

Reflection: Joy and Creativity

August 20, 2017

Reading: *Ten Things Nobody Told You About Being Creative*, Austin Kleon

This morning I have some stories to tell about people and places, creativity and improvisation. I want to tell you that creativity brings joy, no matter what field or discipline you may be in. Joy is different than happiness, which can come and go due to external factors. Joy bubbles up from within, and sometimes comes most easily when you are just being yourself, or exploring who you want to become.

I enjoy hearing Science Friday on National Public Radio, because I've always had a learning curve on science, being a liberal arts kind of gal. A story which caught my ear was about Peter Schultz, a kid who loved to blow things up for fun—in a scientific inquiry kind of way. You can see this featured on the Science Friday website as well. Schulz says he has been doing the same work for forty years, exploding things, and still gets very excited right before the burst goes off. His curiosity kept going from childhood, and now he's a retired geologist, with a background in astronomy.

Peter Schulz became a scientist who studies asteroids, particularly the impact glass created at landing, and the substances that get flash fried inside the glass. Now he explodes things inside a bright orange, two-story high, metal tube—a giant gun that creates glass rock with asteroid-level heat. Following his instincts and an "aha" creative moment, Schulz realized he could study trapped grass and other materials to see past records of life. He could find suspended atmospheric gases, soil, and other living material from bygone areas. In the NPR story, Schulz is looking at a single blade of Pampas grass from Argentina, trapped in the glass of a meteorite landing nine million years ago. Schulz's sense of exploration, his creativity and improvisation, led to the joy of following his intuition in science for decades.

Another creative scientist is Nancy Grace Roman, aka Mother of the Hubble Telescope. A member of River Road UU Congregation in Bethesda, she even has an asteroid named for her! This all started when she was 11, loved to learn about constellations, and formed an astronomy club. Nancy Grace Roman knew in high school that she wanted to pursue this creative passion, even though those around her were not at all encouraging. Following her interest in science all the way through her Ph.D. at the

University of Chicago, Dr. Roman eventually came to NASA. She was the first Chief of Astronomy there, and spent a lifetime in research, publishing, teaching and management.

Nancy Grace ended up managing a project that now gives us some of the most amazing photos of deep space. It's important to realize that she used her creativity to help build and sell the Hubble: she organized the astronomers repeatedly, which I guess is as hard as herding UUs. Plus key to the whole deal: she and others convinced Congress to fund it. The Hubble wouldn't exist without Dr. Nancy Grace Roman. Not because of the science, but because of the management and the money. She took creative action in the public sphere, and put the creativity of science and technology in to orbit. The result has been a project of NASA that is beloved: the stunning images help us dream, and remind us of mystery and beauty in the galaxy and Universe. Now Nancy Grace is immortalized in a set of Lego action figures honoring five female scientists, a creative project meant to inspire children of all genders to be scientists.

Another story of joy and creativity was evident in an art show I saw recently. Richard Levine works in transparent watercolor, and gouache, a more opaque watercolor with some thickening element. His show, *Common Ground*, explored the shared roots between the architecture of rural New England or Nova Scotia, and the geometric color field paintings that come from the Washington or New York schools of painting.

What does this look like? You see an iconic looking Maine barn, with a little gift of surprise. Each building has an inset square, a kind of portal to another place, to a real painting that exists elsewhere from another time and artist. The tiny representations of say, a Morris Louis painting, share the lines of structure and architecture with the Maine barn. There is a sense of something known and familiar, with an unexpected a panel of color in the middle. Austin Kleon's observation is that creativity involves collecting good ideas, and making them into your own creative expression. Levine actually gathers other artists' paintings, and then transforms them by placing them where we wouldn't normally see them. This can spark our own creativity, if we let it. What surprising joy might we bring to our own creative space, inspired by others, yet expressed in our own joyful voice?

Another creative expression, architecture, is seen in the renowned and appreciated River Road building of my congregation. Our beloved sanctuary expresses so much in light, form, and creative purpose. The notes from the original Building Committee dreamed of what they wanted the architects to capture:

Our church shall be designed to contribute to and reflect the warmth of love, the lift of the human spirit in moments of exaltation, and the integrity of the intelligence engaged in the search for truth...Because we are a unity in diversity, imposing no dogma, but believing in the freedom of mind and spirit, our church may incorporate materials and aesthetic qualities which create a unity of effect...Because we use our heritage creatively, our church shall be creative and artistic, yet honest and simple, a combination of modern and traditional materials and design concepts in contemporary structure.

Fifty years later our building speaks, shines, and calls attention to sacred place. The architects used forms from other traditions, and reworked them to represent the ideals of Unitarian Universalism, in the spirit of creativity and improvisation. Their sense of exploration around something new, the joy of following their intuition to make great art and living spaces, is now a gift to us. The building was recognized in 1966 as one the ten best buildings constructed or completed that year in the world. I have no idea how they came to choose both River Road and the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi, India that year! But the words of the jury sing to us across the decades:

A handsomely unpretentious building which expresses the Unitarian philosophy with clarity and vigor. In contrast with so many contemporary churches, this one does not strain for effect. Instead, it achieves crisp simplicity and effortless variety, and its rapport with the wooded site is thoroughly pleasing. Viewed from any position, the relationship of forms is delightful.

Joy is related to creative play and delightfulness. It is a feeling evoked in expression, exploration and intuition. There are ways to design with joy, whether in science, art, music, writing, business. Austin Kleon writes:

The manifesto is this: Draw the art you want to see, start the business you want to run, play the music you want to hear, write the books you want to read, build the products you want to use—do the work you want to see done.

Creativity isn't just for artists and architects, rather, it is a human gift for astronomers or geologists, for educators or leaders of any variety. I remember something my Dad used to tell me as a teenager and young adult: *The most important thing to learn in life is to think creatively.* He said that you could study anything endlessly, and lack the creative impulse to bring this knowledge to life. He and my mom raised three daughters in the 60's and 70's to believe we could accomplish whatever we set our mind, hearts, and faith towards. My Dad affirmed creative possibilities, and the joy of following your calling wherever it led, even when it seemed a little risky. He was not an artist, but he loved music and visual arts via my mother, a painter and copper enamelist. In fact, he was a corporate and tax attorney, a congregational board chair, and a civic leader in numerous settings, who made things happen by thinking creatively. I'm lucky to have such a legacy, one that inspires me to aspire with joy, and to use creativity to flourish.

This is our human capacity, shown in astonishing ways around the planet when we do things that build the whole. We can make something new, or emerging from older work, or combined with the old to make a different form. This is the kind of exploration that makes life interesting, following the passion of creativity that is yours alone. May you be moved to express joy creatively, to let it shine in every field. May you find the joy that comes from being *you*, in all your artistic and improvising expressions.