

Grit and Grace: Creativity as Relationship

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In my experience, there are two ways to think about creativity as a relationship. One has to do with our relationship with the creative project itself; the other has to do with how our other relationships (with people, ideas, things) enrich our creative process.

As odd as it may sound, I experience my creative projects and products as making demands on me, pushing back on my ideas, seeking to hold me accountable. Sometimes this means that an inadequate rhyme or image just won't do, as much as I want it to. I experience an ethical, even a moral call to improve the rhyme or image, to bravely and energetically make it the best rhyme or image it can be, the better to serve the project and its goals. In creating, I need to listen as much as talk, to be silent as much as I am idea-driven, to hear the demands being made on me. I cannot make sense of this experience except to understand it as a way of being in respectful relationship with the project itself. If I do right by the project, it will tell me what I need to know. If I am in a humble, grateful, engaged relationship with the project, it will be my friend. If not, it may well resist my attempts to make of it what I want it to be.

Sometimes these demands take strange turns. When I wanted to write a song in response to Out of the Grey (the name of a contemporary Christian band), I of course wanted my song to be called "Into the Grey." After years of looking at that title, I did not have a single word for the song. Then, one day, after resisting the idea for months, I retitled the song "Into the Gray." Ten minutes later I had the first verse; two hours later I had most of the lyric. This example may be a bit extreme, but it is not the only time I've struggled mightily with a project until I gave in and did what the project wanted me to. This is a component of creating that calls for discernment and self-discipline, the willingness to follow rather than lead.

Of course, being in a relationship with a creative project also means communicating one's own values and hopes and ideas in the process of creating. It's not only about listening and discerning, it's about bringing an idea or goal or image into focus and crafting something new with that idea, goal, or image in mind. Relationships go both ways, after all. That said, it is amazing how much better my work is when I take seriously the idea that I owe something to the work and that what I owe it is my full attention and respect.

Then, of course, our relationships with others improve our creative work. My wife edits almost everything I write: songs, sermons, books, hymns, essays – and she often has suggestions for improvement. More often than not, those suggestions are helpful. My father, a professional songwriter for years, taught me how to write songs, gave me writing assignments, and critiqued my early work. He taught me almost everything I know about the craft of songwriting.

Perhaps my favorite story about how relationships with others can improve creativity involves my song Bringing in the Harvest, which was my attempt to apply gardening and farming metaphors to the kind of psychological and spiritual growth work done by progressive religious people. (I was tired of Evangelical Christians being the only people who used such metaphors and had yet to hear someone with my approach to religion use this kind of language.) I began by

writing a verse that set up the gardening/farming imagery with the idea of introducing the personal growth element in the second verse. The only problem? I don't know anything about gardening or farming. A native New Yorker with a brown thumb and no interest in green things, I was completely out of my element and didn't know what I was talking about.

I showed the verse to my wife, a Nebraskan who had grown up gardening, and she laughed in my face. Then she told me everything that was wrong with what I had written. Being in a stubborn mood, I ran the verse by my father as well since he and his wife had become more serious gardeners since leaving New York City for rural upstate New York. I said nothing about my wife's response and asked what they thought. They also laughed at me, though not in my face because we were on the phone. They then told me everything that was wrong with what I had written. It was, almost word for word, what my wife had said. Chastened, I rewrote the verse several times, asking for feedback with each rewrite. Eventually, I got the lyric right, finished the song, submitted it to a professional service for critique, and got high praise for the lyric.

Of course, there are many other ways that our relationships (with people, with ideas, with things) interact with our creativity. Sometimes those relationships inspire creative projects; sometimes those relationships are creative projects in themselves. For example, I imagine almost everyone in a long-term marriage has had to use their creativity more than once to tend to the relationship in its more challenging moments.

My years of interacting with acoustic pianos – playing pieces written by others, accompanying singers, improvising, writing my own songs – has improved not only my technical abilities but also my understanding of what acoustic pianos can and can't contribute to a song. Deciding when to use acoustic piano and when not to on my third album of original songs had a lot to do with understanding where that particular sound and energy would be useful, where it would be distracting, and where it would be fine as long as it was supplemented with other instruments.

The idea of having relationships with ideas might seem strange to some people, but in fact I think many of us do have such relationships even if we would not use that language. How I made sense of Biblical passages as a young person is very different from how I do so today, and that difference is not merely about me being older and wiser; it's about me spending time with some of the passages, trying to understand their range of meanings and how Biblical experts make sense of them, approaching them in various ways – building a relationship with them. Being in relationship with the stories and claims of the Bible is not, to my mind, equivalent to being in relationship with the Sacred, but it is still a useful kind of relationship that helps us learn, grow, and love better. And the better I understand the stories and assumptions and ideas and claims of the Bible, the more inspired I am to use these materials in my sacred music writing – yet another way relationships impact creativity for the better.

Thinking of creativity as involving and drawing on relationships can help us clarify for ourselves which side of the creativity paradox we are on at any given moment, what our obligations are, and what opportunities lie before us. Relationships demand our work and invite our joy. They involve effort and patience, passion and compassion. They are as rewarding as we enable them to be. And for me, these aspects of relationships are as true of my creative life as they are for the other kinds of relationships in which I participate.