

Soul Matters

A kaleidoscope of thoughts, images, stories, poetry, and ideas to engage hearts and minds.



Art and Spirituality

May 2015

In her book "The Artist's Way" author Julia Cameron writes, "The heart of creativity is the experience of mystical union; the heart of the mystical union is an experience of creativity. Those who speak in spiritual terms routinely refer to God as the creator but seldom see 'creator' as the literal term for 'artist'. I am suggesting," she says, "you take the term 'creator' quite literally."

God - or the Muse, or the Spirit, or the Mystery - as the ultimate artist? Wow. Cameron's words resonate for me. I deeply believe that every act of creation is a holy act, a means by which we, as creators-with-a-little-c, allow something of the beyond into the world. And art, the product of that creative impulse becoming into the world, does not stop at existing. Art itself yearns to become something more, to be heard and seen and felt and experienced, to become in turn the raw material for further acts of creation.

When we create something, whether it's a painting, a poem, or a home-cooked meal, when we transform what was already here into what isn't yet, we are the universe itself in the process of becoming. And when we take in and savor the result of that act of creation, we become the universe falling in love with itself all over again.

How do art and beauty feed your soul?

-- *Claire Curole*

The arts are not a way to make a living. They are a very human way of making life more bearable. Practicing an art, no matter how well or badly, is a way to make your soul grow, for heaven's sake.



~ Kurt Vonnegut



This Soul Matters packet was created by Claire Curole at Unitarian Universalist Community Church of Augusta, ME.

Thoughts within were gleaned from the Soul Matters Network, the UUCC Resource Circle, and other sources.

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QUESTIONS TO WALK WITH



Below is a list of questions to open the mind's gateway to reveal the wisdom that is right below the surface of our everyday ordinary lives. Pick one question, any, the one that grabs you and won't let go, then walk with it. Let your mind wander and wonder. Let the questions percolate. Listen curiously to what surfaces. Live into the answers. Be surprised by what is discovered. Share what you learn with someone you meet along the way.

When Van Gogh was a young man in his early twenties, he was in London studying to be a clergyman. He had no thought of being an artist at all. He sat in his cheap little room writing a letter to his younger brother in Holland, whom he loved very much. He looked out his window at a watery twilight, a thin lamppost, a star, and he said in his letter something like this: "it is so beautiful I must show you how it looks." And then on his cheap ruled note paper, he made the most beautiful, tender, little drawing of it.

*When I read this letter of Van Gogh's it comforted me very much and seemed to throw a clear light on the whole road of Art. Before, I thought that to produce a work of painting or literature, you scowled and thought long and ponderously and weighed everything solemnly and learned everything that all artists had ever done aforetime, and what their influences and schools were, and you were extremely careful about **design** and **balance** and getting **interesting planes** into your painting, and avoided, with the most astringent severity, showing the faintest **academical** tendency, and were strictly modern. And so on and so on.*

But the moment I read Van Gogh's letter I knew what art was, and the creative impulse. It is a feeling of love and enthusiasm for something, and in a direct, simple, passionate and true way, you try to show this beauty in things to others, by drawing it.

And Van Gogh's little drawing on the cheap note paper was a work of art because he loved the sky and the frail lamppost against it so seriously that he made the drawing with the most exquisite conscientiousness and care.

— Brenda Ueland, *If You Want to Write: A Book about Art, Independence and Spirit*

ART IS MADE BY ORDINARY PEOPLE. Creatures having only virtues can hardly be imagined making art. It's difficult to picture the Virgin Mary painting landscapes. Or Batman throwing pots. The flawless creature wouldn't need to make art. And so, ironically, the ideal artist is scarcely a theoretical figure at all. If art is made by ordinary people, then you'd have to allow that the ideal artist would be an ordinary person too, with the whole usual mixed bag of traits that real human beings possess. This is a giant hint about art, because it suggests that our flaws and weaknesses, while often obstacles to our getting work done, are a source of strength as well.

— from *Art & Fear: Observations on the Perils (and Rewards) of Artmaking*
by David Bayles & Ted Orland

When someone says "I'm an artist," what do you imagine about them?

Do you consider yourself to be an artist? What does that mean to you?

How do you understand art and creativity as part of (your) life? Do you see them as central or essential to living well? as something "nice but not necessary," to be considered if there's time? as belonging to other people?

When you appreciate someone else's artistic creation - music, dance, theatre, poetry, visual art or any other kind - what qualities attract you?

Spiritual Practice

A new way of being for all ages

Whoever uses the spirit that is in him creatively is an artist. To make living itself an art, that is the goal.
— Henry Miller, author

When we make art, very little of what we create is actually new, made up out of nothing at all. Instead we transform and recombine the pieces of the world that are already here into something we haven't seen in quite the same way before. There is wonder and magic in the world; the artist's function is to make strange and wondrous the commonplace and familiar, and to make commonplace and familiar the wondrous and strange.

One way of learning to see the familiar through an artist's eyes is through exercises like the Beauty Walk. This is simply a slow, mindful walk through a familiar area, perhaps the neighborhood where you live, or a park or town center that you visit regularly, taking particular notice of the details that make that place what it is.

Allow plenty of time. If you are able to walk comfortably for an hour or more, do so; if your body does not like that, choose a location where you can sit and observe if you need to. Families with young children may want to try shorter excursions.

Consider bringing a camera (such as the one on a cell phone) or a voice recorder to capture sights and sounds from your walk, or use a note pad to record your thoughts. You might want a bag to gather found objects like stones, feathers, leaves or other small items.

Are people active in the area where you are observing, or is it quiet and empty? If there are people, what do they look like, and what kinds of things are they doing? Are there any plants or animals visible?

Consider the buildings - are they old? new? Do they have interesting ornamentation near the roof or old stone blocks near the foundation? What are they made of? What might they have been built for? What are they being used for now?

Take notice of details that stand out - a bright colored wildflower growing through a crack in the pavement, the trill of birds unseen in the trees or the sound of church bells or traffic.

When you are done, gather your observations in some way - write a poem or journal entry, make a collage of photographs and found objects, or edit your sound or video recordings - and share them with someone.

*Beauty is before me, and beauty behind me,
above me and below me hovers the beautiful.
I am surrounded by it, I am immersed in it.
In my youth, I am aware of it, and, in old age
I shall walk quietly the beautiful trail.
In beauty it is begun.
In beauty, it is ended.*

- Navajo blessing

Words of Wisdom

There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all of time, this expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and it will be lost. The world will not have it. It is not your business to determine how good it is nor how valuable nor how it compares with other expressions. It is your business to keep it yours clearly and directly, to keep the channel open. You do not even have to believe in yourself or your work. You have to keep yourself open and aware to the urges that motivate you. Keep the channel open. ... No artist is pleased. [There is] no satisfaction whatever at any time. There is only a queer divine dissatisfaction, a blessed unrest that keeps us marching and makes us more alive than the others.

— Martha Graham, dancer and choreographer

Go into yourself. Find out the reason that commands you to write; see whether it has spread its roots into the very depths of your heart; confess to yourself whether you would have to die if you were forbidden to write.

This most of all: ask yourself in the most silent hour of your night: must I write? Dig into yourself for a deep answer. And if this answer rings out in assent, if you meet this solemn question with a strong, simple "I must," then build your life in accordance with this necessity; your whole life, even into its humblest and most indifferent hour, must become a sign and witness to this impulse. Then come close to Nature. Then, as if no one had ever tried before, try to say what you see and feel and love and lose.

... And if out of this turning-within, out of this immersion in your own world, poems come, then you will not think of asking anyone whether they are good or not. Nor will you try to interest magazines in these works: for you will see them as your dear natural possession, a piece of your life, a voice from it. A work of art is good if it has arisen out of necessity. That is the only way one can judge it.

— Rainer Maria Rilke, poet

Actors in any capacity, artists of any stripe, are inspired by their curiosity, by their desire to explore all quarters of life, in light and in dark, and reflect what they find in their work. Artists instinctively want to reflect humanity, their own and each other's, in all its intermittent virtue and vitality, frailty and fallibility.

— Tom Hiddleston, actor

The arts are not just a nice thing to have or to do if there is free time or if one can afford it. Rather, paintings and poetry, music and fashion, design and dialogue, they all define who we are as a people and provide an account of our history for the next generation.

— Michelle Obama, First Lady

He who works with his hands is a laborer.

He who works with his hands and his head is a craftsman.

He who works with his hands and his head and his heart is an artist.

— Francis of Assisi

Basically there can be no categories such as 'religious' art and 'secular' art, because all true art is incarnational, and therefore 'religious.'

— Madeleine L'Engle, author

"We all know that Art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize truth at least the truth that is given us to understand. The artist must know the manner whereby to convince others of the truthfulness of his lies."

— Pablo Picasso, painter and sculptor

The artist, and particularly the poet, is always an anarchist in the best sense of the word. He must heed only the call that arises within him from three strong voices: the voice of death, with all its foreboding, the voice of love and the voice of art.

— Federico García Lorca, poet