

What Kind of Artist Are You?

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There are only two Unitarian Universalist seminaries in the country, one in Chicago and one in California. When I decided to go to seminary, Dave and I were living in northern Virginia, so like a lot of other UU's in the area, I went to a Methodist school – Wesley Seminary in Washington. It was an eye opener in a number of ways. I had to learn to translate from Wesley's Christian vocabulary and assumptions to a wider more UU view. But I also learned to give up a lot of my stereotypes about Christianity. One feature of life at Wesley came as a surprise.

Every day on my way to classes, I passed the by art studio. Yes, an art studio. Wesley not only *has* an art studio, it requires every student to take at least one course in some form of art. The school has a good biblical theological reason for this – in the book of Genesis, at the end of each phase of creation, God looks at what God has done, and pronounces it “good.” The physical, concrete world is a good place – contrary to what you may have heard from various otherworldly, anti-body, anti-sex distortions of Christianity. And in the Wesley view, human creativity is good, one of the ways in which we are made in God's image. So Wesley's arts requirement is well grounded in its own theology. The Unitarian Universalist students at Wesley might have gotten there by a slightly different route, but we had no trouble embracing the idea of loving and caring for and responding to the real, physical world. Art seems to be the embodiment of spirituality for many of us. Indeed, I have often found myself saying that the artistic endeavor is the same at its base as the spiritual endeavor.

But during my time at Wesley, in my heart I was certain that all that didn't apply to me. Like many people, I think of myself as a not very artistic person, very linear and left brained. I do words, not images. So I passed by the studio every day, a little intrigued, and, in truth, a little intimidated. Sometimes I would peek in and admire the works -- Greek Orthodox style icons, large, brilliantly colored abstracts, small complex assemblages of metal and wood. But mostly I passed by, wrapped up in my own lofty thoughts about theology or ethics or the dynamics of growing a congregation. Sometimes the studio door was closed. That's when I saw the sign. For three years this sign addressed passers by in the hall: "**An artist is not a special kind of person; every person is a special kind of artist.**" That sign haunts me yet. What kind of artist am I? What kind of artist are you?

Then suddenly I was up against the requirement. I had to take an arts course, this semester. I didn't dare take anything that required singing or dancing. Did I tell you I don't think of myself as very talented artistically? That goes double for music and dance. Chancel drama seemed too demanding -- though Dave later had a good time in that course. I didn't want to put in the travel time for the field trips in church architecture, though the beautiful National Memorial Universalist Church was said to be on the tour. The course on vestments and paraments and other church decorations had some appeal, but it seemed too bound up with Christian symbols for me. I could have gotten by with a course in the history of hymnody.

But that seemed too tame, too comfortable. After all, Dave and I often share old hymns of an evening. And my Unitarian Universalist friends were taking a course called Contemplative Drawing, so I signed up for that. Every Monday night for a semester.

I'm not quite sure what I was expecting, perhaps a reprise of a pleasant art experience I had in ninth grade that we called "Drawing to Music." Contemplative Drawing was only a two hour class, but I sweated more over that course than all the others combined. In a book-based course, you can skim the reading, ask interesting questions in class, or cram the night before an exam, but in drawing, there is no shortcut. You can't skim a drawing. You just have to sit there with pencil and paper (and a large eraser). You have to pay attention to what you are drawing. You have to *see*. And you have to take risks. We all had to post our drawings before class for everyone to see. It was agony. No matter how much my professor, Cathy Kapikian, assured us that this was about process, not product, I could see that my drawings were feeble at best -- though they *were* much more energetic and interesting than anything I had ever imagined I could produce.

I finally got through the course and put away my drawing materials and my portfolio with relief. What kind of artist am I? Evidently, not the drawing kind. But I didn't seem to be entirely done with visual art. I found myself *seeing* things differently. Look at the lovely negative space where the chairs almost come together. Notice the rainbow shimmer of oil on a rain puddle. Pay attention to the shadows made by sunlight and curly willow twigs against the wall. A semester of drawing is with me still. It has become part of my spirituality.

And then several years ago, my father was dying of brain cancer. Day after day, I spent time with him, sitting with him through the dreadful deterioration, watching his world constrict as his body shut down. I became a daily fixture at Oak, the nursing unit of Quadrangle, a Butterfield Trails-like retirement community, where he lived. I took solace in the beautiful art on the walls there, especially the lovely translucent watercolors by Anne Wood, a Unitarian Universalist and a friend of Fred's. And one of the things I did to keep my sanity, was to take a pottery course at the Community Art Center where I lived. I had never before attempted to throw pots. My pots were feeble, wretched little things compared to the work of the instructor and even most of the students. But this was *really* about process, not product. As a very left brained, verbal sort of person, I appreciated the chance to do something so entirely right brained. The course gave me a little structure one day a week. It gave me a chance to meet entirely new people. And I could freely get my hands dirty. As Roger, a previous parishioner who is a retired art teacher said, with pottery you can really get your feelings out -- pounding on the clay or weeping with it. So at a personal and practical level, I learned a little about what kind of artist I might be.

In preparing for write about all this, I dipped into some reading from the official art world of galleries and museums, critics and universities. Some of that reading was more intimidating than the Wesley art course. I quickly found myself drowning in conflicting tides of modernism, deconstruction, postmodernism, culture wars, all of it outside of my intellectual ken. So I stepped back and thought about what I have learned about the origin and value of art

in my more ordinary reading and in my own not-very-artistic life. I wanted to explore the religious elements in the art experienced by every person.

And I found some direct and straightforward thinking about art and life and religion in a wonderful book called *Conversations Before the End of Time*. Author/editor Suzi Gablik records her conversations with a series of artist and critics and thinkers. Some of it is familiar and homey. Satish Kumar, editor of *Resurgence*, an ecophilosophical magazine, quotes the words on that sign on the Wesley art studio door -- every person is a special kind of artist -- attributing them to a famous Indian philosopher, Coomeraswamy. He also cites his own mother, a craftswoman who did beautiful embroidery, but who insisted her art be used in everyday life, not something to be set aside. "Don't put it on the wall -- it's for you. I made it for you to wear. The day you start to put beautiful things on the wall, you start to put ugly things on your body." (p. 137f)

Kumar makes a direct connection between art and religion.

When you have a sense of art -- which means a sense of aesthetics -- it means a sense of the sacred, from an Indian point of view, because aesthetics and the sacred are two sides of the same coin with us, or even are interchangeable. When you say the earth is sacred, that is an imaginative, creative, artistic point of view. Because when you set out to do a painting of the landscape, you will not paint just any old landscape, but you have some kind of heart connection with that landscape -- that's why you paint it. You have feeling of reverence for nature, a reverence for the environment and for the landscape, and that is the spiritual, sacred point of view....

I would say that the artist's role is to create, among people, and to somehow be the bridge, or the instigator, for developing a sense of reverence and beauty.

(Satish Kumar in Suzi Gablik p. 139)

Art in India is tied deeply to everyday life and the community, especially the art of women. Several years ago in Washington I visited a wonderful Smithsonian exhibit called "Painted Prayers." Every day millions of women in India begin the day by sprinkling rice flour in a design in front of their homes, a visual prayer to the goddess Lakshmi, inviting her bring prosperity to the people who live there. This painting is quickly scuffed away as people walk by -- this art is truly process, not product. Festivals, celebrations of life passages, and holy days call for more elaborate paintings, on the walls of houses, or composed of thousands of flowers. Even women in dire poverty or those living in big cities find ways to express their religious feeling through art. Art is an everyday matter, both sacred and mundane.

Asking myself about the connection between art and religion, I thought back to those Sunday afternoons at Wesley struggling to really see my subject matter, and those Monday

evenings taping my paper to the blackboard and wishing I could disappear along with my pictures. Two ideas jumped out at me from my ruminations: **pay attention** and **take risks**. And when I poked around in my theology library there they were, those same ideas. Be mindful and be generous. Really see, and love the world. As Hafiz said in the responsive reading:

“For we have not come here to take prisoners
Or to confine our wondrous spirits,

But to experience ever and ever more deeply
Our divine courage, freedom, and
Light!”

Different authors expressed them in different ways, but these two imperatives dwell at the heart of artistry, and of a living faith. Here is Anne Lamott, a writer and teacher of writing.

Let's think of reverence as awe, as presence in and openness to the world. The alternative is that we stultify, we shut down. Think of those times when you've read prose or poetry that is presented in such a way that you have a fleeting sense of being *startled* by beauty or insight, by a glimpse into someone's soul. All of a sudden everything seems to fit together or at least to have some meaning for a moment. This is our goal as writers, I think; to help others have this sense of -- please forgive me -- wonder, of seeing things anew, things that can catch us off guard, that break in on our small, bordered worlds. When this happens, everything feels more spacious. Try walking around with a child who's going, "Wow, wow! Look at that dirty dog! Look at that burned-down house! Look at that red sky! And the child points and you look, and you see, and you start going, "Wow! Look at that huge crazy hedge! Look at that teeny little baby! Look at the scary dark cloud! I think this is how we are supposed to be in the world -- present and in awe. [Bird By Bird, p. 99f]

Poet Kathleen Norris calls it "attentive waiting":

[I]t's a fair description of the writing process. Once, when I was asked "What is the main thing a poet does?" I was inspired to answer, "We wait." A spark is struck; an event inscribed with a message – this is important, pay attention – and a poet scatters a few words like seeds in a notebook.

[*The Cloister Walk* p. 142f]

Actor and educator Eric Booth, author of *the everyday work of art*, insists that what we ordinary folk do as artists is different in *quality* from what Beethoven does, but lies on the same continuum: "You need to set things apart from the commonplace to attend to them in a special way." (p. 7)

Art begins with paying attention. I had an email discussion with our own Angela Peace last week. I was admiring a particular facet of her photographic art –the way in which she often gets the reflection in the water to complete an image – a series of slanted rocks and a bare weed stalk become a fish when reflected, or the water image of a rock formation completes the idea of a skull. Modestly, Angela said, “It’s just there in the physics.” Right. But it took Angela to, to notice, to make art of it. Anyone could do it, with photography or water color or poetry, or quilting or whatever our best medium might be – if we could just begin by paying attention.

It doesn't matter whether you are story telling or dancing or painting or making music -- or planting a garden or preparing a meal for special friends or knitting a sweater. Art is available to us all. When my daughter, Amanda, began her freshman year in college, she brought with her a stack of outdated microfiches from her summer job in a bookstore. She taped them to the corner of her room, where the ceiling meets the wall. It looked cool, kind of fish-shaped, all shiny and dark blue. Quite outside her normal bookish, scholarly approach to life. Playful, even. But behold, it was art: she called it her "microfish."

Everyday life, everyday spirituality, every one of us – even Amanda, even me, even you – engages in the work of art. Not like professionals, perhaps, not even like gifted amateurs maybe. But art, nonetheless. It begins with noticing, of paying attention, of making special, of admiring and honoring the real world. And so does Unitarian Universalism. We are not an otherworldly people. We begin with respecting the inherent worth and dignity of every person. We affirm and promote the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part. Our first source of religion is that transcending mystery and wonder which inspires us. We begin with the real world, we notice it, we honor it, we attend to it.

And after paying attention, then comes generosity – passionately loving the world, taking the risks of creating, putting together (that's what art means literally, "putting together" as in “articulation”) and offering your art. A woman I know quoted one of her theater professors: "Talent is sharing yourself with others." *Generosity* comes from an Indo-European word meaning to "give birth," and *create* from a word meaning to "grow." Making and sharing our art is part of life itself.

Art can serve the wholeness of life in many ways – I think of the annual Day Without Art, on December 1, a day of fasting from art, to commemorate the many who have died of AIDS, a day to rededicate ourselves to ending the plague, both the disease and the social stigma attached to it. Or think of the art that comes from the Muslim world, despite the anti-idolatry prohibition on images of humans and animals – several of our service elements this morning come from Rumi and Hafiz, two Muslim poets each madly in love with God and with the world, expressing that love in a wildly sensual poetry. Growth and life and generosity are at the heart of art making.

Alice Walker writes of generosity, of making something special, and making it available, with the hope, but not a certainty that it will be appreciated. In *The Color Purple*,

Shug and Celie talk about an eager Creator offering us a world of good things to admire. Shug speaks first; she speaks of God as not as He or She, but as "it": [I've toned down her language a little for the pulpit].

Listen, God love everything you love – and a mess of stuff you don't.
 But more than anything else, God love admiration.
 You saying God vain? I ast.
 Naw, she say. Not vain, just wanting to share a good thing. I think it annoys [pisses] God [off] if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it.
 What it do when it annoyed [pissed off]? I ast.
 Oh, it make something else. People think pleasing God is all God care about. But any fool living in the world can see it always trying to please us back.

(p. 167)

Generosity is always a risk; at the least you risk indifference. You give something up. Then you may be slapped in the face. Your offering may be ignored or devalued or even defaced. But there's an up side. When you risk yourself in art, you don't have to stake everything all at once. You don't have to be perfect to do something worthwhile. Anne Lamott reassures her writing students that creativity always begins with imperfection. The risk begins with baby steps: to give yourself a short, manageable assignment and commit yourself to a crummy first draft. (Actually, she uses a word somewhat more colorful than crummy).

Perfectionism is the voice of the oppressor, the enemy of the people. It will keep you cramped and insane your whole life, and it is the main obstacle between you and a [crummy] first draft. I think perfectionism is based on the obsessive belief that if you run carefully enough, hitting each stepping-stone just right, you won't have to die. The truth is that you will die anyway and that a lot of people who aren't even looking at their feet are going to do a whole lot better than you, and have a lot more fun while they're doing it. (p. 28)

Pay attention. Take risks. See what you are already doing in a new light. And have a lot more fun while you are doing it. There's a mission statement for you. Every person can be an artist of some kind. Every person can take part in that singing of the human spirit that comprises art.

Why does art matter? Ann Lamott answers in terms of the art of writing:

Because of the spirit, I say. Because of the heart. Writing and reading decrease our sense of isolation. They deepen and widen and expand our sense of life: they feed the soul. When writers make us shake our heads with the exactness of their prose and their truths, and even make us laugh about ourselves of life, our buoyancy is restored. We are given a shot at dancing with, or at least

clapping along with, the absurdity of life, instead of being squashed by it over and over again. It's like singing on a boat during a terrible storm at sea. You can't stop the raging storm, but singing can change the hearts and spirits of the people who are together on that ship.

(p. 237)

I can't say it any better than Ms. Lamott. So I leave you this morning with a question, "What kind of artist are you?"