

Creativity

God's creativity is the ground of all our own creativity - and (just as significantly), that through exercising our own creativity we come to understand God's creativity more fully.

Reflecting on our own creativity is one way to engage with the aesthetic, that necessary form of inhabiting the world imaginatively, which always engages (one way or another) all our senses. In the ancient world, Aristotle in his *Poetics* explored the foundations of how the quest for "the good" ("*to kalon*") was a fundamental human search about the relationship between truth and beauty. He asked whether art is imitation or representation, and he laid down certain lines of enquiry which are still pursued today in understanding creativity.

Generally speaking, our creativity is about how we enter imaginatively into our world and how our world speaks to us. Just imagine if, as children, we were given nothing to play with, to interact with, to explore. Through all of these we grew. I remember being taught to write, and I did not think at all about the frontier between the letters as communication and the letters as art. It was all one big world where everything sort of held together. And just as important, kind adults entered into that big world themselves, perhaps remembering that is how they grew up too. When next you write your name, or see someone else's signature, what does it mean to you? What did you dream when first you wrote your name?

Let me go back to a phrase there in that paragraph – "just imagine ...". This is what we have to hold on to. A modern German theologian (Wolfhart Pannenberg) says that there are three things that are essential to being human. These are imagination, trust and hope. Of imagination, he says that: "It is in imagination that we are radically open to the new, the "beyond" of our world. Thus God's creative presence is not distant but meets us in our daily experience."

We all have different ways of imagining God. In the opening words of the Bible (Genesis 1.1), and Scripture itself is full of creative writing, there is a rhythmic pattern that goes something like this: "God said And there was..." In Hebrew (the language in which this was written) the word for "say" (i.e. word-speech) is "*dabhar*", which also means "deed". To speak is to do, and to do is to speak. Creation in other words is envisaged as a speech-act drama, which was (is) God's own creative writing project, God speaking creation into being. And God is always doing that, from day to day and moment to moment. Now, bearing in mind the close association between being made in the image of God and having the human capacity for imagination, our own God-breathed creativity is the call to imagine and to explore all that we can become, with our gifts, our endeavours, our enjoyments. And to help others to become themselves too. Going back to Genesis chapter 1, it says that God saw all that (S)he had made was good. And what we call beauty has that capacity to draw us also into the fullness of what we can and should become, the beauty of art, design, play, music, sport, cooking, writing, design – whatever takes us (calls us on) into creation/re-creation. (Think back to what I mentioned about all

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this belonging to childhood, and then try to imagine why it is important that we do not lose it, however old we are ...)

If you are inclined to say: “I am not particularly creative”, consider William Blake’s phrase: “Christ the imagination”. If you find it difficult to entertain the notion of creativity, ask yourself “what do I imagine?”. To be human is to have the capacity to imagine. Our imagination is the way in to our being creative. We all have imagination, so we all must have some form of creativeness. Admittedly the cares of the world, and (let us be honest) the church too, do not always encourage this necessary gift of imagination. The familiarity of everything can also dull the senses. But as with all faculties, it will just be that we have forgotten how to use it – and the more we use it the more easily it will come back to us. Just try this: go through a day with its customary pattern, but try to see something in a new way. Or, when you are next in church, have a good look round to see if there is something there you never noticed before; or something you are familiar with and can now find something new about it. And once you start the process, keep it going as you will begin to come alive in your own spirituality. If you try, as I once suggested, to think your prayers and pray your thoughts you will find you are engaging your imagination; and in engaging your imagination you will begin to draw on all your senses. Things will warm up from the sometimes desiccated faith the church sometimes offers us.

Of course this is not necessarily easy or straight forward. For imagination to work within us we have to become less figity, to allow time and space for ideas to form and order themselves within us. We need to be kind to ourselves. Creativity can involve intense bursts of activity, but this (usually) emerges from a more settled depth. God’s rest on the Sabbath /seventh day was never a respite from busyness, only a return to the divine imagination, which is the Source of everything.

Again, all (our) creativity is a challenge. All creative endeavour meets with failure. But failure is part of growing. It is just important that we keep on trying. We have a living example in God who, as a “potter” keeps on re-fashioning, or as a “mid-wife” keeps bringing things (the world, us) to (new) birth. (These are but two images of God in Scripture). The opposite of failure is not success (a fallacy of our modern world) but achievement. And what we achieve leads on to more creativity and feeds our imagination. Something of this is expressed by the Welsh poet-priest R.S. Thomas in the image of God as artist:

The View from the Window

Like a painting it is set before one,
But less brittle, ageless; these colours
Are renewed daily with variations
Of light and distance that no painter
Achieves or suggests. Then there is movement,
Change, as slowly the cloud bruises
Are healed by sunlight, or snow caps
A black mood; but gold at evening

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To cheer the heart. All through history
The great brush has not rested,
Nor the paint dried; yet what eye,
Looking coolly, or, as we now,
Through the tears' lenses, ever saw
This work and it was not finished?

Creativity is also an “inside-outside” experience. As if it were indeed a form of creative writing, it is getting something out there from within us “on to the page” of our existence. But then that is only half the story – what is there “on the page” speaks back to us, to keep the conversation going. This is true not only of creative writing, literally, but of any worthwhile endeavour. In fact we might say that God gets creation “out there” “from within the mystery of the divine Being, and then is bound to/with it in the imaginative, painful, mysterious adventure of Reality. We are all born into this, and we need to keep our “childhood” going, as I might say. This is to live theology today, no less. The Polish writer Anna Kamienska says: “In nature everything is of good quality. There is no junk. The sea, sand, trees, even weeds and nettle – of good quality, made of good matter. No defects.”¹ Our creativity is not to turn it (and ourselves), or let it be turned, into junk.

The Irish poet theologian John O'Donohue says this: “Beneath even the most hardened surfaces longing waits. ... It is as if under the clay of your presence streams of living water flow. Great moments always surprise you. The routine is broken and unexpected crevices appear on the safe surface of your life. Such moments dowse you – they make you recognise that within you there is eternity ... No one has the right to deny you the beautiful adventure of God by turning you into a serf of a cold and sinister deity. In your deepest nature you are one with God. As Meister Eckhart says so beautifully ‘The eye with which I see God is God’s eye seeing me’.”²

This is what it means to be made in the image of God, by finding and exploring our creativity. And the way in, is through our imagination. We are called to imagine, and to enter creatively into our world in the manifold ways wherein God imagines us in love. To let God’s being flow through us, in what we can imagine for ourselves and others and the world, is to call our own gifts and abilities into focus, and to celebrate our creativity with all our senses.

So what is God saying to you through your imagination, and how are you responding creatively? If faith is a burden to you, or calls you away from what deep down you really enjoy in life and find fulfilment, or does not enable you to find room to acknowledge it, then something has gone wrong. Best to give that sort of faith up – and creatively, and imaginatively, begin a reconstruction. Of course if you (faithfully) enjoy any kind of creative pursuit in life, then you will already know what I have been talking about.

¹ *Astonishments* Brewster, Massachusetts, Paraclete Press 2007, page 111.

² *Eternal Echoes. Exploring Our Hunger to Belong* London, Bantam 2000, page 380.



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