Art Lessons

a sermon by Rev. Jackie Clement
Unitarian Universalist Church of Bloomington Normal, IL
June 12, 2016

FIRST READING:
excerpt from Freeing by Adriana Diaz

SECOND READING:

I remember one vivid winter's day at Versailles. Silence and calm reigned supreme. Everything gazed at me with mysterious, questioning eyes. And then I realized that every corner of the palace, every column, every window possessed a spirit, an impenetrable soul. I looked around at the marble heroes, motionless in the lucid air, beneath the frozen rays of that winter sun which pours down on us without love, like perfect song. A bird warbling in a window cage. At that moment I grew aware of the mystery which urges men to create certain strange forms. And the creation appeared more extraordinary than the creators.

—Giorgio de Chirico

SERMON:

"Art is religion, religion art, not related, but the same." This is the assertion of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, art historian and curator of the Indian art collection at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Since my recent sabbatical was about continuing to live a religious life, but in a way different from parish ministry, and because that new way was so frequently involved making and encountering art, I was intrigued when I came across this statement. I have to admit that this assertion is a bit overconfident for me, but I wanted to test my acceptance of it. Since art is my major spiritual practice I was convinced that there is at least a strong spiritual component to art, but are art and religion the same thing?

Certainly there is a long history of art and religion being closely linked. I can see Coomaraswamy's assertion securely rooted in his native Hinduism since the Vedas, the foundation of Hindu holy writings, give much care to describing how artists are to carve and prepare the statues and other artistic representations of that faith. Art, in Hinduism, is literally a scriptural matter.

Though we can't be sure of the beginning of art or when its link to formal religion was made, it appears that in at least some ancient cultures art was the mediator between the human and the world of the divine. Before the role of priest was relegated to certain individuals, the power of creativity was tied to prayer and expressed through dance, chanting, mask making or painting. In pre-literate cultures, art told the stories and conveyed the lessons of religion. Even in cultures that don't use representational art in religion there is a strong component of the aesthetic. Witness Hindu sand paintings meticulously drawn for holidays and the lyrical calligraphy of

Islam, the poetry of Chuang Tzu or the Beatitudes of Christ, the landscape paintings of Zen Buddhism or the Hebrew Psalter. Theorist Paul Weiss emphasizes that all religions have some art. He says, "If a religion forbids the making of images, recourse will be had to music, arabesques, dance; if it forbids the use of song, men will cultivate the graces of speech; if it frowns on the theatre or the use of musical instruments, it will allow room for architecture or poetry."

One could argue that art and religion, however different, are complementary responses to the quest for our need to understand our world, to respond to it and to make meaning of human existence. For me, that doesn't make art and spirituality the same thing but it does give them a common ancestry.

Years ago, a friend gave me a box set of the PBS series featuring Sister Wendy touring the art galleries of the world and talking about the paintings, the artists, the role of art. In one episode Sister Wendy asserted that "Art only works when it comes from love." That statement gave me many days of contemplation, but ultimately I found it to be too narrow. Great art, truly successful art, whether the joyful finger paintings of a three year old goddaughter or the angry and despairing Guernica by Picasso comes from deep emotion, but, I think, not always love. In fact it was Guernica that convinced me of the narrowness of Wendy's assertion. No one who has come around a museum corner to be suddenly confronted with this 11x24 foot canvass depicting the horrors of the Spanish Civil War can possible think "love." You might stretch a point to include love of mankind or even love of the artist's craft but I believe the real truth in that painting lies in telling of the horrors, of the very outrage of war. In fact, Picasso himself expressed something of the same intention after studying African masks:

> "When I went for the first time to the Trocadero museum I stayed and studied. Men had made those masks and other objects for a sacred purpose as a kind of mediation between themselves and the unknown hostile forces that surrounded them, in order to overcome their fear and horror by giving it a form and an image. I realized that this was what painting was all about. Painting isn't an aesthetic operation; it's a form of magic designed as mediator between this strange, hostile world and us, a way of seizing the power by giving form to our terrors as well as our desires. When I came to that realization, I knew I had found my way."

In addition to Picasso's political protest against the bombing of innocent villagers there are the murals of Diego Rivera exposing the corruption of commerce and government. In the same way, some artists register more subtle or more gentle commentary on their time and country such as Toulouse Lautrec in his portraits of nineteenth century French cabaret life or Mary Cassatt's record of domestic life of the same period.

In fact an emotion as petty as spite can be the source of what the world has considered great art. The story is that when Sir Joshua Reynolds explained to his students that blue should never be used in the foreground of a painting but reserved for distant backgrounds, his rival, Thomas Gainsborough, set out to prove that such academic rules are nonsense. He painted "Blue Boy" where the central figure stands proudly in the foreground wearing blue from head to toe against a

background of brown. Of course, some of us still think Sir Joshua won that argument. But art, generated from emotions other than love exists.

But today we are considering art as spirituality, and does the simple expression of emotion confer spirituality? I believe that is not necessarily the case, though it certainly can be true. I believe that art derived from genuine human emotion, art that tries to tell a personal or a universal truth or art that seeks to find truth is as equally spiritual art as the meticulously crafted Russian Orthodox icons, the carved saints of the santeros, as the stunning vaulted ceiling of Montreal's Notre-Dame Basilica or the totems of the Northwest.

I see all of these as claiming the same root. Sister Wendy named it love, but I find that too narrow. Earle Coleman, author of *Creativity and Spirituality*, comes closer for me when he says that the fundamental link between art and religion is the quest for unity or oneness. I think the root of art and the root of spirituality is that part of us that, as humans, drives us to engage with mystery, to order our existence and ask the big questions of life, that helps us to make the meaning by which we cope with life, by which we approach realization of our highest selves. In other words the common root is that which helps us unify the disparate parts of existence into a meaningful whole. When I talk about "spirit" this is what I mean—the human capacity for awe, for mystery and for drawing it together with our lived experience to understand life more fully and then to take that and put it in to action in the living out of our values. For me, spirituality is not an ethereal, otherworldly concept accompanied by incense and the singing of angels, but a boots on the ground trying to puzzle it all out and do the best we can to live from our deepest truths. Spirit, for me, is not an external holy being or force, or even a holy spirit that resides within us like the Greek concept of daimon I talked about last week. Spirit, for me, is an intrinsic quality of being human. It is that part of us that marries the mystery to the known in search of truth, and therefore that part of us where creativity is rooted.

One of the common themes I found in reading about how artists view their work as spiritual lies not only in questions of mystery and unity but in the universality of art. So how is the spiritual, the universal made personal? What the theorists have to tell us may prompt the questioning but it is personal experience that convinces. Just as the artists in our two readings experienced a transport, a shift in perception, this same experience is related again and again by artists. The experience of art has the ability to make us see the world differently.

Now you may not see yourself as an artist or as creative and think perhaps this isn't about you personally, but if you have ever written something that didn't exist before, planted something, built something, taken a photograph or programmed a computer you have engaged in creativity. If you have ever baked a cake, sung a song, solved a 4^{th} degree polynomial or played a piece of music you have engaged in creativity. If you ever sat quietly alone and thought through something of consequence, you have engaged in creativity. Note that the quotes at the top of your order of service are not from artists, but from engineers and scientists. Creativity, the expression of human curiosity, is everywhere. It is universal and it has the ability to not only bring us deeper into existence but to take us out of the world for a time.

For me there are three ways this separation occurs: in the preparation, the execution and in the appreciation of others' work. While the actual creation is for me the most likely to create a state

of being outside myself there is definitely a spiritual component to the preparation. It is almost a ritual and not limited to any one form of creativity. I know people who dedicate entire rooms to the collection of yarn for knitting wonderful creations, to the collecting of cookbooks to create marvelous meals. I even know a few people who can get lost in time and space wandering the hardware aisles of the Home Depot. Part of the wonder and attraction that can take you out of yourself is the aesthetic appreciation for the materials. The colors and varied patterns, the texture of handmade papers, the smell of paint – these in themselves are worthy of appreciation but the truly spiritual aspect, I believe, lies in the possibilities inherent in and suggested by the materials of your chosen craft. The very infinite possibilities of what can be, what you can create. This is the universal, the mysterious in something so seemingly mundane as paper.

Likewise, the appreciation of what others have created can cause that shift to different way of seeing. I imagine more than one of us have wandered lost in time through an art gallery or been transported out of the every day by a concert. I vividly remember seeing the Rosetta Stone for the first time or the Guttenberg Bible, things that were not created as fine art but have taken on that role through their significance in human history.

But for me, it is in the act of creation itself, that I am most likely to experience that shift of vision, when I am fully absorbed and lose track of time of place, in the experience that psychologists call flow or in the vernacular we call being in the zone.

Zen Buddhism speaks about finding enlightenment in the midst of such ordinary activities as carrying water or chopping wood. There is a long list of examples of where the aesthetic meets the spiritual, such as the Oriental tea ceremony, or the ritual of smoking the Native American peace pipe. So is Coomaraswamy right? Does all art in fact intersect and overlap with religion? This doctrine of the omnipresence of the divine apparently entails that non-religious art is impossible. I don't believe it is. The existence of advertising art, art created for pure economic reasons seems to belie this. No matter how well executed, no matter how it inspires awe in the beholder this is not art born of spirituality. Wonder and aesthetics does not equal religion. Art as propaganda demonstrates that the intense concern that motivates a group may be political rather than spiritual.

So though I ultimately end up rejecting the hard and fast assertions of Coomaraswamy and Sister Wendy, I find much of the spiritual in the realm or creativity. I offer these words from Adriana Diaz as a more moderate expression of the synthesis: "Creativity is the real magic of our universe. It is the shape of our courage and the force of our souls. Creativity is the matrimonial language of form and space, consummated in the physical and spiritual expression of humanity."

Art and religion, religion and art, not the same, but related.

Por lo tanto puede ser.
Namaste.