

The Spirituality of Spring: Creativity as Spiritual Practice

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg

14 April 2013

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Frederick, Maryland

frederickuu.org

*i thank You God for most this amazing
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes*

*(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings: and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)*

*how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any — lifted from the no
of all nothing — human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?*

*(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)*

—e.e. cummings

Four months ago I stood in this pulpit, and asked, “Can you feel the Wheel of the Year turning?” At that time, in early December, I was inviting us to pause and notice that inexorable pull toward Winter Solstice as the days grow incrementally shorter, culminating in the darkest day of the year with the least hours of sunlight.¹ This past week, however, there we have seen less of a slow turning of what pagans call the Wheel of the Year and more of a sudden jolt. This past Wednesday, the headline in *The Frederick News-Post* read: “From sledding to sunbathing.” Winter cold and winds were hanging on longer than expected, then suddenly we seem to have skipped spring and catapulted directly to summer. At the same time, there has been a resplendent array of flowers blooming.

¹ Carl Gregg, “Can You Feel the Wheel of the Year Turning? A Spirituality of Winter,” available at <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/carlgregg/2012/12/can-you-feel-the-wheel-of-the-year-turning-a-spirituality-of-winter>.

Back in December in that sermon titled “The Spirituality of Winter,” I proposed that those among us who are drawn to the cold, dark days of winter may find spiritual practices of darkness, silence, letting go, and saying “No” to be particularly fruitful — or if you are in a winter season of your life (this seasonal dynamic is both metaphorical and literal).² But in contrast to the cold, long nights of winter, which make me want to curl up next to a fire and eat dense, rich foods, the warming and lengthening days of spring make me want to get outside, exercise, and savor the beauty of nature blossoming. In due time, I will likely preach a sermon on “The Spirituality of Summer” and “The Spirituality of Fall.” But for now, I invite us to focus on the changes happening within you as the world around us shifts from winter to spring.

Spring is a time of dawning light, new life, new birth, and new hope — a time of warmth, exuberance, dancing, and blossoming. And if spring is your favorite season, the most natural corresponding spiritual practices might be artistic, creative endeavors — or if metaphorically you are in a springtime season of your life. Accordingly, I have subtitled of this morning’s sermon “Creativity as Spiritual Practice.”

I would like us to explore the spiritual practice of creativity in two ways. The first more abstract and esoteric, and the second more concrete and down-to-earth. To set the context for the first of two approaches, I would like to briefly remind you of a sermon from about a month ago on “Why Is There Something Instead of Nothing?”³ In that sermon I quoted some fairly startling statistics from astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson about the strong argument that can be made that the universe does not have any particular purpose — or at least if there is a purpose of our 13.7 billion year old universe (with more than 400 billion galaxies), then the purpose did not reach its peak with the evolution of the species of *homo sapiens sapiens* here on the far-flung planet Earth.

There may, however, be an easier case to be made for extrapolating a trajectory of increasing complexity in our 13.7 billion year old Universe Story. In a bare bones account, you can trace increasing levels of complexity of “pre-atomic, atomic, molecular, unicellular, multi-

² For my seasonal typology, I’m drawing from Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing: A Primer in Creation Spirituality Presented in Four Paths, Twenty-Six Themes, and Two Questions*.

³ Carl Gregg, “Why Is There Something Instead of Nothing?” available at <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/carlgregg/2013/03/why-is-there-something-instead-of-nothing/>.

cellular, vertebrate, primate, and human” — perhaps extending to even higher emergent levels of complexity that what have not yet fully identified or perceived.⁴ Whether you believe that the universe has a purpose, it is striking that we humans exist — that we’re here and that it’s spring! Over the course of billions of years, it’s breathtaking to consider the emerging stages of complexity of pre-atomic particles into atoms, molecules, and prokaryotic, then eukaryotic cells — to vertebrates, primates, and then into we modern humans. There is “not nothing” and not even just “something”; there is the outstandingly amazing *something* of ourselves, our society, and the world around us.

As e.e. cummings wrote, we are surrounded in the spring by “the leaping greenly spirits of trees / and a blue true dream of sky; and...everything which is natural which is infinite which is yes.” There is also brokenness and tragedy aplenty. But that brokenness and tragedy is interlaced with beauty and inspiration. And looking at the full sweep of the 13.7 billion year Universe Story, one theologian describes humans this way:

[We are] stardust now evolved to the place that the stardust can think about itself!
⁵ ...We are the universe becoming conscious of itself. **We are stardust that has begun to contemplate the stars.** We have arisen out of the dynamics of the Earth. Four billion years ago, our planet was molten rock, and now it sings opera. Let me tell you, this is good news!⁶

As a way of experimenting with the implications of this idea, the spiritual teacher Andrew Cohen has been leading what he calls “Being and Becoming” retreats. The first half of the retreat

⁴ On the eight stages of emergent complexity, see John Haught, “Teilhard de Chardin: Action, Contemplation, and the Cosmos.” *Radical Grace: A Publication of the Center for Action and Contemplation* 23:2 (April - June). Albuquerque, NM: 4-5. For a more nuanced, book-length account, Harold J. Morowitz, *The Emergence of Everything: How the World Became Complex* (New York, NY: Oxford Univ. Press).

⁵ *We are “Stardust now evolved to the place that the stardust can think about itself”* — see Michael Dowd, [Thank God for Evolution](#), 92. The part about “four billion years ago the Earth was molten rock and now it sings opera” is originally from Brian Swimme.

⁶ “*We are the universe becoming conscious of itself...*” — see Carter Phipps, “Preachers of a New Pentecost.” *What Is Enlightenment* (May - July 2004), 25. Available at <http://www.enlightennext.org/magazine/j25/new-pentecost.asp>.

focuses on cultivating what many of us have come to expect from mindfulness retreats: a greater awaking to the fullness of *being* present to each moment in the sense of “Be Here Now!” But the second half of Cohen’s retreats are more unusual, inviting practitioners to open themselves to what he calls the “evolutionary impulse.” One is invited to move one’s focus from “being” to “*becoming*” — to what is arising and emerging on the horizon of each new moment.

Is the spirituality of spring like that? Have you ever not been surprised by spring? At least for me spring is always more miraculous and astounding than I expect and remember in the intricate details and abundance of the flowering. Maybe it is because I’m so grateful for the end of winter. But it’s more than that. Thinking back on just this past week, I was freshly stopped in my tracks by the brilliant, blazing yellow of Forsythia bushes. I feel drawn to them like a beacon. And the startling glory of the Weeping Cherry Trees. Such beauty that we don’t control and didn’t invent, but are invited to behold and receive in gratitude. At it’s best, I think that’s what those “becoming” retreats are about. Inviting ourselves not only to be present to every moment, but also to increase our awareness of the wonder of the evolutionary workings that turns pre-atomic particles over billions of years into humans, that results in stardust becoming aware of itself, that results in the annual flowering of spring. By no means am I making an argument for simplistic intelligent design. But I am marshaling an argument for **wonder, amazement, awe, and gratitude as integral to a spirituality of spring.**

The theologian Matthew Fox say it this way, “We now have an inkling of the unbelievable fertility of the universe, of the constant birthings of atoms and molecules, eggs and spermatozoa, of cells and living organisms in water and on land...”⁷ (181). And the latest calculation from astronomers I’ve seen are that, “There could be 100 billion Earth-like planets” out there.⁸ As you’ve heard me say before, my favorite line from the film *Contact* is that, “I’ll tell you one thing about the universe. The universe is a pretty big place. It’s bigger than anything anyone has ever dreamed of before. So if it’s just us . . . seems like an awful waste of space.”

⁷ “*We now have an inkling*” — Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing*, 181.

⁸ “There could be 100 billion Earth-like planets say astronomers,” available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/science/space/9969746/There-could-be-100-billion-Earth-like-planets-say-astronomers.html>.

What I've been building to is the invitation for you to consider if perhaps our creativity as humans — our creative impulse — is related to the evolutionary impulse of the universe. The groundbreaking American modern dancer and choreographer Martha Graham (1894-1991) said it this way:

There is a vitality, a life force, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all time, this expression is unique. If you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and be lost. The world will not have it. It is not your business to determine how good it is; nor how valuable it is; nor how it compares with other expressions. It is your business to keep it yours, clearly and directly, to keep the channel open.⁹

And if there is a relationship between our individual creativity and the universe's creative bounty, considering this statistic, studies show that, **“80% of six-year-olds but only 10% of forty-year-olds” report being creative. “Thus, between six and forty creativity is killed in our culture...”** (176). I remember a college trombone teacher telling me a few years ago that when he taught general music classes to young children, almost 100% of them could easily and naturally swing and dance to the beat of almost any song he play. But shockingly high numbers of students in his undergraduate general education music course were stiff and seemingly unable to move their bodies to the beat of the music. This is a tragic example of atrophied creativity.

Anytime you hear a call to cut funding for arts education in our public schools, remember that our inherent creativity is being debated. And when I say art, I mean art in the broadest possible sense: painting, pottery, sculpture, design, crafts, weaving, sewing, knitting, photography, video, filmmaking, architecture, music, theater, dance, and so many others. We need more of all these aspects of art in all parts of our society from the public square to the sanctuary.

From a related angle, one the theologian Thomas Berry has said that, **“Gardening is an active participation in the deepest mysteries of the universe.”**¹⁰ Gardening connects you to

⁹Agnes De Mille, *Martha: The Life and Work of Martha Graham: A Biography*.

¹⁰ “Gardening is an active participation in the deepest mysteries of the universe” — The theologian referenced is [Thomas Berry](#) in — Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing*, 189.

the passing of time, the seasons, and the source of your food. This impulse is what led Gandhi to champion the “Do-It-Yourself” method of using a spinning wheel to make your own clothes in an age in which many of us are deeply disconnected from the sweatshops where so much of what we wear is made.¹¹ Growing our own food, cooking our own meals, sewing our own clothes, and creating art are all some of the life-giving practices we can learn when we embrace the springtime seasons of our life.

If there were more time, there’s a lot I would like to say in particular about the burst of creativity we witnessed this past century in the Abstract Expressionist movement in modern art, but that will have to wait for a future sermon. Instead, I will move to my second overall theme, which is a more concrete way of embodying creativity as a spiritual practice.

How many of you have read Julia Cameron’s book *The Artist’s Way*?¹² Now, how many of you have completed the full 12-week course that the book leads you through? I ask that follow-up question because *The Artist’s Way* is one of those books for which reading through it isn’t enough. The transformation comes *not* through reading about rediscovering your inner creativity, but in doing the activities she recommends.

I led a study of *The Artist’s Way* a few years ago in the congregation I was a part of at the time, and two activities in particular still stand out to me: **Morning Pages** and Artist’s Dates. Cameron describes the practice this way:

Three pages of longhand writing, strictly stream of consciousness — not meant to be “art” or even “writing.” Nothing is too petty, too silly, too stupid, or too weird to be included.... Do anything until you have filled three pages. Although occasionally colorful, the morning pages are often negative, frequently fragments, often self-pitying, repetitive, stilted or babyish, angry or bland. Good! This stuff eddies through our subconscious and muddies our days. Get it on the page.

Morning pages, along with meditation and a discernment practice called the “Awareness Examen” (which focuses on consolations and desolations in your life) are some of the spiritual

¹¹ “*This impulse is what led Gandhi to champion*” — Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing*, 191.

¹² Julia Cameron, *The Complete Artist's Way: Creativity as a Spiritual Practice*. To listen for free to an interview with Cameron, visit <http://www.soundstrue.com/podcast/on-the-creative-life>.

practices that I have done most frequently and for the longest time. I can't recommend Morning Pages to you highly enough as a way of clearing your head, and setting the stage for reengaging your creative self.

A spiritual practice that I need to start doing again more regularly is called a “**Weekly Artist Date.**” The idea is to spend an hour or more each week immersing yourself in a creative environment that will help inspire your own creativity. I'll list a few examples of suggested artist dates that I collected back when I led that Artist's Way creativity group. As I list these suggested Artist Date activities, I invite you to notice inside yourself to how it feels to imagine giving yourself permission to spend even one hour indulging in one of these activities once/week. Especially if one or more of these activities resonates with you deeply, I encourage you to try to find a time soon this spring — even this next week — to experiment with one of these Artist's Dates as a way of celebrating the creativity at the heart of a springtime spirituality — and perhaps at the heart of the Universe Story.

1. Take a long, leisurely walk in the woods — or even just around your neighborhood or block. Or take a slow walk during your lunch break and really notice everything around you.
2. Wake-up early to watch the sunrise or find a comfortable place to sit outside and watch the sunset.
3. Visit an ethnic neighborhood and savor different the tastes, sights, sounds, and smell.
4. Go to a local museum, attraction, or plant nursery.
5. Spend a complete morning (or evening) in a bookstore (use it as your own, personal, book museum).
6. Pull out your old school yearbooks, and remember what you and your friends were like. Remember things that pleased you as a child or teenager and pick one to do again.
7. Play with Play-Doh or get some chalk and draw all over the sidewalk.
8. Go to a local batting cage and put in some batting practice or to the playground to swing, slide, or climb the jungle gym.

9. Get a blanket, lay down outside, and cloud watch or try to spot constellations.
10. Take a leisurely bike ride.
11. Hang out for a few hours in the downtown of a neighboring town. Visit a flea market, thrift store, craft fair, or garage sale (maybe find a frame, paint — or take — a picture and frame it).
12. Fly a kite, color in a coloring book, play with a helium balloon, then set it free and watch it float up into the air until you can't see it anymore.

May these ideas percolate within you during the blossoming of this springtime, and give you permission to more robustly engage your creativity.

Spring is a time of dawning light, new life, new birth, and new hope — a time of warmth, exuberance, dancing, and blossoming. And if spring is your favorite season, the most natural corresponding spiritual practices might be artistic, creative endeavors.

As this sermon ends, I want to leave you with one further thought about the transformative potential of embracing creativity as a spiritual practice. When I first saw the Broadway musical *Rent* one of the lyrics that stood out to me most is that, **“The opposite of war isn’t peace, it’s creation.”**¹³ The claim being made is that what our souls long for as an alternative to the destructiveness of violence is not a peaceful passivity, but time and space to *create* in connection with the creative impulse at the heart of the 13.7 billion year evolutionary process.

The opposite of war isn’t peace, it’s creation. In that spirit, I invite you to be attentive to any creative longings that you have felt stirring within you this morning — luring, prompting, and encouraging you — to explore creativity as a spiritual practice, to explore creativity as a religious experience. In the words of the poet:

now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened

Through the spirituality of spring, may we together create a more hopeful, imaginative, and *beautiful* world.

¹³ To hear an edgy clip of the song “La Vie Boheme” from which the *Rent* quote is taken, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=czJHTEeEJmU>. The musical is available as a [feature film](#) and [Original Broadway Cast Recording](#).