

REFLECTIONS ON THE CREATIVE EXPERIENCE AND
SPIRITUALITY

Rev. Kit Ketcham, May 18, 2008

INTRO: When Mary and I got together to plan this service several days ago, we agreed that just lecturing about art wasn't what we had in mind and we decided to invite some of our artists to share personal experience and art works with us. I've asked three people to tell us how their work as an artist influences their spiritual lives and several other of our artists have brought their work to display.

I'm delighted to present Rene Schlangen, Ken Merrell, and Michael Braun. I'm looking forward to hearing what they have to tell us about their own experiences and I will speak last.

WRAP-UP:

I have never thought of myself as artistic. I'm one of those people who has always figured if I couldn't draw a straight line, I wasn't artistic. My sister and mother, now, they could draw pretty well. They were artistic. I wasn't.

I did like to sing and play the piano but I was mostly a workhorse, able to do a decent job but not particularly talented, just adequate. Oh sure, once in awhile I'd get a chance to sing by myself, mostly because I knew all the words to the old folk songs, especially the raunchy ones, and sometimes people said I sounded pretty good.

But there were moments when something happened to me, in the music. Maybe it would be feeling myself caught up in the harmonies of the choir around me. Maybe it would be the experience of improvising harmonies as I sang.

Maybe it would be a particularly tuneful day for my vocal chords. Maybe it would be singing an old lullaby to my child. But it didn't really mean anything, wasn't very important.

Many years passed in this way and then came a time when I was asked to sing one of those folk songs I knew by heart at the memorial service of a friend. It's a kind of philosophical, metaphorical song entitled "River" by Bill Staines and it sings about life as a river. The last verse is particularly poignant, with these words: "one day when the flowers are blooming still, one day when the grass is still green, my rolling waters will round the bend and flow into the open sea..."

I was pretty sure that I would have a hard time singing that verse, that my voice would break, that I would not be able to continue. My friend Alan's life had rounded a bend and had flowed into the open sea, unexpectedly, mingling there with all the other lives gone before him, leaving behind the lives of his wife and two teenage sons.

I almost turned down the request, afraid I couldn't do it properly. But Alan's wife persisted, saying he had learned the song from me and she knew he would want me to sing it.

The day of the memorial service, I went to the church, spent a few minutes practicing with the guitarist who would accompany me, and then it was time to begin the service.

It came time for me to sing and I stood next to the guitarist, my stomach clenched with anxiety, wanting to do well but afraid I would falter. I made it through the first verses and choruses just fine and then the guitarist took his musical break before the final verse.

Just as I opened my mouth to sing those most difficult words, my heart pounding, I looked out into the congregation gathered there and saw another friend, Mary, looking back at me. She smiled at me, with tears in her eyes, and all of a sudden, I felt the song begin to sing itself.

It flowed out of me, in notes and phrasings I didn't even recognize as mine. My voice was strong and clear and true. There was something happening that was beyond me, that was beyond my control, that was expressing my love for my friend Alan, that was receiving the love of my friend Mary, and pouring out all that sense of relationship and connection with them.

A new understanding of my connection to others through music was born that day and left me shaken and humbled by that experience.

Our service today has been about "The Arts" as a source of spiritual inspiration for Unitarian Universalists. But I'm not sure we're just talking about "Art", per se.

The Arts, whether visual, aural, vocal, written, kinesthetic, are expressions of human creativity, a life force so powerful that we have evidence of it going back into pre-history. It is a primeval force, ecstatic and uncontrollable, and it has driven human beings beyond the requirements of daily survival as long as human memory has existed.

Unitarian Universalist theologian, Henry Nelson Wieman, has posited that the creative force in the universe is another name for God, that this divine power exists in all of us and in all of creation.

I find that image very meaningful. As we've heard each of our speakers this afternoon, have listened to our choir, listened to the poems, sung the songs, looked at the visual arts displayed, I think I've seen and heard a common thread---that there is something that pours out of us at those moments when we are caught up in creating or experiencing beauty or meaning or relationship or growth. It's something beyond normal daily life, something so thrilling and engaging that it surely is a part of our spiritual nature.

Of course, we say "the Arts" and yet we know in our hearts that creativity is expressed in many ways, not all of them beautiful and comforting, some of them quite disturbing, some even dangerous.

The creativity in human beings has brought us as a species to a place of high technology, of great beauty, and fearsome understanding of what we have done.

Today we have considered the creative experience and its relationship to spirituality. I find the creative experience to be so foundational to my spiritual nature that I have become attuned to it in other parts of my daily life, hearing it in conversations, tending the plants in my garden, in cooking a meal, even in figuring out how to jerry-rig functional mechanisms to keep my cats confined on the deck.

My colleague, the Rev. Rick Davis, minister of our congregation in Salem, Oregon, has proposed that we consider recognizing formally the importance of the Arts as a Source of our Unitarian Universalist faith. He suggests this wording: "The living tradition that we share draws from many sources (including) the Creative arts, which reveal to us the face of life's beauty and joy, its enduring truth and meaning and which opens our hearts to feelings of awe and gratitude." He goes on to say that art and spirituality

are so intertwined that they cannot be separated.

Whether or not this ever happens, we know how important the creative arts are in our own lives. I'm grateful to our artists today for speaking to us, and for bringing the creations of their hands and hearts for us to experience.

Let's pause for a time of silent reflection and prayer.

Our closing hymn is #12, O Life that Makes All things New

BENEDICTION: Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering that within each of us there is a burning spark of creativity, the spark of life that has brought forth great beauty in the world and gives us the ability to connect with each other and with the divine as we experience that creative spark in others. May we find beauty and inspiration in all of life's ventures and may we offer our own creativity freely and lovingly. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.