

14. Marvin J. Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Whole: Ceasing, Resting, Embracing, Feasting* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1989).

15. This particular student has reconnected with the small group this year and continues to be a valuable source of support and encouragement to his other 3/3 and seminary colleagues.

16. For a more detailed discussion of the University of Dubuque's 3/3 Program, along with some more theoretical analysis of the Christian practices, see my essay, "'Practicing' a New Educational Strategy: Developing a Program for Non-Traditional, Pre-Seminary Students," available at <[www.practicingourfaith.org/cfm/library/pdf/Paul%20Jeffries%20Paper.pdf](http://www.practicingourfaith.org/cfm/library/pdf/Paul%20Jeffries%20Paper.pdf)>.

## Creativity as a Christian Spiritual Practice: Foundations and Explorations for Ministry

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*The heart of human identity is the capacity and desire for birthing.  
To be is to become creative and bring forth the beautiful.*

—John O'Donohue<sup>1</sup>

How do we become creative? More particularly, how do we birth our lives in creative and beautiful ways? Many of us in the fields of ministry, pastoral care, spiritual direction, and religious education and training would concur that the movement of the Spirit is essential to the process of human becoming. But what of the practice of creativity? What riches lie within the power of imagination and creative activity to foster spiritual formation and human development? This article springs from our scholarship and combined experience—in pastoral and campus ministry, retreat leadership, spiritual direction, and higher education—to suggest that the very pro-

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cess of artistic and other creative engagement serves as a container for awareness that makes space for encounter—with ourselves, our neighbors, the world, and with the God who creates and sustains us. Acknowledging that awareness and encounter are important elements in a vital spiritual life, and likewise of thoughtful and engaged spiritual education and formation, we assert the potentiality of creative activity as a wellspring for human flourishing.

Creative activity and expression has been a part of Christianity since ancient times in ritual, music, poetry, dance, and the visual arts. The history of Christian spirituality affirms that spiritual practice and growth are enhanced by creative practices that can help us encounter God in new ways and expand our vision of what is possible. However, our Western, modern culture has emphasized the verbal and analytic in our education processes and has removed the creative arts from everyday experience by professionalizing them. This article calls for a re-integration of art making, creative activity, and an aesthetic way of knowing into Christian spiritual practice, in general, and into Christian education and spiritual leadership training and formation, in particular.

#### THE POWER OF IMAGINATION

The imagination is fundamental to all human activity; indeed, exercising imagination is the creative and critical, intuitive and integrative process central to human becoming. It gives us the power to remember the past, to shape our desires, and to project possibilities for the future. The scholar Wendy Wright aptly describes the imagination as:

...the crucial capacity of the human person to create a world—either the familiar world of the everyday or a world not yet visible. Our relentless human search for new ways of being and relating, our dreams of beauty, our longings for mercy and justice, these are exercises of the imagination that, in a Christian context we would say are prompted by the Divine Imagination itself.<sup>7</sup>

As such, the imagination is the central faculty of creativity, allowing us to imagine the unseen, give form to the new, and actualize potential. Creativity is at the heart of many human pursuits: art making, dreaming and discerning our futures, creating loving relationships, playing in our leisure time, generating new ideas in the workplace, building new visions for what is possible for our communities, working toward justice. The imagination liberates us from time and place, gives us

the power to make and unmake worlds, and helps us to transcend the limitations of external reality. Yet, while God's imagination is limitless and able to consider all possibilities, our imaginations may become constrained and narrowed by the limiting ideas and contexts in which we live. Attending to the whispers of God, who calls us to active awareness, is crucial in a culture that lulls us into passivity and dulls our creative capacity through a constant barrage of media images and the frenzied pace of life. Thus, we assert that a dynamic contemporary Christian spirituality must include practices that nurture creativity by freeing the imagination. Furthermore, we claim the foundations for such practice within the heart of Christian biblical, theological, and historical tradition.

#### BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON CREATIVITY

While books, workshops, and seminars from a secular perspective abound calling people to "claim their inner artist," the Christian spiritual tradition contains a wealth of resources in which to ground creative activity as an enriching form of prayer and spiritual practice. Human creativity, from a Christian perspective, is affirmed in Genesis as being rooted in divine creativity, as an imitation of and extension of God's activity. The creative impulse is an expression of human likeness to God, in whose image we are created (Gen. 1:27 NAB). To delight in the work of the human imagination, then, is to value the image of God in people. As participants in God's creative powers, we are called to be co-creators, persons responsible for helping to shape our world into a more just and peaceful place. Phillip Heifer describes this human role as created co-creator:

Human beings are God's created co-creators whose purpose is to be the agency, acting in freedom, to birth the future that is most wholesome for the nature that has birthed us—the nature that is not only our own genetic heritage, but also the entire human community and the evolutionary and ecological reality in which and to which we belong. Exercising this agency is said to be God's will for humans.<sup>8</sup>

Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, we encounter the natural vitality of creative expression as a means to express faith and celebrate God's faithfulness. In response to God's liberation of the Israelites from Egypt, Moses and the Israelites sing a song to God, while Miriam takes her tambourine and dances with the other women (Exod. 15:1–21). David proclaims his praise of God in front of the ark by



dancing with “abandon” (2 Sam. 6: 14–15). Many of the Psalms revel in the glory of God’s creation and handiwork (Pss. 19, 104) and exhort us to “Sing a new song to the Lord” (Pss. 33, 96, 149). The quintessential song to God within Christian mysticism may be said to be the Song of Songs, which celebrates the delights of the senses, inviting us to relish images of “spikenard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon” (Sg. 4:14) as doorways to a sensual experience of the divine. Such biblical imagery supports the activation of the senses as a means to encounter and praise of God, and finds further foundation in God’s own command to the Israelites to build a sumptuous sanctuary, first as a tabernacle (Exod. 25:1–40) and later as a Temple (1 Chron. 28:11–12).

Not surprisingly then, the Christian value and emphasis upon creativity often comes to a focus in worship. While some historical Christian communities have rejected the use of the arts, most have enriched the liturgy with artistic expression to the glory of God: music, movement and gesture, symbol and sounds, drama, architecture, color and taste, all come together to celebrate the mystery of God’s presence. Christian sacramental perspective affirms the power of sensuous reality to reveal the presence and activity of God. Combined with a theology of incarnation, which asserts that love of our Creator God was revealed to us in the concrete historical person and mission of Jesus Christ, these perspectives undergird the significance of embodied imagination in Christian worship and practice—we live as if the Kingdom that Jesus Christ proclaimed was already fully present in our midst. The Christian community is shaped by these vibrant acts of embodied imagination and then sent forth, challenged to live out in our daily lives, creatively, the intimacy with God and the fellowship that we experience at liturgy.

Indeed, John Paul II acknowledges in his *Letter to Artists*, “Not all are called to be artists in the specific sense of the term. Yet, as Genesis has it, all men and women are entrusted with the task of crafting their own life: in a certain sense, they are to make of it a work of art, a masterpiece.”<sup>1</sup> Thus, the primary creative act is the living of our daily lives, living a holistic life of depth and beauty. Cultivating creatively and imagination is, thus, essential to spiritual life and practice. It is, in a profound way, a call—not only of the individual but also of the whole community of faith.

In the Scriptures, God repeatedly calls people to creative imagination by bringing forth a new vision of community. For example, Abraham is called to go to a strange land and become a great nation (Gen. 12:2–3); Moses is called to free the Israelites (Exod. 3:4–19); and while the prophet Jeremiah is called by God to destroy, he is also “to build and to plant” (Jeremiah 1:4–10). In the New Testament,

Luke’s Gospel begins with the story of the Annunciation, when Mary is called to consent to the birth of Jesus (1:26–38), to cooperate with God’s creative power working deep within her. Paul’s letters also include a celebration of our ability to labor with God’s power (Col. 1:24–29) in forming and sustaining a unified Christian community, one body with a variety of gifts (Rom. 12:3–8), through which we serve as “God’s co-workers” (1 Cor. 3:5–17). Such was the witness of Jesus Christ, who proclaimed the Kingdom of God through metaphor, symbol, and loving action—his life and teaching, especially through parables, serve to release us from ordinary expectations into a new way of seeing, freeing our imaginations to seek God in unexpected places and to create a more just community. In summary, the Scriptures draw us into service of God’s deeper vision of what is possible for humanity, and the responses of the faithful are embodied creative acts, heralding the arrival of something new born into the world, as we labor together to bring God’s vision to reality.

#### SPIRITUAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON CREATIVITY

The history of Christian spirituality also provides numerous examples of ways in which art making and imagination have served the faithful in their creative efforts to understand and respond to God’s call. One example is Hildegard of Bingen, a twelfth-century abbess and prophet, who expressed her visions of God in writing, visual art, poetry, sermons, and music. For her, the heavens were filled with an ongoing celestial concert, and the making of music was a duty and the heart of praise and joy. Music performed the indispensable function of converting the heart and reuniting heaven with earth. For many believers such as Hildegard, then, the focus of artistic activity has been on crafting a product, one that reflects or even inspires religious experience.

However, other Christians have approached creative endeavor as a process, a means to or vehicle for spiritual encounter. For example, Ignatius of Loyola developed the *Spiritual Exercises* around a method of praying with the imagination in which one enters a Scripture passage and imagines the fullness of the scene—conversations, sights, smells, sounds. This method is a fundamental affirmation of the power of the imagination to convey truth for one’s own life and discernment.<sup>2</sup>



It is this latter general emphasis in Christian spiritual tradition—upon creative activity as process—that we believe proves an especially fruitful resource for formation today.

Creativity is a powerful shaping force in human life. It is an intangible human capacity of a transcendent nature. Creativity is “the process of bringing something new into being,”<sup>18</sup> something that did not exist before—an idea, a new arrangement, a painting, a story. This creation, which is a new reality, works to enlarge our ways of seeing the world and what we perceive as possible. Freeing the imagination is at the heart of this potent process.

Psychologist Graham Wallas was the first to describe four “stages” to the creative process, a theory widely accepted and one that is particularly helpful in demonstrating how creativity and spirituality may converge.<sup>19</sup> In his theory, the first stage is preparation. This is a stage of conscious work, readying oneself for the creative endeavor. It involves discipline and training. Artists engage in years of education in various forms and methods. Similarly, persons committed to a life of prayer engage in the discipline of regular practice and formation that increases their receptivity to God in the prayer experience.

The second stage is incubation, in which the artist does not voluntarily or consciously think about a problem. He or she may be involved in other work, or engaged in some form of leisure activity. In the spiritual life, this stage can also be looked at as a period of letting go, of emptying oneself of expectations and self-directives, of making space for God to enter. “Preparation and action can only take one so far; at this point, she must stand in readiness and wait for ‘the other’ to complete her experience, be it aesthetic incept or the religious ‘more.’”<sup>20</sup> It is a stage of simultaneous readiness and surrender to the work of God.

The third stage is illumination. This is where the flashes of insight occur after the waiting in incubation. It is a mysterious process likened to the images that appear in our dreams, received as gift from beyond us. In creative moments, we talk of being inspired. To inspire means to breathe into, drawn from the Latin *spiritus*, also meaning “to be animated or filled by the spirit.”<sup>21</sup>

The fourth stage is verification. This is the stage of working to elaborate on those initial insights, developing these intuitions into the creative work itself. It is the stage where we birth what has been laboring within us. For the artist, it may be the creation of a painting or song or dance. Scholar Earle Coleman writes of the variety of ways this stage can come to expression in the spiritual life: “Genuine religion is always fruitful, productive, or constructive, as when religious figures establish hospitals, schools, libraries, and monasteries... feed the hungry, teach,

preach, inspire, write, translate texts, undertake pilgrimages, and create art.”<sup>22</sup> The processes of preparation and surrender lead to inspirations from God that are meant to be fulfilled by concrete expression through actions in the world.

These stages are a general pattern of a creative process; they are not, however, always clearly delineated from each other, nor are they necessarily progressive and linear. Our experience has been that creativity is far more organic and intuitive, but the stages offer some helpful insights into the nature of how creativity may work. At the very least, they suggest an affinity between certain movements or moments within creative and spiritual experiences.

Rollo May, the well-known Jungian psychologist, describes two essential qualities of the creative process that are helpful for integration with spirituality. The first quality is that of the creative act as an encounter. Encountering an idea or an image absorbs the person involved. Essential to this encounter is a willingness to give oneself over to it. Encounter allows us to distinguish between talent and creativity: talent may reside in a person, but creativity can be seen only in the creative act itself. We are creative in the doing of it, within the encounter.

The intensity of giving oneself over to the encounter speaks to the second quality of the creative process, engagement. May describes creativity as characterized by an intensity of awareness, a heightened consciousness with its accompanying emotion of joy as a result of actualizing one’s own potential. This heightened consciousness is not self-control, but surrender and absorption: “We cannot will creativity. But we can will to give ourselves to the encounter with intensity and dedication of commitment.”<sup>23</sup> This language of encounter and engagement resonates with Christian spiritual experience and with the process of education and formation, which we shall now explore in greater detail.

#### CREATIVITY AND PRAYER

We might describe prayer in similar ways to those that Rollo May uses to describe creativity: at its heart it is an encounter with God. The degree to which we allow ourselves to be absorbed by and surrender to that encounter is the degree to which we allow ourselves to be engaged by God’s active presence in our lives. The nature of prayer as encounter is evident in its personal nature. In prayer, God is addressed as “Thou” or “you,” as in personal conversation with someone.



This understanding of prayer, as encounter, springs from our understanding of Christian spirituality. Spirituality has been defined as "... that inner dimension of the person called by certain traditions 'the spirit.' This spiritual core is the deepest center of the person. It is here the person experiences ultimate reality."<sup>10</sup> Spirituality is something central to being human, based upon our connection to and longing for what is of ultimate value. Christian spirituality is rooted in the lived encounter with Jesus Christ in the Spirit and is concerned with the ways in which Christian teachings shape us as individuals who are part of a larger Christian community.<sup>11</sup> Prayer is an engagement and encounter with this ultimate reality.

The poet Denise Levertov writes of the parallels between the journey of art and the journey of faith. She described art as an "act of faith" because it is a journey into the unknown, in ways similar to engaging in prayer. She describes the work of art as entering a stage of improvisation as the artist begins to create its form: "That step, from entertaining a project for a poem or other work of art, to actually painting, composing, dancing, writing it, resembles moving from intellectual assent to opening the acts of daily life to permeation by religious faith."<sup>12</sup> Prayer like creative activity, when fully entered into, is often an improvisational act, as we cannot anticipate the ways God will move in us at this moment of encounter.

As we have discussed, the creative process means creating for the joy of doing, rather than focusing on the product. Exploring creativity in a deeply intimate way honors the process itself rather than focusing on the finished work. To be truly creative, one must move between states of openness to new associations of ideas and states of focused explorations of these associations. We engage in a discipline within which we cultivate an attitude of openness towards surprise and serendipity, while we wait with patience and humility. Such openness is often described as awareness, or attention, within the Christian spiritual tradition; thus, we may assert that to cultivate imagination and creativity is also to cultivate awareness.

#### CREATIVITY AND EDUCATION

This very language of encounter and awareness may also be found within contemporary philosophies of education. To learn and to know requires at its most basic level an encounter, an interactive experience with that which is to become known. But many contemporary scholars also argue that such an encounter is ideally char-

acterized by a spirit of openness, a willingness to engage and receive, in a manner that resonates with our discussion thus far about spirituality and creativity.

Parker Palmer explicitly subtitles his original text *To Know As We Are Known* as "A Spirituality of Education." In so doing, he names his concern for the formation of the whole person and for holistic ways of approaching education. His stated goal is to develop "whole sight" in himself and in his students—a way of seeing and being and learning in the world that has less to do with the western enlightenment approach, which he describes as spurred by curiosity and the desire to control, and more to do with a desert monastic approach, which seeks to cultivate loving awareness. Indeed, his spirituality of education promotes an understanding of knowing as loving, as embracing the known, recognizing that we as knowers are intimately connected with the known, and known by it. "The act of knowing is an act of love, the act of entering and embracing the reality of the other, of allowing the other to enter and embrace our own."<sup>13</sup> As we have shown, this is also the act of prayer, as well as the work of encounter and engagement in creative activity.

Other scholars utilize less explicitly Christian language to describe this process of loving awareness and encounter in art and in education. For example, Nel Noddings, who writes as an ethicist as well as a philosopher of education, names an affinity between her "ethics of care" and Martin Buber's concern for the other as "Thou," as well as Derrida and Levinas' "ethics of alterity"—which involves "letting the other be."<sup>14</sup> In terms of a pedagogical approach, her model suggests that to achieve knowing, one must respectfully acknowledge the other as other, and furthermore one needs to care for or love the known. In a similar vein, the field of aesthetics at times suggests that to understand or to know a work of art, one must love it; and Maxine Greene brings that insight explicitly to bear on her philosophy of education in her text *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change*. Greene believes that imagination is crucial to knowing, and that one can educate the imagination through artistic engagement. Her sense of the value of aesthetics is precisely—insofar as it promotes awareness of, sensitivity to, and appreciation of a work of art—an other as other. The exercise of imagination, in receiving the other, for Greene is essential not just to understanding art, but also to making sense of reality. It is part and parcel of knowing.<sup>15</sup>

In summary then, knowing itself may be argued to involve an aesthetic mode, which is characterized by loving awareness and engaged encounter, just like the practice of Christian spirituality and the practice of creativity. How appropriate, then, to utilize creative activity as a container for awareness, a vehicle for encounter, and a pedagogical approach to spiritual formation, education, and training.



We took just such a pedagogical approach while teaching a course entitled “Creativity and Christian Spirituality” at the Graduate Theological Union, in Berkeley, during the spring of 2003, funded by a Valparaiso “Practicing Our Faith” Project Grant. The course led a diverse group of seminarians and doctoral students in religion through the biblical, theological, historical, psychological, and spiritual foundations, briefly outlined in this article, for claiming and practicing creativity. Like the Valparaiso Project, we affirmed that spirituality springs from a particular way of life, supported by a specific faith tradition and community, which is made up of practices. In the book *Practicing Our Faith*, practices are defined according to their value and function within the community of faith, in ways which are instructive for naming creative activity itself as a Christian spiritual practice.<sup>17</sup>

First, practices address fundamental human needs and conditions through concrete human acts. If creativity is basic to human nature—for indeed “making special” is not merely a theological imperative of the *imago dei*, as we have argued, but actually a biological need, according to Ellen Dissanayake<sup>18</sup>—then practices of art making and other creative work fulfill the human need to engage the creative process in a very practical and concrete way. Practices are not valued just for their outcomes; it is again the engagement in the process itself that has value.

Second, practices are done together over time. Certainly, as previously mentioned, the believing community has engaged in creative activity for centuries. The singing of psalms; the painting of icons; the telling of stories; the expression of spiritual longing and insight through the forms of symbol, metaphor, and image are all ancient practices of our Christian tradition.

Third, practices possess standards of excellence. The practice of creative expression and art making are not just matters of entertainment or ornamentation, but of surrendering ourselves to a process greater than ourselves and letting God’s light shine through our expression. It is important to reflect on the ways in which we are able to let go of control of the creative process enough to let God’s insights become manifest in our work. We might ask ourselves how open we are to being surprised by what is revealed.

Finally, when we begin to see our ordinary activities as Christian practices, we come to perceive how our daily lives are intimately connected with what God is doing in the world. Creativity is part of our daily lives—in the work we do, the decisions we make, the love we give, and the hopes we have. By making it an

intentional part of our spiritual practice, we may grow to see the ways in which God is active with and through our everyday lives.<sup>19</sup>

As such, the course participants in “Creativity and Christian Spirituality” engaged in regular creative activities throughout the course. We employed collage, painting, beads, masks, movement, singing, and like activities, in such a manner as to emphasize the process, over product. As we played and created together, we simultaneously prayed together. And we explored how each of us might utilize art making and more generally practice creativity, as a means to make space, cultivate awareness, and foster encounter both within our personal lives and our ministries.

#### THE PRACTICE OF CREATIVITY

To use creativity as a Christian spiritual practice involves a fundamental shift in intention. We must enter the creative process with a commitment to seek God, which involves the humility to invite God into our prayer and lives, to be an intimate part of the process, to help direct and guide our efforts while we listen. Just as prayer is our response to God’s invitation to a deeper relationship, so the creative process begins with God’s own creative desires inviting us to respond prayerfully with our creative expression.

The creative process and art making, with intention and awareness of God’s invitation and movement within us, become the process of prayer itself. As previously suggested, it is a process of surrender and reception, of letting go and welcoming newness. It is a process of dialogue as we reach out to communicate with God and open ourselves to God’s communication with us through image and symbol, gesture and sound. We can develop an awareness of God’s presence in everything we do, see, and feel, so that prayer generates all of our activities. We can use our imagination and intention to keep calling God’s presence in our awareness. “If we become conscious that every moment is a possible sacramental one and that God is at the horizon of every act and Jesus walks with us in the Spirit, then every mundane thing we do is consciously connected to God as a gesture of prayer.”<sup>20</sup> All of life becomes rooted in encounter with the holy, through a deep sense of awe and humility at the revelation of God present in every moment. Developing an awareness of God in our creative expression reveals a God who is not static, but a dynamic and active force in our lives and in the world. This allows us to cultivate ways of being in the world that are creative.

Thus, the very practice of creativity cultivates a deeper awareness in the

living of our daily spiritual lives. In a sense, art making can inform the way we live. Formalized artistic processes—for example, the practice of the rhythms of creative preparation, incubation, and illumination, or in spiritual terms the practice of rest and activity, of receptivity and expression—teach us skills and ways of being that are transferable to everyday life and prove essential to healthy and creative living. Art empowers our daily lives through time of self-reflection and contemplation. Art requires acts of courage to make oneself visible through the creation of form and the expression of visions. Most importantly, when we steep ourselves in the creative process, we open ourselves to deeper awareness, encounter, and knowledge, which serve us in our becoming and in our loving engagement with the world.

This article is meant to be evocative rather than prescriptive. We invite those engaged in the formation and training of persons in ministry to consider the ways in which you might engage the creative process more intentionally in your programs both through the practices of art making as well as through broader attention to elements that nurture creativity. Some of these elements, as we have explored in this article, include considering whether you allow the spaciousness in your program that creativity needs for flourishing and that imagination needs for free exploration of possibilities. Is there a rhythm of receptivity and activity as a framework for how you approach training? Do you include creative activities that can become a container of awareness, which makes space for encounter and promotes loving awareness toward oneself, others, and God? Are you able to let go of some level of control and allow the creative process to unfold freely and then welcome God's newness that is ushered in as a result? Is attention to the creative process a central framework for how you have designed your program or is it an added consideration? Is there consideration for the ways the image of God, and the invitation to create that flows forth from this, are uniquely manifested and expressed in those persons you train?

We leave you with these programmatic questions to consider as well as an invitation to pay attention to your own creative process: In what ways do you tend to your own desire and capacity for birthing? What brings you life and joy? When do you feel most vital and fully alive? How do you model a lived way of honoring the creative process in your own life? What facilitates your encounter with the holy Creator in whose image you are lovingly made?

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## Urban Clinical Pastoral Education: Student Reflections on Practices of Faith

Jennette L. Rude

The Urban Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) program is based in urban Chicago. The CPE students' ministry is within the context of urban social and faith-based organizations serving the most marginalized people. Some but not all of the CPE sites have a person who serves in the capacity of pastor or chaplain. By and large, the supervision and training of these students expands their concepts of ministry and their identities as persons called into ministry within their faith traditions. The population served includes youth and adults of all cultures, faith traditions/spiritualities, sexual orientation, and spiritual needs.

The Urban CPE focuses its initial curriculum on four of the practices as identified in *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*.<sup>1</sup> This included the students' reflections on their faiths and cultures related to the practice in their CPE—ritual leadership, verbatim/ministry encounter reflections, open/covenant group reflections, personal process reflection notes, individual supervision—and in the systems and social locations of their ministries and those with whom

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