

I, The Creator
Beacon Unitarian Universalist Congregation
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Driving southwest out of Paris you first spot the flamboyant spires nearly 10 miles off, rising up over a caramel carpet of wheat fields into a bluebird sky. And then you approach, you cannot help but gasp, as the fullness of the magnificent Chartres Cathedral comes into view. A French Gothic structure, begun in 1145 and completed in 1220, Chartres is a quintessential example of a medieval cathedral where grandeur, religion, and the commerce of the surrounding village merged.

Chartres has for centuries been a pilgrim's destination -- to walk its famed labyrinth, to view the Sancta Camisa (a tunic allegedly worn by the Virgin Mary at the time of Jesus' birth), and for many, to study and marvel at the spectacular stained glass windows – 167 in all – “two stories of them, roses, oculi, lancets – each one a masterpiece of beauty and workmanship, transcending time, transcending space.”

After visiting Chartres, my colleague the Rev. Patrick O'Neill recalls how the “windows wrap you in color and turn the cold harshness of granite stone flooring into a warm liquid carpet.” France's royalty and nobility bankrolled many of these windows. And, as you would expect in a Cathedral, most of them illustrate epic stories from Scripture, stories of the lives of saints, from the life of Christ, and from the history of Christendom itself.

And, yet, as you round the sanctuary, you find yourself standing before a collection of panes that tell another story – not the saga of their Savior, his birth, his ministry or his death and return. Rather, these special windows celebrate craft, beauty and utility, the common man who worshipped at Chartres, and who built its great edifice, spires, labyrinth and stained glass splendor.

These are the so-called “Guild Windows.” Among them, there is the shoemaker's window and the mason's. The village water carriers, the fishmonger, the blacksmith, and the butcher are represented in meticulously crafted tableaux of glass and etching.

Vine-growers and tanners underwrote windows in the same manner. As did the furriers, drapers, coopers, milliners, and apothecaries. And there (below a soaring depiction of Old testament prophets), in a diamond shape encircled by blue glass rosettes, is the Carpenter's Window. It was a gift from the carpenters of every village in France, each of whom contributed even their smallest coin to commission this work of art for God's house. The two young guildsmen in the window are mid chop on a rough-hewn log. They are in motion and yet convey a stillness and concentration.

A look of contentment radiates from their fair faces. They are caught in the act of creation, and like the other skilled tradesmen depicted in Chartres Guild windows, the duo is shown blending craft and function, manifesting beauty for the people of the French countryside; they are, in the words of poet Marge Piercy: "of use...submerged in the task."

Although we do not worship the divine Christ as UUs, we do appreciate the wholly human Jesus, and he was just such a craftsman himself, a carpenter who learned his trade at the shoulder of his father, Joseph. We rarely see depiction of him in his carpenter persona, although we can presume that he measured twice and cut once, and that he, too, appreciated the opportunity to apply useful craftsmanship to bring beauty into a broken, sometimes ugly world.

I chatted with a carpenter friend of mine the other day while pondering this sermon and asked him: "Where does your creativity come from?" He smiled and said half-jokingly, "Ah, the Muses, of course." According to the ancient Greeks, the Muses (goddesses of such things as art and dance and sacred song and the like) come to you, whisper in your ear, or they whisper from inside you. This is a metaphor, I believe, for what it feels like when an idea pops into our consciousness and mingles with a divine and creative spark.

My colleague Roger Bertschausen offers a fitting connection here to Process theology, which, as he explains, "asserts that we co-create the world with the divine – the force pulling us forward. The divine is the force encouraging us to be good and whole people. This force is love, but we make the decisions and take actions, and decide whether to co-create or co-destroy in the human realm.

As I chatted with my carpenter friend, I also inquired whether he relishes the process of creation or the product more. Without hesitation, he responded, "process." Yes, he feels a sense of accomplishment in the table or cabinet or perfect mitered edge, yet, the process of creation is why he lifts the plane and the saw at all.

Creation, giving birth to an idea, a crusade, a movement, or a dream is process. Building walls and crafting cabinets is process. Living our perfectly imperfect lives with as much creative integrity, humor, and perspective as we can muster is process...one of joy and sorrow, masterpieces and messes, rousing anthems and woeful ballads, all woven fine together. Creativity contributes to our sense of aliveness and our playfulness. . . . One art teacher, Adriana Diaz, defines creations as "places where caring and daring come together." They open our eyes to nature and the body and give us fresh appreciation for both ritual and recreation.

There is a prevailing belief that creativity is an inborn trait- you are either creative or you're not. In truth, we are, for the most part, born with a creative brain (the right cerebral hemisphere) and have many skills. Children tend to be naturally curious and eager to explore the world around them and can spend hours making up imaginary games and friends, and pretending. Their minds run free. Yet, as we age, we can begin to lose some of that natural creative spark as we learn left brain reasoning in school.

In fact, research shows that our propensity to generate original ideas reduces from 90% at age 5 to 20% at age 7 to plummets to 2% as adults! Yikes. However, unless you have suffered brain damage in your right hemisphere or had it removed, you still have a creative brain. So, you are still inherently “creative,” even if you are not using your creative skills to capacity. Maybe we’ve become too self-conscious, less satisfied with the process and fixated on the product? Something spiffy enough to share on Instagram, perhaps?

In his book, “The Courage to Create.” Rollo May muses that creative people, as he sees them, “are distinguished by the fact that they can live with anxiety, insecurity, sensitivity and defenselessness for the gift of the *Divine Madness* (to borrow a term from the classical Greeks).

The buzzworthy author Elizabeth Gilbert chimes in, too. She believes that creative living helps us achieve a state of transcendence. So, I wonder – how can we do this? Gilbert offers “seven magical lessons in creativity in her bestseller, “Big Magic: Creative Living Beyond Fear.” They are: Put Fear in the Backseat (creative living is the path of the brave). Catch Genius When You Can (But Don’t Wait for It!). Be Light and Unburdened (Like Tom Waits). Don’t Avoid the Dark Side. Treat Creativity as a Vocation. Think Like a Trickster.

Creation takes time. In her reflection, “Brick by Brick,” the Rev. Meg Barnhouse recalls one summer when she observed a team of masons building a brick wall in her neighborhood. She writes: “Against the brutal heat, they stretch a tarp overhead to get a little shade. One man who looks to be in his seventies is the leader. His skin is the color of bittersweet chocolate, his beard is gray. I see him teach a younger mason how to do the work. Often they are both smiling.”

“He looks like he loves what he is doing,” Barnhouse observes. “I wonder how he can love building walls, day after day, handling bricks, teaching the art of brick laying. Is it the teaching he loves? Does he love the wall itself? Does he look forward to seeing it finished? Or does he love the process, the feel of the bricks in his hand, the squish of the mortar, the challenge of making the symmetry of pillars and arches and geometry of it all?” She concludes, “I think from the look on his face, he loves the process. I think he will go onto the next wall as if it were just a continuation of this one, then the next and the next, and never be bored.”

“I want to be like that,” says Barnhouse, “and I suppose I am in my job as a minister. Brick by brick, story by story, we build a community, the patterns, the symmetry, the pure joy, sustained by the strong structure we create out of our lives and our hopes. We will never be finished.”

Yes, Meg, you are so right. We may not create an edifice as grand as Chartres Cathedral, but the process of creation, in collaboration with our inherent divine spark, is like the sun dancing against the etched stained glass chards of the Carpenter’s window. This shapes a prism of beauty that radiates out across all the country field and city skylines of this broken, sometimes ugly world.

Let us remember that the Guild windows were given one mosaic at a time, piece by piece, coin by coin, by devout villagers, common but skilled, who wanted to contribute something beautiful to the ages. Like the guilders of Chartres, like my

carpenter friend, may we find creative find ways to be of use, to conspire with the Muses, to give birth to beauty -- plank by plank, piece by gloriously human piece, hand to hand, heart to heart. We will never be finished.

Blessed be. Blessed we and Amen.

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