

On Creativity: Something from (Almost) Nothing

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I don't remember exactly how old I was when I wrote my first song; I'm guessing 12 or 13, which may explain why it was such an incredibly bad song. It was called – I'm not kidding – “Life is a Song Cue” and the final verse went something like this: “Life is a song cue and I think I always knew that we would live our lives together living life this way forever so let's sing our song together, you and me.” Isn't that absolutely terrible? For your sake and mine I will spare you the rest of the lyric.

Why start a sermon on creativity with an example of a song that was barely, if at all, creative? Because bad examples can direct us toward good models. So, I'll point out four things wrong with “Life is a Song Cue” and then reflect on what they might tell us about creativity at its best, no matter the form.

First, my first song was derivative, drawn from the lyrics and music in my early-teen brain. True creativity is original in some sense.

Second, my first song was pure labor. After I got the title there was nothing inspirational about it. I just cranked it out. It was all about my ego and not at all about being a vessel for the creative spirit.

Third, I wrote it at an age where no one except maybe Mozart has any business being creative. My father, discussing creativity with me last year, said, “It takes life to write a song” and I think he's right. At least as a reasonably well-off white person in a developed country, I had nothing to say at age 13.

Finally, “Life is a Song Cue” is completely banal. It isn't merely unoriginal, it's unimportant. It is true that some of us who love music talk in song cues sometimes, but there is absolutely no reason to write a song about this fact. The topic contributes nothing to the world. It neither comforts the broken nor builds a just land. It's not even funny. True, it does no harm but it also does no good. Put in language I might use today, “Life is a Song Cue” offers no blessing to either individuals or society.

So I'm suggesting that four important elements of creativity are originality, inspiration, life experience, and value. After I talk a bit about these four aspects of creativity, I want to touch on two additional topics. First, I believe deeply that all people are creative and can channel this creativity, which we might think of as a gift given to humanity or as the spirit of life and love working inside each of us or, for some, as God in God's creative form. But how do we do this? How do we give ourselves maximum access to our creativity? I'll suggest that for many of us it involves a mix of inspiration and perspiration, openness and diligence, tenderness and toolkits.

Second, regardless of whether or not one believes in a personal God, I think creative practices can be understood as spiritual practices, both in the sense of spiritual disciplines involving patience, humility, and other traits, and as opportunities for the greatest joy, peace, and gratitude.

I wish I had time to talk about the role of creativity in social justice work, but perhaps another day. Or catch me after the service and I'll tell you an amazing story about a creative moment during the Stonewall Riots in 1969, a moment of huge importance for lesbian and gay liberation.

So, let's start with the notion of creativity as original, as involving the development of something from nothing or at least the development of something new. The author of the Hebrew Bible book Ecclesiastes claimed that there was nothing new under the sun. I imagine a certain world-weariness in the comment, an acceptance of the limits of life. Perhaps the author was an old man drinking wine and philosophizing when he made his claim. But in fact, there have been many new things under the sun since the time of the Hebrew Bible. I wrote this sermon on a laptop computer, looking up references on the internet, and using electricity in the process. Making a laptop when there had never been one before; imagining a "world wide web" where one didn't exist, harnessing the power of electricity for the first time: these are creative acts and processes.

So where does originality come from? I think in my case it hasn't exactly come from nowhere. It's been about developing a certain voice and certain ideas in my writing and music, over long periods of time, fumblingly and haltingly, and then one day seeing a new connection or multiple new connections. Over and over again the "something new" turns out to be the tip of an iceberg of old ideas, ideas developed through voracious reading and thinking and talking with people and writing earlier stuff, both songs and sermons, that didn't quite get there but that started the process. Originality in my experience is the harvest that follows a spring and summer of labor. A lot of writing and deleting and rewriting and waiting and listening and scribbling down ideas that sometimes go nowhere and sometimes become some of my best songs.

You just heard my song, "Hell is a Human Invention." I came up with the title years before I wrote the song. One day I pulled the title out and wrote down a bunch of words that rhymed with "invention." Then I put the sheet of paper back in my "song ideas" folder. Then one day I took it out again, perhaps following some awful conservative religious situation in Colorado Springs, and started writing: "You hear them preach it all over this town: where you will land when you die. Some will go up and most will go down. So much for the sweet by-and-by." And so on. The song was easy to write though the second verse needed substantial rewriting later. During the editing process, Phoebe added the line, "Love is creation's intention"; I still have no idea how she came up with that touch of perfection. Once I had a rhythm in my mind it was also clear that the song should be a tango. And a month ago, after failing to write a bridge for several years, I sat down and wrote the bridge, lyrics and music, in under an hour. Who knows how?

So, what was original here? The whole song. No one ever wrote this exact song before, or any part of it, as far as I know. And what wasn't original? The whole song. The concept that hell is a human invention has been part of Universalism for hundreds of years. The use of tango music to provide humor in addressing awkward topics is as old as Tom Lehrer's 1950s "Masochism Tango" and as new as "Tango Maureen" from the musical "Rent". All the elements were there already. The originality came in putting them together differently so that the new whole was more than the sum of the old parts.

Then there's the notion that creativity is inspired, that it does not come only from our labor or perhaps even only from our egos. One use of the word "inspiration" refers to inhalation, the act of breathing in, and I find this analogy very helpful. Sometimes we are aware of our breathing and we may experience ourselves as working to breathe in certain situations, but if we are thinking about other things our breathing happens on its own, and the air we take in as we breathe is around us, within us, beyond us, and sustaining us. I think of creativity as like air in this way. Sometimes I struggle for it but sometimes it breathes itself through me and I write a song or a sentence or a sermon without any sense of struggle or effort.

So how does this work? If the inspiration that fuels a lot of creativity is in some sense beyond our control, what is our relationship to it? In my experience, the word that describes how I wait for inspiration is "preparation." To write better songs I listen to a lot of music, songs in particular, and I analyze them: chord structures, melodic lines, lyrical strategies, and so on. To prepare to write sermons I read books about how to write sermons and I listen to and read the sermons of others. My goal is to be ready so that when inspiration strikes, I can take full advantage of it. All of my song titles came as inspirations but perhaps it won't surprise you that I spent years hanging out in music stores reading the titles of songs on the back of CDs to see which caught my attention and gave me ideas. Did these music store experiences lead directly to song ideas? Almost never, but I consider that part of my preparation.

Then there's that word we more frequently associate with inspiration: perspiration. Coming up with a song title is approximately one-millionth of the work of writing a song in my experience. Then comes all the decision-making: what is the narrative arc of the song? What are the lyrics? Hard rhymes or soft rhymes? How does the chorus send the primary message of the song? What is that primary message? If there's a bridge, how does it go somewhere new? And that's just the lyrics. Since writing pop music using the musical conventions of our society means absolutely pure originality is impossible, being that there are only so many ways to put chords and melodies together, how familiar or unfamiliar should the chords sound? Can the melody sound at least somewhat unique? How well does the chord progression fit with the point of the lyrics? What about the melody? Those are just some of the decisions that will often, in my experience, get made with a mix of perspiration and inspiration – mostly perspiration.

Part of my perspiration process also includes input from others. Phoebe edits everything I write, songs, sermons, essays, books, everything – and she often has suggestions for improvement. Unfortunately for me, she's usually right, so that leads to more perspiration. I also ask my father, a former professional songwriter, for responses. Input from others is fabulous, but it almost always means more work for me. And I wouldn't have it any other way.

Finally, part of the inspiration I receive is from the creative product itself. For me to create with integrity means following the demands the product makes on me. This may sound crazy, but there are projects I struggle with mightily until I give in and do it the way the song or sermon seems to want me to. There was a time when I was failing to write a song called "Into the Grey" until I changed the spelling of "grey" to "gray" and then I had a complete lyric in about two hours. Seriously. If I'm willing to let the creative process kick my ass – that's a technical term – I wind up with a much better outcome.

There's also the role of experience in enriching creativity, or, as I mentioned my father having said, "It takes life to write a song." This is true, I think, for several reasons. First, the longer we live, the more models of creative work we can be exposed to, and the more such models we're exposed to the more we learn about the variety of ways to tackle creative challenges and shape a creative project. My hymn "Mother Earth Beloved Garden" is essentially a song listing metaphors for each of the directions and for the spirit at the heart of all things. All songwriters learn how to write songs based on a list; it's a bread-and-butter form for us. One of today's hymns was, in fact, a list song: "For the Earth Forever Turning." Same with "For All that is Our Life." We learn from experience and training how to write this kind of material. Or we learn, as Peter Mayer does with "Blue Boat Home," to start with a simple metaphor, earth as a blue boat, and to extend the metaphor into the complex and glorious song that we love. My song "Spirit, Gracious Spirit," reflected a long-time love of blended musical styles, like Claude Bolling's classical jazz or Herbie Hancock's African funk, and a study of how they worked. That inspired me to mix Taize worship-style lyrics, a folk melody, and jazz chords.

Also, the longer we live, the more we grow up emotionally and spiritually. One of my more recent songs, "A Mile in Your Shoes", is about the compassionate drive to learn about others by listening to their stories. I'd say the most recent ten years of my life radically deepened my compassion, not that I don't have plenty more growing to do. I couldn't have written this song even five years ago. And rarely for me, it's not didactic or preachy. That's a new writing capacity, suggesting the kind of humility that I still struggle with at the pulpit.

Finally, the longer we live, the more life experiences we have that give us ideas for songs. I wrote a song called "Equinox" in response to the approach of the Iraq War that the US started in 2003, for example. I've written several songs as UU responses to Christian songs that moved me but that bothered me deeply because of their theology. After listening to Noel Paul Stookey's "For the Love of it All" I wrote "Love at the Core." After remembering how often Evangelical Christian pop music uses farming or harvesting metaphors for proselytizing, I decided I wanted to write a harvest song more appropriate to the spiritual growth involved in liberal religion, and wrote "Bringing in the Harvest." I shouldn't admit this but I wrote "Affirmation" as my "Spirit of Life," and there's actually a congregation that is using it that way on a regular basis.

Which leads to "Spirit of Life" itself, a much-beloved hymn that made it to second place in a contest over "the most UU thing of all time" (lighting the chalice won). Spirit of Life has been described as our doxology, yet it was written by someone who has only intermittently identified as a UU and it was written at a moment of spiritual exhaustion following an early 1980s meeting for Central American solidarity. It was written as a private prayer, a cry for faith to continue as an activist, not as a hymn to be sung liturgically. And yet, here it is: a personal experience of struggle gave us the most frequently sung hymn in the grey hymnal.

The fourth claim I made about creativity above is that for a work of art to be maximally creative, it should make some kind of contribution to the world. It should make us think about things differently. It should open our hearts and perhaps our tear ducts. It should strengthen our commitment to make the world a better place. It should give us hope for humanity. It should use the fire of creativity for morally good acts of kindness, compassion, and justice. Or, if not one of

these, it should do something else meaningful, not just take up space. Here, I'll mention two examples of social justice music, one that I wrote and one that my father wrote.

Sometime in the past couple of years I wrote a song called "The Difference." The point of the song was the narrator's question, "Could I be the one to make the difference?" The song, a call to service and activism, made this move in the bridge: "And of course the answer is yes, I'm the one, but only if I'm one of many, many to bind up the broken, many to fight the good fight, many to struggle for justice, to take what is wrong and to work till it's right." And so on. The song ends, "We'll be the ones to make the difference." Subtle, not even slightly. But it's intended to inspire people and my experience is that it's done so.

Here's a very different social justice song by my father, which I suspect he wouldn't consider a social justice song. It's called "Slaves" and was performed by Dionne Warwick for a movie of the same name. Here are the lyrics in their entirety:

Little bird got a name. You call it sparrow. Drop of water got a name. You call it rain.
He is a man but it's slave you call him. You have seen his face. Don't you know his name?

When your fields come up white you call it cotton.
When the furrow grow green, call it sugar cane.
He works your fields till he's old and weary, still it's boy you call him.
You have seen his face. Don't you know his name?

Without no name it's a long hard journey. Without no name, got no soul to save.
When he's dead and gone who will remember without no name to mark his grave?

Water in a pail, still the sweet rain water. Little sparrow in a cage sparrow just the same
But a man in chains, no, you can't call him nothin'
But when his chains be gone and his soul be his,
When you call him free then you'll know his name.

I may be biased because my father wrote the lyrics for this song but I cannot imagine how someone could listen carefully to the lyrics and not learn something, however small, about racism. I've been studying and teaching about how racism works for more than 20 years and I can still say that this song lyric is among the best summaries of the devaluation and dehumanization visited on black people that I've ever encountered. And in fact, it's still true today that too many of us white people see the faces but don't know the names; if I wrote the song in 2016 it would have the line, "He is a man but it's thug you call him." This song, "Slaves", has a meaning and a purpose and makes a difference. It is the opposite of banal.

So, if we want to make a difference, if we want to be open to inspiration and originality, if we want to put our life experiences to good use by creating new things in whatever venue, how can we set about to do that? How can we maximize our creativity? I've suggested some answers already; here's what I see as the heart of it: live fully; train in your creative area if at all possible; and develop the discipline to persevere in the service of inspiration. We do all the preparation so

that when originality arrives, when inspiration strikes, when that breath flows through us we are open to it and ready to make good use of it.

Live fully. Embrace a wide range of experiences and emotions. They will provide both material and guidance for your creativity.

Train in your creative area. Learn to paint good pictures by painting terrible ones. Read books, take classes, listen to music, go to the theater, visit art museums. Observe and experience the creativity of others as much as possible. I was lucky enough to get songwriting assignments from my father after I wrote “Life is a Song Cue”, perhaps because he realized that I had, shall we say, completely untapped potential. I studied how Stephen Sondheim crafted songs. None of my training has gone to waste, even if it took years for most of it to come to fruition.

Practice perspiration. Turn a phrase from a TV commercial into a short story, a song, a sketch in black and white. Make all the decisions that get you from that first idea to a finished product, however good or bad. Then do it again, and again, and again. I may have written a hundred songs before I wrote the song that made my father weep because he found it so beautiful, but all that work was worth it. Even “Life is a Song Cue.” Which was a far cry from the prayer I put into song that eventually opened Dad’s tear ducts.

Finally, creative practices have always been spiritual practices for me. These days, that’s partly about writing specifically spiritual and religious songs such as the ones you heard today, but it’s much more than that. The discipline of creating and the discipline of waiting; both are spiritual disciplines if by spiritual we mean “open to the mysterious creativity that comes from beyond us as well as within us.” This is why ego-driven songs are often less powerful than those that partake of inspiration. It’s the very combination of practice and patience that make a creative life a life of wholeness in my experience. Knowing that I can’t control the inspiration 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.

There’s a book of Christian preaching called “My Utmost for His Highest.” When I’m struggling to create, striving to draw on everything I’ve learned over my lifetime and to honor the integrity of the emerging creation, it sometimes feels like I’m giving my utmost in the service of something greater than me, something that touches me, works in me, sometimes leaves me to my own devices, but always comes back sooner or later. And as hard as the labor of creativity is, the blessings along the way are wondrous and always cause for gratitude. I can’t be sure, but I bet Peter Mayer wrote “Blue Boat Home” in deepest thanks for his blue boat home the earth.

So, my friends, may your lives be filled with creativity, with the making of new things and the appreciation of all that other people have made. May preparation, inspiration, and perspiration work together for you in your creating. And may it always be true that the creations you bring to the world, in whatever form, make a difference. Amen and blessed be.