

**Sermon for Joint Worship
Covenant Christian Community
And
Seekers Church
October 26, 2014**

Creativity: A Spiritual Path

READING

Art speaks to the senses in ways that are too complex and subtle to be able to fully define in words. We respond physically and emotionally to the colors, shapes, textures, rhythms, timbres, pitch, or other aspects of a painting, a song, a film in ways that are difficult to describe, but still very real.

Sanctifying Art

INTRODUCTION

When the Sacred Conversations on Race and Diversity Planning Group organized our first joint worship service last year, we focused on a social justice issue that both of our faith communities found pressing and ripe for multiracial, multicultural social action---the myriad injustices surrounding our system and practice of mass incarceration. This year we decided that our communities shared something else in common, the creation and appreciation of art. So we thought we would lift the theme of creativity's role in our spiritual journey.

OPENING THOUGHTS

The universe itself is the result of a creative cosmic force, the external manifestation of a Divine consciousness. For those of us who believe that we are expressions of that consciousness it is no wonder that we embody that same creative cosmic characteristic.

We are creating every waking second with our thoughts, whether, as Christine Valters Paintner says, we are making art, or dreaming and discerning our futures, or creating loving relationships, or playing in our leisure time, or generating new ideas in the workplace, or building our visions for what is possible in our communities, and working toward justice."¹ The creative process is probably second only to our instincts for survival, and even then, we employ it in our efforts to secure that survival.

Making art, which is what we are focusing on this morning, is a special part of this larger creative process where we tap into that inner dimension beyond thought and free the imagination to play, explore, discover something new and touch the sacred.

¹ Paintner, Ph.D., Christine Valters, "The Relationship Between Spirituality and Artistic Expression: Cultivating the Capacity for Imagining," [Spirituality in Higher Education Newsletter](#), (UCLA, Vol. 3, Issue 2, January, 2007, p.3).

Paintner cites Graham Wallas as describing four stages in the making of art (though I have experienced them all, they tend to be not separate and distinct, but more fluid, sometimes instantaneous and often hardly noticeable):

1. preparation: in our thinking and imagining; gathering our materials; equipment; patterns; setting, etc.;
2. incubation: where we step away from the work; we go to sleep; we stop handling it; we give it time to rise like yeast-filled dough or a germinating seed;
3. illumination: where we make ourselves receptive to inspiration and insights that can come from almost anywhere; and
4. execution: where we just do the thing... make it happen.²

Whether, as Deborah describes in Sanctifying Art, we are the prehistoric painter, the potter, muralist or dancer, who get intensely physical with their art, or the person who experiences art as a divine gift bestowed upon us in an instant through some ethereal source, its ability to nurture, instruct, awaken, comfort, arouse, annoy confound and perplex us in ways too numerous to describe, is undeniable.

Both Peter and I are fiber artists. For both of us, our work in fiber is a spiritual practice, but we approach it in very different ways.

PETER:

Fiber work can play a deep, abiding role in our formation as individuals and members of community. Marjory has made a crib blanket for each of the children of her two sisters and each of their children. It's always interesting to visit one of their homes and see those quilts folded across the foot of a child's bed, or hanging on a bedroom wall.

In my case, I was the beginning of a similar tradition. Here's a crib quilt that my grandmother, Ella Bankson started making just about 76 years ago for her first grandchild, me. She gave it to my dad, her eldest son, and his bride when I was born, and it's been around me ever since. I may forget about it for years on end, but every time I drag it out I am reminded of how Nana Bankson's image, stitched into this quilt, has shaped my life.

Show the quilt, and read the words:

“The Little Red Hen”
“The House on the Hill”
“She swept her house”
She washed her clothes”
She tended her chicks”
“She planted her wheat”
“She baked her bread”



² ibid, p. 5.

Those of you who know me well can decide whether Nana Bankson was being predictive, or directive, whether she guessed how I would turn out, or whether her presence in my life, symbolized by this quilt, helped shape me into the person (boy scout) I am today.

Sometimes when I think about the role model of the Little Red Hen I wonder if, in her heart, Nana Bankson might have been hoping for a granddaughter...

My own journey with fiber art began about 45 years ago, when I was ambushed by crochet. Just after I came home from my second tour in Viet Nam In 1970 I went to the Haystack-Hinckley School of Art summer session in Maine to pick up Marjory, who had been serving as the kiln pilot for the pottery program. She presented me with the first fiber sculpture I'd ever held in my hands, this little yellow school bus crocheted by Walt Nottingham. The moment I touched it I was hooked. I wanted to learn how to make things like that. So I got myself some yarn and a few hooks, and got started.

(Show Walt Nottingham's school bus)



About 3 years later, while I was in graduate school (Studying science, technology and public policy at GW) I had the opportunity to take a class at the Smithsonian, taught by Ron Goodman. He was a fiber sculptor like Walt Nottingham, and helped us learn how to make things that turn out the way we expect. His idea was that if we could learn to crochet a square, a rectangle, a circle and a sphere, then we could make anything we could imagine. The final exam: imagine it and crochet it. For me, that led to "No Mustard Please."

The image on the bulletin cover is part of the crocheted coral reef that was on display at the Smithsonian a couple years ago. It's a project of the Institute for Figuring, embracing mathematics, marine biology, handicraft and community art practice. Over 7,000 people have added to the reef, helping draw attention to the environmental crisis of global warming and the escalating problem of oceanic plastic trash. It's a presentation of colors, shapes and textures that help us see, and feel the different ways things grow. And when we learn that these wonderfully complex creatures are dying away because the oceans are getting to warm for them, these soft, floppy sculptures invite us to an understanding that goes beyond words.



The altar installation this morning is another example of art in the service of compassion, a collection of crocheted flowers, are part of a project to honor some 3,000 children who lost their lives to gun violence.

In our reading for today, Deborah Sokolove says “Art speaks to the senses in ways that are too complex and subtle to be able to fully define in words.” That says a lot about art. I can appreciate it when I contemplate sculpture, or painting, or photography. But I’m here today with my mind full of crochet. And one of those old questions rises up immediately as I begin to think about it is this: Is crochet “art,” or just “craft?”

Crochet is often understood as merely a craft, a quick way to make a baby blanket, or a scarf, or a hat, or even a pair of booties. Personally, I think this is a dismissive way of thinking about “craft.” Here’s an observation from M.C. Richards, one of the mentors of our family, from her seminal book “Centering In Pottery, Poetry and the Person:”

Craft as you may know, comes from the German word *Kraft*, meaning *power* or *strength*. As Emerson said, the law is: “Do the thing, and you shall have the power. But they who do not the thing, have not the powers.” We can’t fake craft. It lies in the act. The strains we have put in the clay break open in the fire. We do not have the craft, or craftsmanship, if we do not speak to the light that lives within the earthly materials; this means ALL earthly materials, including [people] themselves.³

M.C. Richards, *Centering in Pottery, Poetry and the Person*, p 12.

Crochet is Craft. Piano or painting is Craft. But like piano or painting, crochet can also be a medium for artistic expression. It can “...speak to the senses in ways that are too complex and subtle to be able to fully define in words.” Crochet can be craft, or art, or both.

Crochet can comfort or confront. Crochet as craft can be comforting. A prayer shawl is comforting to make, and comforting to wear.



Crochet as art can be confrontational. A pattern-less piece can explore dark corners of my imagination. “What is It?” shows how something unexpected emerges from the work in progress.

A mathematical piece can offer insights about other dimensions of life. This piece, “ $S = 6 \sum_{n=0}^9 2^n$ ” demonstrates how things grow when each generation is twice as large as the one before it. AS in “Double

your investment, or each couple has four children. It begins with six stitches in the first row, and by doubling each stitch, has 3,072 stitches in the tenth and final row!



I’ve found that fiber sculpture can amuse or amaze ... or honor a memory. Here’s a piece I did during the 1998 home run record chase, while Mark McGuire and Sammy Sosa struggled at the [plate, I was trying to figure out how to show how old tape comes loose from the handle of a well-used bat.

³ M.C. Richards, *Centering in Pottery, Poetry and the Person*, p 12.



When I finished “Home Run” I knew I had the perfect liturgical stole if I ever was invited to officiate at the wedding of two baseball players! SO far, no invitation...

So, for me, working with fiber has led me deep within, encouraging me to give shape to things I haven’t been able to find words for. Maybelle’s journey has been a bit different.

MAYBELLE: The womenfolk in my family taught me to crochet and knit when I was about seven years old. My mom, my aunties, nor my grandmother believed in idle hands. I never saw them using patterns, but they did some awesome work.

As I grew older, and went away to school, a woman I befriended of French background taught me how to read patterns, correct mistakes, become more sophisticated in my knitting, use round needles, read knitting charts and really expand the range of projects I could undertake.

Unlike Peter, I took to deciphering the patterns and trying to master the craft. I became more interested in making clothing and practical items than creating works of art. The same held true when I decided to try my hand at weaving some twenty years ago. For me, learning the mechanics of the craft, and making sure what I made looked like what was in the book became my main focus. Here is a traditional Civil War pattern, “Lee’s Surrender,” that I did early in to test my weaving skills.



Then something happened. Over time, I found that crocheting, knitting and weaving were not simply interesting pastimes that kept idleness away or that gave me a means of making interesting hand-made gifts. As I entered a recovery program, I found my handwork to be therapeutic, a source of serenity, a hush harbor I could enter in the midst of a crowd. I could take long tedious trips, sit for hours in waiting rooms and listen to not-so-interesting lectures as long as my hands were busy.

At length, I found that doing my handwork in solitary was not nearly as fulfilling as doing it in community, and as it turns out, another church established in the tradition of the Church of the Savior, New Community Church, provided the space and the program (ArtSpace) for the teaching of fiber arts. Here’s where I learned to get creative and go where no pattern could take me!

I wasn’t making art as much as the teaching itself became the art. I found myself:

- teaching folks who couldn’t read the patterns;

- teaching folks who wouldn't read the patterns;
- teaching folks who could read the patterns but didn't want to follow the patterns;
- encouraging folks who didn't need patterns to make beautiful work;
- troubleshooting when folks got in trouble with their work;
- fixing looms that were in need of parts and love;
- stocking, sorting and managing an inventory of yarns, patterns and instructional books;
- encouraging folk whose work looked nothing like the pattern when they decided to make their own pattern modifications;
- allowing folks to find out why certain weaving, knitting or crochet conventions are more effective; etc.



Here is a shrug made by Troy, and his "Spiral," made without a pattern to guide him.



In short, I learned much about human nature, styles of learning, and the therapeutic benefits of working with one's hands. Teaching fiber arts led me into the mysteries of: human learning, understanding and project execution; community building; family making; and spirit healing. We're no longer students and teacher. We are Sons and Daughters of the **YAM (Yarn Arts Mastery)** who come together in celebrations, on vacations, to worship, when illness strikes or tragedies occur.



I learned about my own temperament, my patience levels (or the lack thereof), and how my students quickly became my teachers, especially when they wanted to try something I had no experience at all in doing.



William Coperthwaite put it well when he described the teacher as:

*"Not an authority of specialized knowledge, an expert who has all the answers and imparts some construction of "truth," the teacher is a designer of the learning process, a choreographer of discovery. Teachers value and respect the unique knowledge that others contribute to the learning experience and foster a mutually shared responsibility among all those involved in producing knowledge and learning."*⁴

In short, the greatest work of art we, my students and I, have created together is the community we have built around fiber arts.

BACK TO PETER: Wrap-up thoughts

For me, crochet has become a helpful metaphor for spiritual guidance. The comforting "craft" is like caring spiritual companionship. In this role, a spiritual companion can walk with us, pray with us, and help us trust the love of God as we live into our own dark nights of the soul. As I listened to Maybelle talk about how keeping her hands busy can help her stay present to those "not-so-interesting lectures" I thought about the comfort of spiritual companions in the waiting room praying for someone in surgery. Crochet can be comforting companionship.

At other times, unexpected or confrontational art is like an insightful; spiritual director, whose questions help move me along the path of my spiritual journey.

Crochet can be craft, or art, or both. Or neither. It can comfort AND confront. It might be a bit of a stretch, but after all this time I'm convinced that crochet can be a pretty good teacher, even if crochet patterns are still a bit of a mystery to me.

MAYBELLE: Wrap-up thoughts:

Finally, one beautiful example of how art became the conveyor of divine insight took place in my experience of learning to repair a broken thread while weaving.

As a novice weaver I thought I was doing fine weaving my first project, a set of overshot placemats I was making for my Mom. Then a thread broke right in the middle of the warp. The warp, made up of the lengthwise threads in a textile, was many yards long and wound around the back beam of the loom. I feared a broken thread meant that the whole textile might have to be discarded, and my despondency was written all over my face. My weaving instructor came over to me, and asked what was wrong. When I told her that the thread was broken, she reminded me that almost all cultures in the world have developed some form of weaving, and that weavers, worldwide, work with all sorts of materials. Then she asked, "Do you think you are the first person to ever break a thread?"

⁴ Coperthwaite, William, [A Handmade Life: In Search of Simplicity](#), (Chelsea Green Publishing Company, White River Junction, Vermont, 2002, p. xiii).

She went about showing me how to pull the old thread back off of the loom and how to anchor a new thread on the closest piece of newly woven cloth where the thread had broken. The new thread was carried through the same dent in the reed and the same heddle that the old thread occupied, and was used to continue weaving the cloth in the old thread's stead, for a few inches. Then, the old thread was placed back in the heddle and reed where it was at first, side by side with the new thread and the two were woven together a few more inches until the new thread was discontinued. Now the weaving continued with the old thread as before, only this time, with the cloth even stronger where the break had occurred.

As the process for the repair of the broken thread was being explained to me, I realized that it was a metaphor for the repair of my own life from the disease of addiction. Like the broken thread, which was part of a well wound warp of hundreds of threads that were in otherwise good shape, this addiction was part of a life well invested with love, education, and career achievements. Just as one doesn't throw away a whole warp because of one broken thread, one doesn't throw away a whole life because of an illness. The new thread represents the help that is available when brokenness occurs. That help is needed for a while to reinforce a life that is struggling toward wholeness, and is integrated into the whole life side-by side with all the strengths that were already there until the repair is complete. Like the cloth, the life, having been strengthened by a new resource, in my case a recovery program, is now on the road to a new wholeness, stronger in the place where brokenness once occurred.

The craft/art of weaving, in the repair of the broken thread, became a vehicle for communicating a spiritual insight about my life.

Finally, knitting, crochet and weaving became gateways into the art of teaching; the sacred work of community building around discovering the joy of making things by hand. There is a common language that crosses all barriers between: male and female; black and white; young and seasoned; gay and straight; Christian and Muslim; Israeli, Indian (East), Trinidadian and Belgian. All have been part of our community. I'll close with a wonderful example from William Coperthwaite's *A Handmade Life: An elderly Lapp woman sat by the window annoyed at having a stranger in her home whom she was forced to host until her son arrived. Since she was ignoring him, the stranger decided to be as unintrusive as possible and sit quietly in the corner working on his hand craft. It was a sort of hand weaving the woman did not recognize, and, "After about twenty minutes she was looking overly shoulder. Unperturbed, I continued weaving. Then I looked up and smiled. She smiled back. I slowed down the stitching to enable her to see. Then I passed the mitten to her to try. Back and forth it went. Her nimble fingers and mind soon had the technique. After a few hours, when her son returned, we were fast friends, and yet we had not a single word in common.*⁵

The power of craft/art to bridge differences, create friendships, and communicate oneness is revealed beautifully in this story.

⁵(Coperthwaite, William, *A Handmade Life* , p. 73