

Who's the Creator?
Nicholas Filzen MFC Sermon,
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When I started writing this sermon, I hadn't planned on getting going just yet. My plan that day was to do a fair amount of reading for this interview. At that point, I still had a lot to do and was feeling the pressure to get it done in time. *And*, as I was reading one of the required books, "Everyday Spiritual Practice," my immediate external need to keep reading was overcome by what seemed to be an immediate and deep internal need to start creating.

I was reading the reflection written by Rev. Laurie Bushbaum about the seemingly simple process of quilting as a spiritual practice, when I just *needed* to grab my computer to get this bursting at the seams (so to speak) inspiration down. *And*, as I began writing, I couldn't get this question out of my mind: Is it really me writing this sermon? *And*, if not, then who?

Here are Rev. Bushbaum's words that so intensely resonated with what was already on my heart:

"Art is not so much what we make, but how we relate to the world. Not a noun, but a verb. This puts art back in the position to be claimed by the many. Quilting has been a way for me to use a particular discipline as a means of discovering that it is not the art creation itself that matters so much but what the process of creation teaches...

The spiritual discipline of quilting has... taught me the rhythms of the creation process. Many of my quilt pieces were started, partially completed, only then to spend two or three years on a shelf waiting for the vision to reappear or clarify... When the inspiration comes, it sometimes comes with such dazzling, simple clarity that I can only say a quiet "thank you" for this amazing grace."¹

Each creation can't merely be claimed by just one. It can also be "claimed by the many" - by everyone and everything. In a metaphorical *and* real sense. But I'm getting ahead of myself. I'm also moved by the last sentence: "I can only say a quiet 'Thank You' for this amazing grace." I, too, offer my deep gratitude when the muse arrives - especially when I'm not expecting it. But, to whom do I say,

¹ Alexander, Scott W. *Everyday Spiritual Practice: Simple Pathways for Enriching Your Life*. Boston, MA: Skinner House Books, 1999.

“thank you?” Certainly to Rev. Bushbaum for her wisdom. But the inspiration didn’t just come from her. I also did at least a little bit of the work. And, how did she and I get connected? I thank the members of the MFC for asking me to read this book. But how did the book get created? Obviously, a lot of folks influenced this creating moment. So many threads to connect!

Like I did by including Rev. Bushbaum’s words, many 20th and 21st century composers of music in the west directly borrow from their musical ancestors to enhance their own works (not to say that this homily is anywhere near the brilliant music compositions of folks like Stravinsky or Prokofiev). There was even a whole “period” of music referred to as neo-classical, when composers, like the two guys I just mentioned, intentionally played with the melodies and styles of earlier masters to make something new. Similarly, modern DJ’s are masterful at seamlessly weaving together different songs or making remixes of those songs. Again, to create something new. An apparent instantaneous sound quilt creation. As these “new” creations happen, I return to my previous question: who was actually creating these works? The original composer alone? The modern musician creating the new thing by themselves? Someone or something else entirely?

There’s a type of theology directly tied to early 20th century Unitarian history called Process theology, created and refined at least initially by Alfred North Whitehead and Henry Wieman (you all may have heard of them). They argue in a few more words than I’m going to use here that creation is not fixed. It’s always emerging. In process. Moment to moment. Our communities, the world, even each of us as individual creatures are constantly becoming, based on all the direct and indirect interactions and experiences we’ve had now and in the past. And *for them*, God is actively involved.

As religious naturalist Dr. Ursula Goodenough argues, Nature herself is constantly emerging. She uses the Latin phrase “Natura Naturans,” or “nature naturing.” Nature becoming nature by being nature in an endless process. The Haudenosaunee creation story gift from what would have been our

Time for All Ages today, in which creation is shared among all creatures in the animal kin-dom, is a lovely mythos for this process.

UU ethicist Dr. Sharon Welch (who many of you probably know), is notorious for loving jazz. She attends jazz performances regularly and often uses it as metaphor in her teaching - both the aesthetics and philosophy of it. A metaphor that really resonates with me, too. Though I come from more of a classical background, jazz just makes more sense to me now. Jazz and classical music both *become* music when musicians transfer it from the page to an audible artform. This itself is a beautiful manifestation of co-creation. Yet, jazz also has this built in component of improvisation. Creation on the fly. Or is it? Importantly, when Wynton Marsalis improvises, he's not simply making up random notes in a vacuum. He's doing it in relation to the pre-specified chords and styles, the notes he played previously, and the other artists with whom he's performing. And of course, the audience hearing the performance plays a role, too. This is powerful and compelling metaphor for how life itself is constantly becoming. Constantly being created, co-created, and re-created in relationship to others now and in the past. "[Life] is... how we relate to the world. Not a noun, but a verb. This puts [life] back in the position to be claimed by the many."

If life is a relational artform, then so, too, is justice. Life cannot truly be relational without it. When co-creating justice, it's imperative that there's an awareness and intentionality about which voices, bodies, and experiences are privileged in the process of creation; and are most impacted by what and how we create. Intentional action at the most vulnerable connection points of our interdependent web is required. Without deliberate, shared, *Divine* action, the whole web could break apart. (Something that too often feels like it could happen at any moment when the bodies and lives of folks like Breonna Taylor and George Floyd seem to matter so little to a destructive system and the power players keeping it in service to themselves.) Yet, we, as individuals and as a community, create the situation in which justice can flourish and oppression can wither. We have the ability and responsibility

to give “life the shape of justice.”² In practice, this takes an awareness of our social location and privilege in the context of historical injustice, so those of us with oversized power don't unknowingly reinforce... re-create an oppressive culture. My faith demands I keep that relational co-creativity at the forefront of my ministry; and gives me hope that together, if we answer that divine call, we can create justice. We can create Beloved Community.

So, in answer to the kind of big, implied question here: Is God the creator? Yes. And yet, I personally don't believe God is a singular conscious entity, intentionally doing any concrete actions alone. Outside of nature. Outside of us. Ruach Elohim, the *Spiriting* of God, is the relational *verb* form of the Interdependent Web of existence of which we are a part. Every-thing, *every-body*, is literally co-created by, with, and through, every other body, forever. Every piece of this quilt can “be claimed by the many.” Embodied art of the most Divine Nature constantly emerging. Forever transcending. A new creation story each moment. And, because of the infinite variables going into each creating moment, infinite possibilities exist for each new story. The beautiful thing about this shared story of stories is that it doesn't take any agency away from each of us as individuals. Each of us are stitched by and are *stitching* this ever-emerging quilt of creation. Sure, this means our actions can increase the bad, yet we also have the power to add some good. The way we're involved in this creative process matters in a powerful way. So, as we go out into this world, lend your creativity to beauty. To justice. To *Life*. Do when the spirit says do. And, then, take a moment to say “thank you” for this amazing grace.

Sing opening lines to “You Gotta Do When the Spirit Says Do”

² “Spirit of Life,” 1981. Carolyn McDade.