

Grit and Grace: Using Your Truth to Create: An Example and Reflection Questions

Copyright 2021 Amanda Udis-Kessler; amanda@amandaudiskessler.com

Creativity born of our authentic stories and struggles is rich with integrity. Moreover, because each of us has unique elements in our experiences and interpretations of the world, creativity that springs from our life circumstances can lead to fresh and new ideas and creative products. It's not that our stories and struggles don't fall into larger social patterns; they do (something I'm comfortable saying as a sociologist). And yet, the particular way those social patterns and identities and experiences intersect in our individual lives provides fertile ground for whatever forms of creativity move and inspire us.

My own creativity, for example, is often what I would call "agonistic" (combative). I don't mean that it's violent, but rather that it takes shape in my creating over and against other, different visions. My doctoral dissertation drew on but pushed hard against a then-popular "culture wars" theory to make sense of why the United Methodist Church kept excluding LGBT people from full participation, proposing instead an institutional way to see the situation. My song Love at the Core was written in response to Noel Paul Stookey's song For the Love of It All, which is stunning and brilliant but which has a Christology I don't share. My work on ethics decenters principles (duty, maximizing happiness, virtue, justice, care, equality, rights), instead centering the flourishing of actual people (since principles can be used for ill as well as for good). My confessional psalm Oh, My Shepherd, for white people seeking to work against racism, reimagined Psalm 23 as sung by an oppressor rather than by a member of an oppressed or put-upon group (the more common interpretation).

The name of a contemporary Christian band, Out of the Grey, inspired my song Into the Gray; for me, the power of spirituality and religion is in how they help us move deeper into the complexity of life, not in how they show us "the truth." I loved the farming, gardening, and harvesting images that Evangelical pop music used but not how they used them, so I wrote Bringing in the Harvest, a song that takes those same images and applies them to the spiritual growth of progressive religious people. Finally, my worship song Hope Waits for Us at Advent was inspired by my sense that we were supposed to do more during Advent than just wait for the birth of Jesus. Inspired by John Dominic Crossan's assertion that building the Kin-dom requires our collaboration, I asked what would happen if we saw Advent as a time of active preparation "for the work of co-creation."

While my creativity sometimes starts with my own ideas, observations, or yearnings, it is more often born out of a dissatisfaction with the ideas or creative products of others. Knowing that this is a core piece of my creative truth both frees me and disciplines me. It suggests which projects I am most likely to find meaningful and also indicates where I can put my creativity to the greatest use for others. (It also helps me to resist certain unhelpful temptations.)

This agonistic creativity, as I call it, has a lot to do with specific aspects of my personal history and with some of the social groups of which I am a part. It fits with my life trajectory and the ways I make sense of the world. It is undoubtedly tied to anger, but it is a productive way to transmute that anger into something meaningful and helpful, even joyous.

Of course, your creativity might be totally different. It might begin and end in joy or curiosity or wonder, or it might be the most amazing mash-up of positive and negative impulses. The better you understand what your creativity has to do with the rest of your life, the more opportunities you will have to build a creative life with deep integrity and generate ideas or products or relationships that serve the world well.

In that spirit, here are ten questions for reflection. I hope they help you to better understand your creativity and where you might go with it next.

- 1) What are the most important things that have happened to you over your life? What, if anything, do they have to do with your creativity?
- 2) What are your most important personal or social identities? If someone asked you to complete the sentence, “I am...” or “I am a...”, what would your top ten answers be? How do those identities (and their interactions with one another) shape your creativity?
- 3) How do you see the world? How do you make sense of society? What meaning do you think your life has? What are you called to do? Who are you called to be? What do your answers to any of these questions have to do with your creativity?
- 4) What are your greatest strengths and most painful difficulties? What gifts do you bring? Where are your growing edges? How do these capabilities and limits shape or interact with your creativity?
- 5) I referred to my creativity as “agonistic.” If you had to describe your creativity in a single word, what would that word be? Why?
- 6) What frightens you the most about yourself? About the rest of your life? About the state of society? Could fear play a productive role in your creative life? If so, how?
- 7) What is the single most important transformation that has ever happened to you (positive or negative)? Did it have any effect on your creativity? If so, what was that effect?
- 8) What is the single aspect of your life about which you are most grateful? Why? Does that aspect of your life play any role in your creativity? If it does not play a role now, could it?
- 9) What is the single aspect of your life about which you are most regretful? Why? Does that aspect of your life play any role in your creativity? If it does not play a role now, could (or should) it?
- 10) Some people are particularly gifted at relationships, others at understanding and working with ideas, others at working with, using, and fixing things. Some lucky (and hardworking) people are good at two of the three, or all three. What about you? Does your strength fall in one of these areas, or two, or all three? Whatever your answer, how does it connect with your creativity?