

Grit and Grace: Spiritual Benefits of Creativity

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A spiritual life, regardless of one's religion or lack thereof, is a life fully lived, rich with compassion, love, connection, and a deep commitment to one's own well-being and the well-being of others. A spiritual life is not free of pain, but it is full of joy, and the pain sometimes follows from the joy, as when we lose people we love. A spiritual person is awake and aware, able to take in the fullness, complexity, beauty, and brokenness of the world and committed to using their gifts, resources, and skills to enhance the beauty and heal the brokenness.

If this way of thinking about the spiritual life, and about what spiritual people are like, makes sense, it follows that creativity enhances the richness of life led by people with commitments to wholeness, wellness, justice, and joy.

- The creative process, as hard as it can be, stretches and deepens the people doing the creating, especially when they are attentive to and engaged with the paradoxes of creativity. As a spiritual discipline (discussed in a separate essay), creative practice can be its own form of spiritual growth.
- A creative life can be an extremely full and rich life, one that enhances joy and draws attention to beauty and the human capacity for productivity in its best sense.
- Creativity done thoughtfully wakes us up and makes us more aware.
- Because creativity can be used for good or ill (as I discuss in my essay on ethics and creativity), the conscious choice to be creative in the service of God's dream (or the good, or human well-being) enriches our ability to celebrate ourselves and our work, to see ourselves as part of the good (or the Good News), to situate ourselves in a larger story in which we make a positive difference in the world.
- When our creativity adds beauty to the world, we benefit from the additional beauty along with others, which can enhance our sense of gratitude and wonder.
- When our creativity heals brokenness in the world or supports the work of justice, we benefit from the healing and the justice along with others, which can similarly enhance our sense of gratitude and wonder.
- When we are able to draw on our own pain, suffering, or brokenness to produce ideas, products, or relationships that will help others, we become, as Henri Nouwen would have said, wounded healers. As we heal the wounds of others, we may ease some of our own pain.
- If we engage the gritty work of creativity with attention and open hearts, we may become more compassionate toward others who struggle, even if the nature of their struggles have nothing to do with creativity.
- Regardless of how we make sense of the Biblical creation stories, we must acknowledge that there is something inherently creative at the heart of the universe. When we consciously and intentionally create, we tap into that creative energy and add to it, situating ourselves within one of the deepest and life-changing experience.

None of this is to say that creative work is inherently spiritual or that all creative practices guarantee spiritual benefits, even if we define spirituality quite broadly. For example, plenty of very creative people engage in self-destructive behaviors of various sorts even as they are

creating extraordinary artwork or music or academic knowledge; however profound the new ideas or products, it's hard to see how creating them while drunk or drugged (for example) enhances one's spiritual life. People who use creativity to gain political power or to harm others are also not, I would imagine, getting much spiritual benefit from their creativity.

Creativity, like any other human gift or capacity, can be misused. If we know that, and if we are committed to our creativity being a positive force for us and the world around us, we are more likely to put our creativity to good use and to benefit from it ourselves in the process.