

(Ruth Franklin's review of Mary Oliver's poetry)

"Part of the key to Oliver's appeal is her accessibility: she writes blank verse in a conversational style, with no typographical gimmicks. But an equal part is that she offers her readers a spiritual release that they might not have realized they were looking for. Oliver is an ecstatic poet in the vein of her idols, who include Shelley, Keats, and Whitman. She tends to use nature as a springboard to the sacred, which is the beating heart of her work."

The Summer Day

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean—
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down—
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?
—Mary Oliver

Reading

This reading comes from the notes of a book called *Reinventing the Sacred: A New View of Science, Reason and Religion*. Author and complexity theorist Stuart Kauffman offers "a daring and ambitious argument for a new understanding of natural divinity."

The genesis of this book (he explains) derives from what was for me a life-transforming, small, and quite wonderful conference in 1992 just north of Santa Fe, New Mexico, in Nambe. The Gihon

Foundation, directed by Michael Nesmith, had set itself the task of organizing small, biannual meetings of three to five ‘thinkers’ to ask, what is the most important question confronting humankind? One can find a certain amusement in the presumption that any three to five people could possibly say anything useful. We met for two-and-a half days – four of us: myself; Lee Cullum and Walter Shapiro, fine journalists; and a magical mountain of a man, Scott Momaday, Pulitzer Prize-winning Kiowa poet. Scott, perhaps six feet seven inches, some 270 pounds, bass voice, fixed us in his gaze and said, ‘The most important task confronting [human]kind is to reinvent the sacred.’ I was stunned. Trained as a doctor and scientist, even with a background in philosophy, it was beyond my ken to use the word *sacred*. The topic was outside the pale of my view of informed conversation. And I was instantaneously convinced that Scott was right.

‘The most important task confronting [human]kind is to reinvent the sacred.’

SERMON

I Can’t Draw! (It’s Irrelevant)

The Rev. Anne Bancroft

One of my favorite musicals is Stephen Sondheim’s “Sunday in the Park with George.” I’m sure I’ve mentioned it before. Based on the painting by Georges Seurat, “A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte,” Sondheim gives personalities to each of the people in the painting – AND to the dogs. But the primary character is the artist himself, who chooses his expression, his art, his craft, over the people in his life – working fastidiously to finish elements of his paintings. He is driven by his passion to create.

“Look. I made a hat. Where there never was a hat.”

It is the essence of creativity to have expressed something that did not exist before: a hat, a song, a dance, a sweater, a piece of theatre, a Bundt cake, honey, jelly Look. I made this. I expressed myself through this event, and it was amazing.

It IS amazing, because before that whatever it was didn’t exist.

Our Buddhist friends remind us through this morning’s story that it doesn’t matter how LONG our pieces of creativity exist, really – right? We in the West tend to cling to the idea of longevity, of passing down what we have painted or built or written, but in truth it is not about WHAT is created, but the act of creating that is awesome.

Creativity is our theme for the month of May. Creativity is, by definition, a kind of exquisite opportunity; an invitation. To have the chance to do something that one has not done before: to have crafted a thought, or a pattern; to have an idea come to life. Creativity is generative and exhilarating.

It can also be a little intimidating. We so often tend to think of creativity as something gifted to particular people, don't we? Picasso – he was creative. Rembrandt. Michelangelo. Choreographer Martha Graham – unbelievable. Hemingway – amazing. Our poets, our architects, our engineers

But the truth is – and we know this even though we too often forget – we are each filled with the potential for creativity. We know in our heart of hearts that even when we say, for example, “I can't draw,” we know that's irrelevant. Creativity is so much more than “art.”

Elizabeth Gilbert (author of the popular book, *Eat, Pray, Love*) writes, “The guardians of high culture will try to convince you that the arts belong to a chosen few, [but] we are all the chosen few. We are all makers by design.”

What is it we make, then? And how is it we speak of this capacity for Creativity, this process of expression that is, really, our life? The Art of Life, as Michael wrote in this morning's offertory: peril, civility, tumult, tranquility, *unceasing poetry*.

How shall we speak of it? Because we need to speak of it, don't we? We need to share what it is we are here to do, to think, to create. When Mary Oliver asks what it is we plan to do with our one wild and precious opportunity, we are reminded it's not a thought or a dream or a wondering we want to keep to ourselves. We are inherently relational creatures. We want to share ourselves.

Who made the world, she asks us? Who made the swan, and the black bear? We find ourselves wondering and wanting to talk about it ... but for the right words.

It is perhaps why our second reading, from scientist Stuart Kauffman, suggested, in answer to the question of what most important question faces humankind, that the answer is one of reinventing the sacred – reinventing a way to bridge the ways we speak about what is most significant to us, to share what is our biggest challenge and mystery: this capacity of creativity, making sense of our living, and thriving in the company of others.

For many years, the answer to the question of creation – largely though not exclusively for the Western mind – has been God, right? Or gods, depending on the timing, or the culture. Who made the swan? God did. The Black Bear? God. Believer or doubter, there was a construct and a vocabulary. The particular name may have varied (Brahma, Elohim, Allah). But there HAS BEEN a vocabulary. For many it still exists, but for many others it feels that the vocabulary, particularly of this term or symbol “God,” is wanting – certainly in OUR tradition, the vocabulary in general, and around God specifically, is wanting.

There was a great “On Being” podcast this morning with naturalist and journalist Michael McCarthy, who was commenting on how our current philosophical system, largely more secular and humanist, does not recognize the human potential for destructiveness – that the legacy of humanism has been damaging as our morality has been so anthropocentric. Something has been lost, he seemed to be saying, in our lost sense of naturalist wonder. I commend to you his book, *The Moth Snowstorm*.

I have spoken to you before about the thoughts of theologian Gordon Kaufman. He was a professor at Harvard Divinity School during my tenure there, and offered an alternative, a construct of relationship he called Creative Serendipity, or sometimes turning it to Serendipitous Creativity. Not unlike the naturalist theology of Unitarian Universalist Henry Nelson Wieman (also a 20th century voice), Kaufman helped reframe the idea of that most basic term which he references as the symbol, God. Kaufman morphed the symbol from an anthropomorphic director of human affairs to suggest a moment in time, if you will, a capacity – that we might understand “God” as the “serendipitous creativity manifest throughout the cosmos (rather than as *the Creator* of the world and all that is in it).

“It became evident that we humans had attained the power to destroy the very conditions that make our lives (and much other life as well) possible, and the notion that God would save us from ourselves as we pursued this self-destructive project has become increasingly implausible.”¹

Wieman also despairs of the usefulness of the symbol as distant and top-down, if you will. For Wieman, sense experience is “the primary source of human knowledge. Thus, God too is an object of experience and to be known as we know any other sense data.”²

Now, granted, Kaufman and Wieman are theologians. In the book my colleague, Bruce Southworth, wrote about Wieman, he reminds us that “Henry Nelson Wieman was a philosopher of religion, first and foremost. Attempts at conceptual clarification about God, a reality that Wieman believed to be operative as **creativity** in the world, dominated his work.”³

Most of us don’t live in that highly intellectual realm on so regular a basis. Most of us determine our comfort level with the idea of God that we grew up with, and accept or reject its usefulness and move on.

Like Kaufman, we may see the ways in which old constructs don’t really seem relevant to us, and even those of us who WANT to engage with a spirit, a mystery, a something other than ourselves, struggle to find a way to frame it, let alone name it, or be in conversation about it!

¹ Kaufman, Gordon. *In the Beginning . . . Creativity*, p. xiii

² Southworth, Bruce, *At Home in Creativity – The Naturalistic Theology of Henry Nelson Wieman*, p. 30.

³ *Ibid*, p. 125

But I actually think it is especially relevant, and a bit of a problem, because it leaves us – not just us here at Theodore Parker Church, but across the world – it leaves us unable to be in conversation or have a common understanding about the things that are most important to us, what we might stretch – even – to call the things that are most *sacred* to us.

It's not a question of whether God is our word of choice, but that it is A word of choice in so many religious spheres that if we have no frame for it, no way to relate to it, we are left separated. We see that right here, don't we?

Imagine my delight at finding Stuart Kauffman's work – no relationship to Gordon, by the way. Stuart Kauffman is a scientist who works with complexity theory – the idea that complex and chaotic systems have order, pattern, and structure. He notes the way the advent of the Enlightenment and the emphasis on science and reason has driven a divide between world views. His hope is to reintegrate them. "A couple in love walking along the banks of the Seine are, in real fact, a couple in love walking along the banks of the Seine, not mere particles in motion."⁴

Kauffman writes of a sense of "emergence and ceaseless creativity partially beyond natural law [that] is truly a new scientific worldview in which science itself has limits. ... In this partial lawlessness is not an abyss, but unparalleled freedom, unparalleled creativity ... since reason truly is an insufficient guide ... we need to reinvent the sacred for ourselves to guide our lives, based on the ultimate values we come to choose."⁵

It feels a little complicated, doesn't it?

What Stuart Kauffman is attempting, I think, is to provide a common ground of understanding for our global community, reintegrating science and spiritual life as creative forces existing in tandem – a worthy goal. He wants to put us back together. "At last, there is the possibility of finding our way together, with a shared value system that we jointly create – our chosen global ethic, our chosen spirituality, and our chosen sacred."

We have these two challenges before us: how to find our own path, and how to find a common one. And it seems to me these are essentially creative challenges.

In the Small Group Ministry packet for this month is the question: What is it that I want to create today? What if we woke up asking ourselves that question every morning? And what if we imagined that task as a sacred one? For surely every day gives us the opportunity to create something and why

⁴ Kauffman, Stuart. *Reinventing the Sacred: A New View of Science, Reason, and Religion*

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 281

not something meaningful and of value? Something, dare we say ... sacred. And maybe this daily task IS something with a bit of the divine inherent in it?

Maybe it's a hat. For surely what we paint, or knit, or write or sing is sacred. Maybe it's the creative act of getting through the day – for some days that seems pretty amazingly creative! Maybe it's a moment, a meal, a clean room, a protest poster, a decision, an exchange. Maybe it's a connection, an effort to create justice in the world. We are each and all inherently creative. If you don't think you can draw, it's irrelevant. You are, by nature, a maker of your life – and THAT, my friends, is a profoundly sacred thing.

And how shall we speak of it – this amazing possibility, this each and every opportunity? Shall we call it God? Would that remind us of our potential to do good, to be generative, to side with love?

I offer a prayer, this morning, of co-creation.⁶

Creative spirit, source of life and love: We give thanks for the beauty of this day and for the company of those assembled here. Thank you for the breezes of change, clearing our heads and bringing fresh ideas. May they cleanse our minds of the oppressions and isms that divide us.

Thank you for the flame of hope, the heat of righteous anger, the warmth of compassion, and the fire of commitment. May they bubble the cauldrons of [our creativity and] transformation.

Thank you for oceans of love, rivers of connection, tears of relief, and pools of serenity. May healing waters flow over us and through us and among us, wearing down the sharp rocks of despair to bring joy in the morning.

Thank you for the good earth beneath us, around us, and within us. May we take this clay and co-create a new realm of justice and beauty.

Thank you for all these and more. We accept our gifts and commit to building, sculpting, painting, singing, and dancing them to life; to abundant life.

What is it you will create today? And how will you name it?

⁶ Lyn Cox <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/prayer/prayer-co-creation>

CLOSING WORDS⁷

I have no name
Until you name me.
I have no form
Until you shape me.
I don't exist
Until you make me,
I am creativity.
I am waiting deep inside you
Touch my spark
And let me light you,
Give me life
And I'll revive you
I am creativity.

⁷ <http://www.adaliaconfidenceandsuccessblog.com/2013/01/24/a-collection-of-creativity-poems/>