



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

An Amplified Existence

Rev. Hannah Petrie, Associate Minister

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301 N. Orange Grove Blvd. Pasadena, CA 91103 (626) 449-3470 information@neighborhooduu.org

Soon after my first sabbatical three years ago I wrote a sermon called, “The River Beneath the River,” based on Clarissa Pinkola Estes’ notion that the metaphor of an underground river describes the very lifeblood of our spirits. The river beneath the river nourishes the flow of our souls, our vitality, our ability to connect, with results, to our passions and our loves, to that which makes our lives exciting because we know we are fulfilling our purpose, generating that which we most desire to manifest.

The bible says, “Go forward and prepare a place for the soul.” I can dig that. That’s much more open-ended than say, “You have to meditate for twenty minutes *every day* if you want results.” It’s not that I think meditating or praying is pointless – I believe these can be quite powerful. However, I have found it does not suit my constitution. It’s apparently just not in my genes. My 93 year old maternal grandmother, a devout Methodist her whole life, says, “I know I really *should* pray – but I don’t!”

I come from a long line of *doers*, which is why I get very excited about the topic of how spirituality and creativity intersect. “Go forward.” “Prepare.” These are directives for action, for how we may best treat and interact with our soul work. I love this definition of the soul from Erwin McManus: “The soul is the aspect of being human that drives our imagination, emotions, and thoughts toward the highest ideals of what it means to be human.” I know when my soul sings. It’s when I’m completely engaged in and believe in whatever it is I’m doing. Do you know that feeling? Do you know what makes your soul sing?

If you don’t know, then first you need to figure that out. I want to share my personal good news that I believe I’ve reached a new stage of maturation. The forties have been good to me so far, and according to the *Hitchhikers’ Guide the Galaxy*, 42 is the magic number that harmoniously aligns all existence. At 42, I *do* know what makes my soul sing, *and*, what is unlikely to ever make my soul sing. My spirituality is one that needs to be on the move – connecting dots, creating new forms and ideas, alchemizing a little of this with a little of that, hustling to *make* compassion, to *make* justice. What do you like to make?

I’m talking about living the creative life. When the waters of creativity are flowing, I am fulfilled. Can you think of a time in your life, maybe it’s now, when what you were busy *making* made you very happy? It’s a golden period. For example, I had a golden period of writing poetry in college, and all through my twenties. But as soon as I hit my 30s, that period of poetic prosperity . . . *perished*. A new golden period of creativity ensued, when I was called to serve as your Associate Minister. When I got married and had kids.

Are you in a golden period, or do you need to find the next one again? It’s not unrelated to the status of our spiritual health. The commitment we make to the creative process is similar to the one we make to a spiritual practice. It is discipline born of making and keeping vows, to honor and serve “the river beneath the river.” For me, my passion is writing. During my next

sabbatical, which will be this February through May, I intend to write every day, on a writing project I half-finished since my first sabbatical. It's really hard work, just as spiritual evolution is hard work.

So I'm lucky I get to take a sabbatical, and deeply grateful that Neighborhood Church recognizes how sabbatical strengthens ministry. But what about the "most of the time," hectic busy-ness that we all usually have to navigate? How do we prepare a place for the soul when we can barely prepare our household for decent living? Is there space for creative living in the rat race of modern life?

Only if you make that space. If you love something enough, if you want to serve the god of beauty and artistry, you find a way to carve out time and space, or, integrate it into the fabric of your busy life. When some health issues arose for me about two years ago, I stopped working on my novel, there just wasn't time and energy, and I've missed it.

However, I found other ways to be creative. I adapted. By doing little art projects with my kids; by getting into the spirit of holiday decorating; by curating song lists and consuming music voraciously; by dancing, dancing, *dancing* on nights out with my husband and friends. I also brought creativity into my work as a minister, taking risks of the heart and believing in a vision, making that vision a reality.

In this modern world, it's often catch-as-catch-can when it comes to honoring the creative life. It's something that, like a spiritual practice, you get better at by practicing. Creativity can become a habit, something to which you are attuned. Coming to understand this is one of the gifts I received from my first sabbatical, that creative living *is* my spiritual practice, and to be healthy and whole, I have to find ways to do what I love, no matter what. It's a form of worldly salvation – to honor the life we are given by realizing our visions, big and small.

When we honor the self in this manner, we honor the holy. Because, you are what you love. I love the story of the ice skater in Elizabeth Gilbert's *Big Magic: Creative Living Beyond Fear*. A woman in her forties who hasn't skated for over twenty years takes it up again, "simply because skating is still the best way for her to unfold a certain beauty and transcendence within her life."

The "Big Magic" Gilbert refers to is that transcendence we feel when we do what we love, which of course reminds me of our 19th century forbears, the transcendentalists – the poets and thinkers, the likes of Emerson and Fuller. Honoring the creative impulse is a prominent part of our spiritual heritage as religious liberals. The transcendentalists' message was simply that: loving the gods of art and poetry is central to what it means to live a good life.

You know, the transcendentalists were often made fun of and mocked by their contemporaries, for being frivolous and bohemian. I often worry that writing a novel is perhaps a waste of time, that perhaps my sabbatical pursuits ought to be more academic or applicable. When we have doubts it's time to find inspiration in our creative heroes.

My 42nd birthday was auspiciously blessed by seeing Grace Jones in concert at the Hollywood Bowl. This was the night of the blood red moon followed by a total lunar eclipse, all viewed above the bowl during her stunning performance, when she was naked, clad only in tribal war paint. NPR's Kelly McEvers saw the same performance and interviewed Grace Jones a few days later, because she has also just published her memoirs, called *I'll Never Write My Memoirs*. I'm reading it now. It's great. I recommend it.

I loved Grace Jones' answer to McEvers' attempt at a serious question about the appropriateness of what she's doing. McEvers asked, "What would you say to a 25-year old African American who's looking at your performance with tribal paint and head-dresses made of straw, and saying, wait, hang on, that makes me uncomfortable or I don't know how I feel about that?" Grace Jones didn't skip a beat when she answered, "I don't care." She essentially said it doesn't matter what others think because for her it's about making the art.

I loved that answer because it's the realization of art that trumps discomfort or political correctness. What at first could be dismissed as offensive actually makes a powerful statement. In Grace Jones' case, her art is courageously declaring, yes, I am sexual, I am exotic, I am powerful. Grace Jones needs permission from no one to express herself, and my point is, neither do we. Even if we worry our thoughts and ideas are subversive or might make people uncomfortable, making the art is worth doing, for it's when we push the boundaries of conventional wisdom that new truths emerge, or, very old truths re-emerge.

Another way to think of this is to watch out for "the shoulds." This is what I should or should not do. Remember that phrase? "Don't should yourself." If making little Holly Hobby crafts brings you alive, or keeps you sane, then make them. No creative endeavor is too small or insignificant or wrong, if it amplifies our existence and fulfills that very human need for purpose and production of the new or the beautiful. Remember the thrill heard in the child's voice who says, "Look what I made!" We should never lose or let go of that childlike love of *making*.

When we make stuff, it's an act of devotion, to the soul within us as individuals, but also to the collective human soul. Again, Estes illuminates this point within her "river beneath the river" metaphor. She writes:

Creating one thing at a certain point in the river feeds those who come to the river, feeds creatures downstream, yet others in the deep. Creativity is not a solitary movement. That is its power. Whatever is touched by it, whoever hears it, sees it, senses it, knows it, is fed. That is why beholding someone else's creative word, image, idea, fills us up, inspires us to our own creative work. A single creative act has the potential to feed a continent. One creative act can cause a torrent to break through stone.

I love that! Art and creativity are powerful. So when we find we don't have the energy or

space and time to create ourselves, consume others' art! Be *fed* by it. I was very much fed by reading another autobiography recently, the photographer Sally Mann's, called *Hold Still*. It's probably the best book I will have read in 2015. She's the photographer from Virginia whose work got labeled controversial when she photographed her children, not always clothed, on her family farm.

(I know, there's this theme of nudity running through the art that interests me. What can I say. Women, sexuality and the sacred is a theme whose surface has barely been scratched by artists like Grace Jones – that gives you a hint at what I'm working on in my novel.) But back to Sally Mann. She is so human and vulnerable, expressive of her struggles and the need for spiritual sustenance to navigate the contradictions of life. She writes,

I struggle with enormous discrepancies: between the reality of motherhood and the image of it, between my love for my home and the need to travel, between the varied and seductive paths of the heart. The lessons of impermanence, the occasional despair and the muse, so tenuously moored, all visit their needs upon me and I dig deeply for the spiritual utilities that restore me: my love for the place, for the one man left, for my children and friends and the great green pulse of spring.

What are the "spiritual utilities" that restore you? What are your loves, and have you been active in loving them, or are they a little neglected? What baby steps, what small change can you make to allow those loves to breathe, to live?

You know, in nature, when a waterway is sick, as so many of them are, the thing conservationists say that's so true, is that it doesn't take a whole lot to restore them. Once a dam is removed and the water flows freely again, life returns to the river! Basic gestures of repair allow nature to take care of the rest. It doesn't take much to restore our souls – just the will, and the gestures of care. But we must believe that the care of our souls, of the river beneath the river, is important. We must have the courage to acknowledge when we stagnate, and the need to get clear, clean water running again, bubbling, *flowing*.

It's not easy to believe in a vision with the same kind of faith some people bring to their spiritual lives. Faith that something will grow if you nurture it. It's hard work, but anything worth doing is hard. Same with spiritual growth, same with creative growth.

The best art is an authentic expression of one's soul – it's the same goal we have for our spirituality – to know thyself well enough that others can know you too.

So express yourself, be yourself, make your art, in whatever form it may take. Take note of Rilke's faith, to

. . . believe in all that has never yet been spoken!
I want to free what waits within me
so that what no one has dared to wish for

may for once spring clear
without my contriving.

If this is arrogant, God, forgive me,
but this is what I need to say.
May what I do flow from me like a river,
no forcing and no holding back,
the way it is with children.

Then in these swelling and ebbing currents,
these deepening tides moving out, returning,
I will sing you as no one ever has,

streaming through widening channels
into the open sea.

May it be so.