

## Grit and Grace: Creativity as a Spiritual Discipline

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I think of spiritual disciplines as practices that:

- connect us with other people and with the Holy,
- make us more comfortable with discomfort,
- wake us up and enable us to face the world fully awake,
- build our resilience, and
- help us access and breathe through the full range of our emotions safely without the need to avoid them or the risk of causing harm to ourselves or others.

Spiritual disciplines thus help us to grow spiritually and emotionally. The very fact that they are often challenging is part of what makes them so valuable in helping us see that we can do hard things, sit with discomfort, and grow spiritually even during dry and uninspired times.

Spiritual disciplines also discipline us. They restrict us and hem us in. They can be a way of using our freedom to be less free. Moreover, our choosing freely to be less free can be in the service of seeking to become the people we are still working toward being. If I have five minutes to play a game on my computer but choose to sit in silence and listen instead, I'm disciplining myself in two senses: I'm choosing the harder of two options, and I'm doing something that I hope will shape me for the better.

Prayer, meditation, silent reflection, and engagement with spiritual materials are common spiritual disciplines. Creativity can also be a kind of spiritual discipline.

- It can connect us with other people and help us to access the Creative Spirit at the heart of things.
- For most of us, creative practice involves discomfort on a regular basis because it has a strenuous element that requires focus, work, and intensive energy.
- Our encounters with the creative work of others can wake us up – good writing, theater, music, dance, and art often have that effect – and the creative life includes being awake to inspiration all the time, which in turn can help us be awake to everything around us.
- Creative work builds our resilience for the same reasons that it often involves discomfort.
- The creative aspect of our relationships with ideas, people, and material things is richer when we have full access to our emotions along with the ability to keep them from exploding out of us in problematic ways. Our creative products are emotionally richer when they are informed by our emotions. (How often have I heard bakers on the Great British Baking Show say they hope the dough feels the love as they are making their bread?) At the same time, our creative products are often of higher quality if we are at least somewhat in control of ourselves (disciplined) during the creating. And our ability to address relationship challenges in creative ways depends on our having both access to and some control over our emotions.
- Just as we strive to engage in traditional spiritual practices even when we aren't feeling connected (and perhaps especially then, when it is hardest), we strive to be creative when we are not feeling inspired. Sometimes nothing good comes from those attempts, but sometimes something wonderful emerges as we struggle through the work.

- Just as we expect traditional spiritual practices to change us and we work on them in the hope that we will change and grow, we expect our creative practices to teach us new things, open our hearts in unanticipated ways, and help us become better at waiting for and receiving inspiration. Like the “young, growing God” of Brian Wren’s hymn “Bring Many Names,” we enter into creative processes “willing to be changed by what [we’ve] started.”

Creativity also disciplines us, in the sense of being a discipline (or set of disciplines) with particular actions and skills which we practice and improve, and also in the sense of limiting or restricting us, limits or restrictions which we take on voluntarily. Both sides of the creativity paradox involve spiritual discipline: working and waiting, claiming what we know and acknowledging what we don’t, avoiding both false humility and arrogance in our cultivation of appropriate confidence and genuine humility. (Knowing that I can’t control when inspiration will strike increases my humility; knowing that I can control the final product at least enough to make it better rather than worse actually increases my humility as well. I have a duty to the product and to those who might encounter it, to give it my level best.)

Creative work almost always calls us to work within voluntarily accepted limits and restrictions. All creative forms, whether artistic, academic, or some other kind, come with parameters, and while learning the rules to break them is fair game, working outside the parameters entirely may not be appropriate to the project. If I’m trying to write a new hymn text to a traditional hymn tune, say with the intent of having a sacred music publisher sell it, here are some restrictions I’m likely to accept:

- Avoiding four-letter words and language that would not be sung in a church;
- Avoiding archaic language (“Thee,” “Thou”) if my publisher wants contemporary language;
- Avoiding contractions if they would make the text too informal;
- Avoiding doctrinal claims that fall outside the parameters of the publisher’s audience;
- Writing a text that does not fit the tune smoothly or that has wrongly accented words; and
- Using near-rhymes if the publisher only wants exact rhymes

Accepting those restrictions in such a context does not mean I must accept them in all circumstances; it means that I am willing to shape my work to the expected needs of those who might use it. (I’ve rewritten hymn texts to get them published; I’ve also refused to change texts of worship songs when that would cost the song – or me - integrity.) Not all creative circumstances require the same type of discipline or even the same level of discipline. But as soon as we are willing to accept limits and do our creating strictly within those limits, we are accepting the challenges and opportunities of being disciplined – spiritually and otherwise.

Choosing to let go of some freedom is not a practice unique to creativity; adults make this choice every day that they go to work at the same old job, and every day that they stay in a monogamous romantic relationship rather than seeking out adventures among new people. But there is something particularly powerful about self-discipline in the context of creativity. A blank canvas, an untouched sheet of staff paper, a bare stage, a new academic topic: these hold all possibilities. To commit to a particular possibility is to let untold other possibilities go and to choose how we will be unfree in the service of beauty, truth, justice, or perhaps even freedom. In this sense as well, creativity is a spiritual discipline, one whose demands are gifts and whose gifts are demands.