

Grit and Grace: Introducing Creativity

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Let's start with a bumper sticker. Perhaps you've seen it: "Earth without art is just eh."

What an amazing example of creativity. We've had the words "earth" and "art" in English for centuries, and we've probably had the word "eh" for decades at least. But one day, not all that long ago, someone noticed the word "art" in the middle of the word "earth" and they further noticed that the two remaining letters spelled "eh" when put together in the order in which they appear in the word "earth." And, of course, the result is not merely clever (as a good bumper sticker should be) but profound. Earth without art is indeed "eh." Art, and creativity more broadly, is the difference between "eh" and "earth" (at least earth in its fullest sense).

Creativity and its products offer us pleasure, delight, and joy; our creating affords others pleasure, delight, and joy. Creativity gives us a sense of accomplishment and leads to actual accomplishments. Creativity can add beauty to the world, help in the seeking of justice, and tell truths that cannot yet be told in other ways. Creativity can also be harmful, used in the service of fear, manipulation, hatred, violence, war, and genocide. It matters that we get creativity right and use it for good.

We are here to consider, celebrate, learn about, and teach each other about creativity in its best sense. Here are some opening thoughts to get us started.

Creativity is "...the capacity to combine or synthesize existing ideas, images, or expertise in original ways *and* the experience of thinking, reacting, and working in an imaginative way characterized by a high degree of innovation...and risk taking" (from the Association of American Colleges and Universities Creative Thinking VALUE rubric)

Creativity can be a focused and purposeful strategy for problem-solving. Creativity can be a way to encounter the world every day of our lives: an outlook, worldview, or commitment. Creativity can fall somewhere between those two extremes and probably does fall between them for most of us, most of the time.

Just as we think that some people can carry a tune and others can't, we may think that some people are just creative and others are not, that creativity is a talent with which we are born (or not). Hopefully, life has taught you that creativity is a way of living that can be cultivated through practice, a muscle we can strengthen through creative exercise. While creativity may be a gift in some sense, it is primarily a craft.

Here are some common examples of creativity:

- Composing an opera
- Writing a book
- Choreographing a dance
- Painting a picture
- Inventing a product

- Generating a testable hypothesis
- Grasping a social pattern for the first time
- Finding a new way to read Shakespeare or Chinua Achebe or Margaret Atwood

Here are some other examples of creativity that we might not think of immediately:

- Figuring out how to make up with someone you've hurt
- Making an inadequate paycheck last until the end of the month
- Developing a friendship with someone with whom you differ profoundly in matters of politics or religion
- Figuring out what's really wrong with the car, furnace, or remote control
- Fixing the car, furnace, or remote control without instructions
- Creating a tasty dinner with four ingredients
- Helping a politician see why every single person should have access to health care
- Figuring out what is really troubling someone who says they are fine when they clearly are not fine
- Developing a white paper that helps your employer understand what needs to change in the organization and why

As the above examples suggest, we can be creative with ideas, with things, and in our relationships with other people. Put differently, creativity is a way of being in relationship with ideas, things, and people.

We have better access to our creativity when we are in touch with our best selves – when we are awake, aware, joyful, grateful, peaceful, authentic, humble, and resilient – which is why creativity is enhanced by our spiritual, psychological, and justice work. And, of course, creativity enhances our spiritual, psychological, and justice work, as we'll see in some of the short essays that follow this one.

Those essays cover the following topics:

- Paradoxes of creativity
- Creativity as a relationship
- Creativity as a spiritual discipline
- The spiritual benefits of creativity
- Ethics and creativity
- A progressive Christian theology of creativity
- Creativity in the life of the church
- Prophetic creativity

Happy reading, happy thinking, and happy creating.