

**Big Sky Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
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**Listening for Bat Qol: What I've Learned about Creativity
Since Becoming a Unitarian Universalist**

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The title of my talk today is "What I've Learned about Creativity Since Becoming UU." I've chosen this subject – or it has chosen me – because ever since I first came to UU more than four years ago, the subject of creativity has been imposing itself on me – turning up in what I read and hear and filling my thoughts.

You might think this would not be unusual since you know me as an artist. But, what you don't know is that until I came to UU I had quit painting for almost 20 years.

UU changed that and now I want to share with you my story. It's a story about creativity and spirituality and how I came to know that they are vital to our happiness.

Since UU, much of what I've encountered regarding creativity has been linked with spirituality. That's another subject that I had more or less put out of my life –spirituality.

The problem for me was that I was resisting those words; Creativity and Spirituality. They have been used so superficially and conveniently that I became skeptical of them and rejected them along with what they mean.

You know the problems with "spirituality." It's used for everything from Ouija boards to God and His angels in Heaven. I didn't believe any of it.

As for the word "Creativity," there I have had real, personal, painful problems: I had become convinced I didn't have any.

Of course, creativity applies to all kinds of endeavors, but it's artistic creativity I'm talking about here. My experience as an art student in college pretty much convinced me that I didn't have a creative imagination. I just couldn't express my inner life in abstract paintings. I could paint what I could see, but I could not paint from my imagination. I was an unlucky person with a talent for drawing and skills for painting (which were dismissed in college as "facile"), but lacking "creativity," I had no satisfying way to use them.

After college, I searched for my missing creativity in workshops and classes and books but, I just couldn't paint pictures from my imagination that pleased me. I did find ways to use my art skills as a courtroom illustrator for TV and as a medical illustrator and a sidewalk portrait artist. I also sold people-pleasing pictures at art fairs. People knew me as an artist, but I couldn't call myself "artist" on tax returns. Artists are Creative people. I was not.

To make a long story a bit shorter: Eventually I got so frustrated that I divorced art. I got rid of my art supplies and didn't even want to look at art.

People didn't like that. They insisted that I should paint -- as if painting is an obligation.

But I was relieved and happy enough. I didn't miss painting. I found that making quilts – playing with little pieces of colored cloth was satisfying.

As time went by, though, I knew something was missing.

I began to read more and more about religion. I had firmly decided that God was a creation of man, that the church was an apparatus to control people and that heaven was an invention by people afraid to die. Still, it took me decades to gather courage to call myself atheist. I still clung to the warm, fuzzy feelings I experienced in church growing up. I kept trying to make religion work. But all my experiences with church always left me sad and angry and feeling shut out. -----Just as all my efforts to be an artist left me feeling shut out.

Looking for that missing something, I searched for a church and eventually, because of some good friends who suggested it, I found UU.

So here I am. Nothing has been the same since.

The first thing that happened after becoming UU was that the joy of finding the place I had been looking for allowed me to open myself up to things “spiritual” without all the knee-jerk skepticism I had felt before. Principles 2 and 3 –“acceptance of one another” and “the free and responsible search” demand that.

When I first started coming to UU, Bill Elliott gave me some old UUWorlds. One of them had the article by Forrest Church about the cathedral with many windows and the one sun outside shining through all those different windows – that beautiful metaphor for one God, many churches. That article helped me with the God and church question.

Soon I was able to reconcile my atheism with this: seeing the worshipful art made in by humans from the beginning of time had brought me to the belief that we humans must be hard-wired to worship. To deny this ancient urge is to deny who we are. I was willing to say that God is whatever it is that we feel moved to worship. Whatever it is that we feel the need to thank when life on this earth moves us to gratitude to the unknown. Whatever it is that we turn to for comfort or courage when we feel a need to pray.

Our UU services have introduced me to many ideas about the spirit. Best of all, much of this I was learning was presented by real people whom I admired --- you.

Now, maybe this is just a coincidence, but shortly after I started coming to UU, I started painting again. It occurred to me that if denying

spirituality is denying part of oneself, then denying creativity and one's artistic gift is also denying part of oneself.

I still didn't think of myself as a creative artist, but I felt opened up to art enough to allow it to come back into my life. I joined the Art Center to be with people making art. When I saw an ad for some big canvases I was moved to buy them even though I had never painted big. I was inspired by an Art Center acquaintance's successful show during an Art Walk and open enough to make a commitment to the library to have my own show – with, for the first time, big paintings. That was a big risk for me. I'd been painting those pictures of Helena in my mind for decades. I worked hard on the show for a year, did the best I could at the time and I was proud of that show. I've been painting ever since. And, creative or not, I've been enjoying it so much that it's become a big part of my life.

So that's my story so far. But the title of this talk is "What I've Learned about Creativity since Becoming UU"; so, on with the show. As I mentioned earlier, not long after starting UU I became aware of the flood of information about the creativity/spirituality link.

First there was the UU World – now my favorite magazine. The first issue I received had a picture of a tree by Andrew Wyeth on the cover with an article, "The Sacred in Images" about how Western religion focuses on "The Word," tending to eschew graven images, while Eastern religions are awash in visual images. It proposes that we should be trying to be more visual in our perception of the sacred.

I didn't expect to find articles about art in our church magazine, and that issue seemed providential. It also had an article about Ted Kooser, the UU who was U.S. poet laureate. It inspired me to buy some of his books of poetry, and although I don't do it all the time, I have tried emulate him and be more creative in how I perceive the world while I am taking a walk.

I read every word in that first issue – even the classifieds where I found the ads for the houses to rent in San Miguel de Allende and France. As you know, I've gone to both places to paint.

Another issue of UU World had a piece about haiku poetry and how the author is challenged to get his ego out of the way, get rid of the impulse to be clever, and become the "medium through which nature's own holy voice can speak for itself." He recommended a book, Seeds from a Birch Tree, which I bought. It tells about how gratitude and reverence open our senses and our creativity and it helped me see the world around me much more intensely and creatively. Making haiku primes the pump for making art.

Having let down my guard about spirituality, I allowed myself to just go hog wild and read a New Age Oprah favorite, the day book, Simple Abundance. I quite liked it --especially when more than half-way through I came upon an entry about "Rumplestiltskin." When it comes to making pictures, I have always identified with the miller's daughter -- so much so, that even now when I go down into the basement where I have my easel, I

think of her going into the room filled with straw. It is daunting to face the white canvas and all the vulnerabilities, doubts and fears that it stimulates. The book has, what was to me, a revelation about both the meaning of the story and why it has always resonated with me more than any other fairy tale.

It says that we are all of the characters in the story. It says that sometimes, like the miller, our ego sets us up with what seems like an impossible task. We doubt that we can do it, but we are intrigued with it just as the greedy king is. Like the miller's daughter, our potential impels us to the task as if our lives depend on it. We try to spin our straw into gold using all the skills of our rational mind, but they are not enough when we dream the "impossible dream." We need the help of Rumpelstiltskin – our subconscious mind. Instead of a necklace or ring, we give up pride and control of the dream. Instead of our firstborn child we surrender our ego; we cannot do it alone. We give the order to our subconscious and then slip into a creative slumber so that the subconscious mind can go to work for us.

This analysis of the story sounds right to me. Some people think that the unconscious is God. It's easy to think that God dwells in us. Whether that is true or not, I do believe that even though we can't hear it when we are awake because sensory distractions drown it out, our subconscious is speaking to us constantly and it is urging us to fulfill our potential – to be more than we believe we can be. And it will help us if we pay attention.

The haiku poet also sought to let go of his ego just as Buddhists and other meditation practitioners work to get past their ego to access the subconscious and the treasures it has to offer our creativity.

This idea turned up again in the novel Cynthia suggested for our Big Sky bUUK cIUUb, The Beekeepers Apprentice, about Sherlock Holmes and his teenage girl sidekick. At one point she is trying to crack a secret code. She receives the solution in her sleep and attributes it to what the Hebrew prophets called Bat Qol, "daughter of the whispered voice of God." Whether it is just our subconscious or the whispered voice of God, I love having a name (better than Rumpelstiltskin) for that creative voice in the mind that gives us answers in our sleep or when we least expect them.

Now, when I have a creative problem, I often invoke Bat Qol as I fall asleep. I invoked her a lot as I composed this sermon.

Other books in our bUUK cIUUb have made big, maybe even life-changing impressions on me. The first book we read was "Three Cups of Tea". If any of you haven't read it yet I urge you to do so. It's the true story of Greg Mortensen and his heroic efforts to build schools in remote regions of Pakistan. His story reinforces three important lessons about how to complete a creative endeavor. First, he stated his goal: He promised the villagers who saved his life that he would build them a school. Second: he asked for help and was open to receive it. Third: he just kept at it until he

did it. He focused and didn't give up. Those three things - say it, seek help and do it – are the groundwork to the road to any successful creative work.

The Happiness Hypothesis by Jonathan Haidt was our second book. It's about our brains and our behavior and is just filled with fascinating information. The metaphor that runs through the book is the elephant and the rider. The elephant is our unconscious, animal brain that controls our automatic responses. The rider is our rational mind that thinks it is in charge. Haidt says the elephant is in control and can only be changed by much, much training.

Throughout the book Dr. Haidt says that creativity and spirituality are vital to human happiness.

Two ideas especially caught my attention: They are “flow” and “writing our life story.”

Psychological experiments find that the thing that makes people happiest is “flow.” Flow happens when you are involved in a challenge that fully engages your attention and all your skills are working beyond what you imagined possible, as if by magic, and you get flash after flash of positive feeling as you meet the challenge. You lose yourself and all sense of time and place. Flow is when the elephant and the rider become one.

Creative activity often leads to “flow. I've experienced it a couple times playing golf but it happens to me most often when I am painting. It is bliss. Since it's the thing that makes us happiest and it comes through creative activity then, what was I doing denying what creativity I have?

Haidt says that we are all writing our life story as we live it and he names the four story lines of our life story: relationships, work, posterity and spirituality.

These are the areas where we measure our success and satisfaction. Posterity is our unique contribution to the world.

This interested me. Entering my age bracket does wonders for focusing attention on how the life story is going. And, if work and posterity (which are creative) and spirituality make up most of the story, then it's a huge mistake to deny or neglect them. I figure I've got a lot of catching up to do.

Dr. Capacchione, whom I quoted earlier said, “When you are committed to seeing your life as a work in progress – as the creative process beckoning to you—then creativity becomes your spiritual practice.”

The give and take of that creative/spiritual practice is beautiful and rewarding. For example: The act of painting (or any creative activity) requires you to open your senses and be mindful of what you are doing.

If I draw a face I have to look at that face so openly and intently that it's as if the face goes into my eyes and comes out my hand. I lose myself in the face and even begin to fall in love with it. It's a kind of exhilarating, magical experience that I can now call “spiritual.” Conversely, feeling the love of “spirit” opens your senses to beauty and stirs you to create. I don't know how I lost knowing that for so long. I'm so glad to own it now.

Thanks to you the words “Creativity” and “Spirituality” no longer make me uncomfortable. Just recently this occurred to me: Many say they find spirit in nature – the mountains and sunsets that move us to awe and reverence. I think that “spirit” is in something even more awe-inspiring and miraculous – you. You, who are made of the same cosmic material as the mountains and sunset, you do something far greater than they can do: You experience their magnificent beauty with your senses and respond emotionally with awe and joy and reverence. You can do that miracle. And out of that, you and I and all of us create art and music and dance and all manner of wonders. To me, that is where “Spirit” is.

Now, I like the way my story is turning out. Thanks to you, these are things I’ve learned so far:

- Embrace creativity and spirituality as vital parts in creating your happy life story.
- Say it. Ask for it. Focus and do the work.
- Haiku and meditation prime the creative pump.
- Be mindful of the world around you. As Lynda Saul said recently at our Wednesday Spirituality discussion, “I see whatever that’s beautiful and I want to shout it out.”
- Shout it out. Do your best joyfully, accepting that “This is the best I can do at this time.”
- Own what you do.
- Be patient: wait and listen for Bat Qol.

I thought about these things as I painted my Helena paintings. I still think about them and even if it is not great art, now the act of painting is, as someone said, “The divine play that is creativity.”

We are all creative. I’ve seen your creativity: the things you are knitting, Ruth and Lowell’s creative kitchen remodel, and Patti and Bill’s home renovations, Winston’s piano compositions, Patti and Jeannie’s gardens, Joyce’s mansion district research, Nick and Jay’s music making, Emily’s poetry, the sermons many of you have written, our beautiful newsletter and website, the banner some past member created that brings us pleasure every week (her posterity) and the art project we are working on now. It happens here in BSUU every week – the choice of songs and sermons, the food we bring, the clothes we choose to wear, the ways we reach out to each other.

Our creations enlarge us as they contribute to the world. We are given our talents and interests – given circumstances and personalities. What are we going to do with them? How will we live creatively to write our story and leave our posterity?

Let’s go bravely and mindfully and make our lives the works of art they are meant to be.

