

Grit and Grace: Prophetic Creativity

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Whatever else creativity is, it is also political. There are a variety of ways to think about this aspect of creativity.

Sociologically speaking, society would not exist without constant creativity. Any given society is created, recreated, and modified on a daily (and hourly and more frequent) basis through the millions of actions of everyone in the society and some people outside of it who act in ways that impact the society. This topic could easily be the focus of its own short essay (which I have skipped because not everyone is interested in sociology) but its relevance here is that the constant making and remaking of society is inherently political as well as creative, involving power differentials, power struggles, visions of a better society and visions of a society that some of us consider appalling. In our creative making, remaking, and changing of society, we also make it more or less equal, more or less just; we make it more or less possible for everyone in a society to flourish. Creativity in this sense is inherently political.

As mentioned elsewhere, creativity can be used for good or ill; this is true politically as well as morally in a broader sense. Filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl used her creativity to support Nazism; Charlie Chaplin used his creativity to challenge Hitler. The Westboro Baptist Church used its creativity in the service of homophobia and spiritual violence; the UCC Open and Affirming Coalition uses its creativity in the service of full inclusion in the church for all people. Reading the signs at (for example) a #blacklivesmatter protest and a white supremacist protest shows creativity among both groups but certainly not in the service of the same political values.

Social movements rely extensively on creativity in everything from their chants to their activism strategies. One of my favorite stories of protest creativity involves the first night of the Stonewall riots, June 26, 1969. The Stonewall riots were not the first time that LGBT people fought back against police harassment and violence, but they are a well-known example and they played a role in moving the lesbian and gay movement forward. Most of us who know a little about the riots learned that the LGBT crowd trapped the police in the bar at one point and that everything from coins to bricks to parking meters were thrown. But a bit less well-known is the response of a group of flaming gay men, drag queens, and transvestites (the term used at the time) who formed a kick line like the Rockettes and sang, to the tune of the Howdy Doody Show theme song:

We are the Stonewall girls. We wear our hair in curls.
We don't wear underwear. We show our pubic hair.
We wear our dungarees above our nelly knees...

Imagine being queer in a time when you might be arrested and have your name listed in the newspaper, when you might be locked up in an asylum or be lobotomized, when you had to be circumspect in ways that many of us can't appreciate today. Imagine having to congregate in a bar run by the Mafia that didn't even have running water. Imagine routine blackmail and entrapment, and imagine hundreds of respectable men committing suicide when their secret was

revealed. That riots such as the one at the Stonewall Inn happened at all is amazing. That anyone had the wherewithal to come up with a kick line and make up parody lyrics is nothing short of astonishing. It is, to my mind, a moment of true communion with the Creative Spirit in the service of human dignity and liberation.

Thinking about the politics of creativity and the creativity of politics is a way to begin understanding creativity as prophetic (and prophesy as creative). The prophetic work of people like Isaiah, Amos, and Micah was not about predicting the future but about condemning the injustices of the present as (literally) ungodly and inviting political leaders and others to repent (literally, to turn around and change their ways).

We may not think of the words and actions of the prophets as creative but they were in at least two senses. First, they assured us that another world was possible, a world of justice, kindness, and human and planetary flourishing. Since that world did not exist around them (and still does not exist), claiming that it could be brought into existence through the remaking of society was itself a creative act. Second, the prophets sometimes engaged in outrageous symbolic actions to make their point about how problematic the society around them was. Hosea, for example, named his children “Unloved” and “Not-My-People” after marrying the most promiscuous woman he could find (Hosea 1; see also Hosea 2:23). Isaiah preached naked for three years (Isaiah 20). Jeremiah did not wash his underwear (Jeremiah 13:1-11). These bizarre actions were meant to grab the attention of those around the prophets, to wake people up and get them to change their ways. Certainly, like some kinds of protests today, these actions were creative – as creative as the Stonewall kick line.

If prophets can be creative, creativity can also be prophetic. Creativity is prophetic when it is used to point to everything that is morally and spiritually wrong with business as usual, to demand that we repent of the harm that we are causing, and to invite us to a new way of being in the world. Creative people, like the prophets, are convinced that another world is possible if we engage in the paradox of working and waiting, taking courage and developing humility, preparing our minds and being open to inspiration. I believe that this is so, and my creative life is dedicated to participating in the co-creation of the world that is not yet but could be now if we made it so.

Here is one final example of my creativity, an example that draws from the Psalmist’s tradition but in the service of the prophetic call. The text of my confessional psalm for white people working against racism, “Oh, My Shepherd,” appears on the next page; it is inspired by and struggles with and against the language of the 23rd Psalm.

Oh, My Shepherd: A Psalm for White People Working against White Supremacy

Amanda Udis-Kessler, copyright 2020; dedicated to the UCC racial justice communities that have nurtured and challenged me; inspired by Psalm 23

To be sung as a solo or in unison by one or more white people/people of European descent

Oh, my Shepherd, lead me, guide me.
Haunt me, push me, move my heart.
When I ache for stiller waters, keep me on my feet.
Bring me to the street. Help me not retreat.

Lead me in the path of justice.
Send me to resist the violence.
Tempted as I am to silence,
Comfort me and raise my voice.
Help me make the harder choice.

Oh, my Shepherd, I have walked through
Whitest valleys far too long,
Fearing what I thought was evil,
Causing harm and doing wrong.
Help me sing a different song.
Where I stumble, make me strong.

I have lingered at the table,
Safe and sated, unaware,
Failing in my joy to notice
All the ones who weren't there,
All the ways the world's unfair,
All the times I didn't care.

Oh, my Shepherd, fill my cup with heartbreak so it overflows.
Pour the oil of deep compassion down upon me till I know
How to face the devastation, how to work to heal the nation,
How to strive for reparation.

Oh, my Shepherd, may I be a shepherd of my very own,
Leading others into goodness, guiding others into mercy,
Living proof that you have called us to rebuild your shattered home
As a place where all of us shall dwell as one our whole lives long.