

The Wonder Of Creativity

Thomas Aquinas once said, *“God is an artist and the universe is God’s work of art”*. Aquinas maintains that God is the source of all generative power. The Psalmist David sings in Psalm 19,

“The heavens are telling of God and His glory; the sky proclaims his handiwork, Day to day ours forth speech, and night after night declares knowledge!”

David is pointing out in his song of praise, that God’s incredible creative genius is on display for all to see and observe. All you really have to do is look at the whole universe to see the incredible force of creativity at work. At the root of all created things is a spontaneity that is diverse, wild, and mysterious. And the source of all this is the Creator God!

Robert Capon goes so far as to picture God lying in a bathtub, joyfully and playfully blowing the bubbles of creation! We are all created out of love and joy the *“Divine artist”* has for his work. All creation is rooted and grounded in love! And the Creator has shared the wonder and joy of creativity with his creatures. Once again Aquinas states,

“from an abundance of Divine goodness have creatures been endowed with the dignity of causality.”

It is more than noteworthy that the Hebrew word for blessing is closely related to the Hebrew word for create. What is being suggested here is that creation and all creativity is wrapped up as a blessing! All creativity flows from a gracious Creator as a blessing to us. Rabbi Heschel points out that,

“Just to be is a blessing; just to live is holy”!

Furthermore, the Bible declares that we as humans are made in the image and likeness of God. We are to mirror and reflect God’s likeness. That is a powerful affirmation -- at the very heart of our dignity as human beings lies our creativity and our ability to reflect God’s image! It is an awesome fact that the very source of all being is

where we obtain our ability to create. We derive our creative DNA from Him!!

So let us consider that creativity is a wondrous gift from God! The wonder of creativity is not to be taken for granted. Psychologist Otto Rank defined the artist as,

“one who wants to leave behind a gift”.

Yes indeed, a thank you is in order for the gift of life and creativity, and the artist naturally should want to share a “thank you” for his gift from God with others!

The great composer and conductor Leonard Bernstein once shared,

“ I sit for long nights all by myself and don't have a thought in my head. I'm dry. I'm blocked, or so it seems. I sit at the piano and just improvise-strum some chord or try a sequence of notes. And then, suddenly, I find one that hits, that suggests something else...This is the most exciting moment that can happen in an artist's life. And every time it happens I say 'Gratias agimus tibi'. I am grateful for that gift”!

Gifted Jazz great Miles Davis wrote,

"I'm always thinking about creating. My future starts when I wake up every morning. Every day I find something creative to do with my life."

So we can see that closely related to creativity is imagination. Imagination and the creative process transport us to a special place where there are no limits or boundaries. It is only because of the imagination that there can be such an incredibly diverse amount of artistic ideas!

Listen to what Mozart observed about imagination and composing music,

“When I feel well, and in a good humor, or when I am taking a drive, or walking after a good meal, or in the night when I cannot sleep, thoughts crowd into my mind, as easily as you could wish. Whence,

and how do they come ? I do not know; and I have nothing to do with it. Those which please me, I keep in my head, and hum (at least others have told me that I do so). Once I have my theme, another melody comes, linking itself to the first one, in accordance with the needs of the composition as a whole. The counterpoint, the part of each instrument, and all these melodic fragments, at last produce the entire work. Then my soul is on fire with inspiration. The work grows; I keep expanding it, conceiving it more and more clearly until I have the entire composition finished in my head, though it may be long. Then my mind seizes it, as a glance of my eye a beautiful picture or a handsome youth. It does not come to me successively, but in its entirety my imagination lets me hear it.”

Rollo May asks a very important question which is particularly relevant here,

“In our day of dedication to facts and hard-headed objectivity we have disparaged imagination...what if imagination and art are not frosting at all but the fountainhead of human experience?”

The bottom line is that imagination and creativity may be the greatest thing we have going for us!

Back during the days of slavery, slave masters felt they could control the imagination, ritual, and creativity of African slaves by taking away their drums. The slave masters recognized the immense power and freedom that the drumming, dancing, and singing represented when African slaves joined together. But while the drums disappeared the slaves imagination did not! The rhythms re-appeared in the black preachers phrasings and the development of the Negro spiritual songs!! And of course later their rhythms and music developed into the birth of jazz and blues. Today the drums are back in our music culture because you can't kill the imagination!

Keith Jarrett, in an article for the New York Times shared this observation,

“Try to imagine the very first musician. He was not playing for an audience, or a market, or working on his next recording, or touring with his show, or working on his image. He was playing out of his

need, out of his need for the music. Every year the number of musicians who remember why they play music in the first place grows smaller...

What is the real reason behind creating, writing, and playing music? I believe it is ecstasy (no ecstasy really isn't a naughty word!) Music produces an ecstatic experience. Theologian Matthew Fox describes ecstatic experience as,

"forgetting oneself and of being turned on in a full and deep way." He defines ecstatic experience as, "fully forgetting ourselves, of getting outside ourselves."

Music truly intoxicates the soul! Feelings of joy, peace, sadness, mellowness, there are just so many emotions, some indescribable and just too many to name, that music creates in the creator, performer, and listener! Time for the moment is suspended as we respond to the music!

Creativity brings such joy! One loses all sense of time and gets totally caught up in the present moment. And the sparks bring joy! I know that personally I am most content and fulfilled when in the creative process! Bernstein continues,

"But eventually...a spark will fly, and I'll be off, sailing, my ego gone. I won't know my name. I won't know what time it is. Then, I'm a composer."

What follows this line of thought is the following exhilarating fact-- every time you are involved in a creative act you are also engaged in a spiritual act. Why is this? When an artist is in the process of creating there is a heightened intensity of awareness. Rollo May, in his book, "The Courage To Create", puts it this way,

What the artist feels (at the moment of creation) is not anxiety or fear; it is joy!"

And the artist wants to share this joy so that others may taste it as well!

Jazz Pianist Bill Evans expresses the connection with art and spirituality like this,

“My creed for art in general is that it should enrich the soul; it should teach spirituality by showing a person a portion of himself that he would not discover otherwise . . . a part of yourself you never knew existed.”

I know that from my own personal experience of writing music I have observed that I have had some of my most profound spiritual experiences while writing music. There is an inner connectivity with the presence of God that is intensely spiritual. There is joy in the flash of an idea and during the development of the music there is an on going spiritual mood that can linger for days or even weeks. Of course, it depends on the type of music you are creating as to what kind of emotional feelings or mood will be present.

But there are things that can hinder the joy of creativity. And let me go further in applying this to the experience of being a musician as well. As suggested by Keith Jarrett’s line of thought earlier, we can become hampered by the obsessive, *“How am I doing?”*, and the self-consciousness that accompanies this question. American composer Aaron Copland once said,

“inspiration may be a form of super-consciousness, or perhaps sub-consciousness – I wouldn’t know. But I am sure that it is the antithesis of self consciousness.”

When we start to enshrine ourselves as the source and center of our creative abilities, and fail to appreciate and recognize that all our music, talents, and abilities are a gift from God, the exalted ego can effectively extinguish the joy of creating and playing music. One’s ego can become so big that the focus is solely on how well we are playing or how well our Cd’s are selling. Many musicians need to forget about success and failure and just get back to the joy and gift of music itself.

Bill Evans also spoke with incredible insight when he said,

“technique is the ability to translate your ideas into sound through your instrument. This is a comprehensive technique . . . a feeling for the keyboard that will allow you to transfer any emotional utterance into it. What has to happen is that you develop a comprehensive technique and then say, Forget that. I’m just going to be expressive through the piano.”

Jazz music in particular provides many opportunities for responding to the music and encouraging creativity and improvisation. Quoting Miles Davis again,

“I’ll play it first and tell you what it is afterwards.”

The joy of music has been filtered out of the curriculum of most learning institutions. Teachers dish out helping after helping of dry joyless monotony as they try to teach the mechanics of music without giving at least equal emphasis on creativity and the joy and wonder of creativity. No wonder so many drop out and never pursue playing it for personal enjoyment or even a professional career! And many fine musicians are burnt out because they have lost the connectivity between their music and the source of all joy!

May we make every effort to regain and sustain our sense of awe and wonder as we return to the source of all creativity! I pray that joy will be re-discovered in our art, our music, and in all of our lives!!

Written by David Arivett

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