

Dreaming is What We Do
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UU Minister Barbara Wells once recounted this story from her own life:

I was in seventh grade art class. We were working with clay. I don't exactly remember what the assignment was, I just remember that I was having fun, creating—if I recall correctly—a tiny gas station out of the red clay. Suddenly the vice-principal, who was wandering through our classroom for some reason, sat down next to me. He looked at my little bits of clay and asked me what was I doing. I explained about my gas station. "That's the dumbest idea I've ever heard," he said. "You clearly don't have much talent, do you?" I felt as if I'd been punched. I can still feel the anger and the shame that I felt in my seventh grade heart. I knew I wasn't much good at art. I never could draw, but I liked working with clay. Somehow the three dimensional aspect made it easier for me. But after that day I never made anything. My creative spark was effectively doused.

"What that man did to me (and others have perhaps done to you, I expect) was not only insensitive and cruel," Wells says. "I think he committed a crime against my spirit"

Those are strong words, but friends, they ring true to me. Because in my mind, the creative spark that leads to art and innovation of all kinds, is not simply talent or skill. I believe, with Rev. Wells, that that spark of creativity is holy and that it is one of the most important elements of our humanness. The human spirit is blessed with extraordinary creativity, and it is through this creativity that some of the best elements of humanity emerge.

The creative process begins with an idea – a dream – a fantasy or thought of what could be that is not, yet. Can I make a gas station with this clay? Can people, little black children and little white children, be judged not on the color of their skin but on the content of their character? Can I make a tasty dish with these five ingredients I was given in the great British bakeoff? (I may be mixing my cooking shows here). Creation begins when we start playing with the idea of what could be. Daydreaming is a profoundly creative process.

When I first started attending First Universalist Church in Denver, I noticed that after each service they pulled these racks of books out of a closet and set up a little bookstore, right in their social hall. I was curious to see what kinds of books they had, and enjoyed browsing each week. There was one book whose title grabbed me, and after a couple of weeks I gave in and purchased it.

It was called *The Impossible Will Take a Little While: Perseverance and Hope in Troubled Times*, by Paul Loeb, a collection of fifty stories and essays that range across nations, eras, wars, and political movements. They were stories of heartfelt community involvement that have helped people move beyond despair to compassion and hope. They told of seemingly small act that ended up making a big difference to the lives of people whose situations seemed, well, impossible.

One of the stories was about the city of Curitiba, Brazil. In the 1970s, Curitiba was in the midst of rapid population growth, choked with cars, and plagued with favelas – filthy slums filled with desperately poor people.

Then the city elected a new mayor who opened the doors for creative solutions. He and a small group of city planners opened Brazil's first pedestrian mall. They figured out a way to have affordable, reliable and comprehensive bus service in dedicated bus lanes, that pays for itself, and was 200x less expensive to build than a subway. For the poorest, they instituted a program of food for trash, costing no more than they had been paying for cleanup crews. Sustainable solutions.

Curitiba has now been a world urban leader for over 30 years. They do not have a perfect city. They are still creatively solving the problems that arise in a city with 3 million people. But 99% of the population is happy with their city.

The mayor was asked why even the poorest citizens were happy to live in Curitiba. "It is very simple," he said. "I believe that every person should be treated with respect." His urban planners actually involve those who will be affected in the planning and decision making. When they build low-income housing, each potential resident helps design their own home, so it will actually fit their needs. The bus system actually helps even the poorest people quickly and affordably reach their workplace, no matter where in the city they have found work.

It all started with a dream, and the creative solutions have flowed from there. It was that creativity that moved "impossible dream" to "a dream realized."

Creativity is a practical process, the foundation for progress in science, health, education, and just about any human endeavor you can name.

It is also a profoundly spiritual process.

Matthew Fox, a former Dominican father who has since left the Catholic Church to become an Episcopal priest, wrote a book some years ago called *Original Blessing*. He believes that we are co-creators with God, and that it is in the creative process that we can touch holiness and become one with the divine. He challenges us to throw out our pre-conceived notions of art—that the artist must be talented and/or professional—and instead seek to discover the artist, the creator that lives in each of us. In God's original blessing, *God's dreams love the future into existence. Our dreams love the future into existence.*

Barbara Wells believes that when we create—whether a painting, a poem, a dance, a sermon, a lesson plan, or even a government report!—this act of creating is one of the most spiritual things we can do. "Why is this?" she asks. "Because our spirituality is, I believe, that part of our being which is continually evolving and growing in response to the world around us and the world within us. If we stifle our creativity, we run the risk of smothering our spirits. Spirit needs the lively interaction of creative hearts and hands and minds to keep it alive and growing. People can actually die when deprived of beauty. And I have seen the spiritual death that occurs when people lose (or have forced out of them) the ability to be creative."

“The most regretful people on earth,” said Mary Oliver, “are those who felt the call to creative work, who felt their own creative power restive and uprising, and gave to it neither power nor time.”

But all of us are blessed with the ability to create, the ability to be creative. It is an essential part of our humanity. How our creativity manifests itself is as unique as our individual spirits.

When the second grader runs into class from recess all excited about the spider she found, and the teacher willingly changes his lesson plan from long division to a hands-on science lesson, that is creativity. When a nutritionist like my daughter works hard to plan really tasty and varied meals for a young patient with multiple dietary restrictions, she is engaging her creative spirit. When lawmakers hold hearings and invite experts to explain the possible impact of a piece of proposed legislation, and then debate the best way to make sure everyone’s interests are best served, that is a profoundly creative act.

Some years ago, a news story on creativity spoke of how, when the Corning company was moving its facility, they did the unprecedented thing of letting the employees come up with some of the creative design for the new building. The employees knew much better than any architect what works for them. Yes, the architect ultimately designed the building. But he did so, using the creative ideas of the employees who were going to work there. The result? People loved their new working environment, their efficiency and productivity were enhanced, and their morale soared.

Like the spoon full of sugar that helps the medicine go down, the ability to engage with our daily tasks creatively can make all the difference, not only in how we feel about what we are doing, but also in how successful our efforts are.

Brenne Brown, who has made it her career to study what makes people happier and more emotionally healthy, has this to say: “Here's what I've learned about creativity from the world of wholehearted living and loving:

1. “I’m not very creative” doesn’t work. There’s no such thing as creative people and non-creative people. There are only people who use their creativity and people who don’t. Unused creativity isn't benign. It lives within us until it’s expressed, neglected to death, or suffocated by resentment and fear.
2. The only unique contribution that we will ever make in this world will be born of our creativity.
3. If we want to make meaning, we need to make art. Cook, write, draw, doodle, paint, scrapbook, take pictures, collage, knit, rebuild an engine, sculpt, dance, decorate, act, sing – it doesn’t matter. As long as we’re creating, we’re cultivating meaning.”

It is my hope that our church can be a community where our imperfect, creative spirits can find a home. It is my hope that this church can be a place where everyone can bring their whole selves, where we can touch the deep spirit of creativity that lives in each of us and in the universe and make it come alive. What we create in our individual lives matters, and what we create here matters, too. May we be blessed with an abundance of creativity, and use it to make this world just a little more beautiful, a little more exciting, a little more whole.

