

Grit and Grace: Paradoxes of Creativity

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The great scientist Louis Pasteur once said that chance favors only the prepared mind. We might be so used to this idea that we don't recognize how paradoxical it is, but in fact it is a perfect paradox. If chance only favors the prepared mind, it isn't really chance; if preparation still needs chance to bloom into magic, preparation alone may be necessary but it is not sufficient.

In my experience, creativity is built not only on Pasteur's famous paradox but on many others, some related. For example, we've probably all heard that creativity is a combination of perspiration and inspiration, or, as I've put it in this course title, grit and grace. If we don't do the hard work, we won't be fully available to the gifts of creativity, but labor alone does not necessarily produce truly new and inventive ideas or products or relationships. Creativity involves both the making of many laborious decisions and that moment when we suddenly see which decision to make and why in a new way.

Here are some of the other paradoxes I've encountered in my creative life:

- Creativity is a mix of work and waiting, effort and patience.
- Creativity calls for intentionality and focus coupled with an open heart.
- Creativity is enriched by silence and by engagement with our senses; it needs both approaches.
- Creativity benefits from a mix of mindfulness and mindlessness, a combination of being fully present in the moment and being ready to daydream at a moment's notice, the pairing of being awake and being distractable.
- Creativity asks that we learn the rules, not least in order to break the rules.
- Creativity requires us to be both "knowers" and "learners," always drawing on our training and prior experiences while always being ready to go beyond them. This means standing by what we know while always remembering how little we know. Creativity thus demands both confidence and humility.
- Creativity asks us to work with freedom and restrictions, to find freedom in the very process of restricting ourselves, and to discern where within the restrictions there is still freedom to experiment and invent.
- Creativity is not merely a mix of labor and insight, it's a mix of work and play. When we bring playfulness to our creativity, we enrich our work. When we bring effort to our creativity, our playfulness becomes more productive.
- Creativity involves a mix of comfort and discomfort, ease and difficulty. If we do not hold space for both the comfort and the discomfort, we are not likely to stay engaged with the labor and we may miss some of the joy that makes the discomfort worth it.

I find these paradoxes fascinating, but that's not the only reason to think about them. For me, the ultimate moment of paradox in the creative life is the moment of breakthrough, the "aha" moment. It's when we finally grasp the part of the iceberg below the water line, when we make a new connection toward which we have been building for a long time, when all the prior perspiration – the study, reading, training, practicing, thinking, writing down ideas that don't go anywhere, the false starts, the failures, the successes that are frustrating in how incomplete they

are – suddenly alchemically morphs into something truly new, original, beautiful, useful, inspired.

Here's an example (completely optional reading if you're interested). My sociology doctoral dissertation research focused on the struggle over LGBT inclusion in the United Methodist Church. Though not a Methodist myself, I was intrigued and disturbed by the fact that a denomination that was largely otherwise quite liberal had so much antigay language and so many homosexuality-related prohibitions in its denominational rulebook

After almost two years of extensive reading, carrying out interviews, doing fieldwork, and otherwise delving deeply into the struggle and getting perspectives from people on all sides of the debate, I was at my wits' end. The then-popular culture wars analysis that pitted liberals against conservatives in a fairly simplistic way had some value but failed to explain far too much. A classic sociological analysis of the struggle as a matter of homophobic opportunity hoarding by heterosexuals added a little value, but not enough. Something key was missing.

Then, one night, I was in the middle of my third interview with a conservative pastor I had met during my fieldwork, a lovely, insightful, kind man who believed firmly in "holding the line" against LGBT inclusion in the church. We had, much to my surprise, become friends. During this particular conversation, I probably said something about how odd I found it that many of the conservatives who supported exclusion in the church also supported LGBT rights in the public sphere. My friend, exasperated, said, "But Amanda, it's not about civil rights, it's about holiness."

I could not get that phrase out of my mind, and after our talk I pondered a type of literature that I had been reviewing (at the suggestion of a member of my dissertation committee) that suddenly made sense out of the struggle. This literature suggested that when we study formal institutions and organizations, we need to understand that they have their own "logics" (cultures, practices, assumptions, priorities, rituals, and other constitutive elements). Moreover, it was possible for different institutional "logics" to be in conflict with each other and for this conflict to take place within a specific organization.

And there it was. For the Methodist conservatives, it was about "holiness." It was about a way of understanding Christianity and Methodism that led to a commitment to a kind of purity that worked out to be homophobic in real time. For the LGBT Methodists and their supporters, it was about "inclusion" but the language they used and the arguments they made drew at least as much on progressive politics as on religion – and when they appealed to religion, it was with the argument that (for example) Jesus came to tear down walls. They wanted to bring the values of "the world" into "the church." The conservatives wanted to protect "the church" from "the world."

A third of the delegates who voted on these issues at denominational meetings were conservative and a third were inclusive. The final third, the moderates, voted consistently liberal on every topic except LGBT inclusion, where they voted consistently with the conservatives. Why? Because they were protecting the United Methodist Church *as an institution*. They were not making culture war claims about the public sphere, nor were they particularly homophobic as

individuals, nor were they consciously trying to keep power within a limited subgroup. They regretted the pain that the restrictions caused LGBT Methodists, but they found the conservative argument more compelling in light of churchly priorities and values. If “the church” needed to protect itself against “the world,” here was a clear way to do so, to show that the church was a different entity than “the world,” that it ran on a different institutional logic.

Twenty years later, as the UMC contemplates a schism over this issue, it remains helpful to understand the stakes in these ways. And without two years of immersion and sweat (and actual tears), followed by a moment of grace arising from a conversation with someone on the opposite side of the issue, I would never have had this set of insights. This research, and the book resulting from it (*Queer Inclusion in the United Methodist Church*, 2008), is still one of the most important creative projects I’ve ever carried out. Everything successful about the project rested on my ability to be open to both sides of the paradoxes mentioned above, even when doing so was painful and exhausting. In the end, the inspiration was worth the perspiration, and then some.

May it be so for you in your creative projects.