



Leadership and Jazz

by Rev. Tisha Brown

In January of this year I started a DMin program in Creative Leadership at Central Baptist Theological Seminary in Shawnee, Kansas. The course I am currently taking is titled “Engaging the Power of Change.” The first book we read for this course was *Sacred Habits: The Rise of the Creative Clergy* by Chad R. Abbott. This book is a collection of reflections from a wide range of clergy who write about how they are cultivating habits that help them to be creative, transformative leaders in their particular contexts. I was pleased to note that a number of UCC colleagues have reflections in this book including our very own Rev. Zayna Thomley a pastor in the Southwest Association.



This book inspired me to think about my own journey to embracing creativity in my personal life, which has led to my ability to be more creative in work and ministry. My particular journey toward greater creativity began when I began following my high school dream of being a jazz singer. So far, I’ve identified four significant lessons about creativity along this journey. These lessons influence the way I approach ministry and which I believe support my efforts to be creative not only when I’m singing but also when I’m engaged in ministry.

1. It’s all about relationships: Great jazz and the best improvisation are as much about community and relationships as they are about the music. A truly great improviser never stands alone. She is always aware of what everyone else is doing and builds off of the work of others in the group by listening, adapting and responding to the contributions and efforts of others. When the jazz is live, listeners also play a role, encouraging, responding and appreciating the efforts of the musician and enjoying the sacred and holy moment when something truly unique that will never again be repeated transpires.

This is equally true in the creative practice of ministry. Our God is relational – parent, child and Spirit and calls us into relationship with one another and with God’s self. Creative, effective, transformational ministry begins and ends with the compassionate relationships that are cultivated for the healing and transformation of our world through the love of God.

2. Some structure is necessary, too much structure limits creativity: Jazz is built on some very predictable and reliable structures including standard chord changes, song forms and time tested improvisational conventions, to name a few. For jazz to

work these structures have to remain loose enough to allow for virtually unlimited personal and individual expression and variation. The musicians have to know when to let go of the structure to allow something new to emerge.

The tension between providing enough structure and support for creativity to emerge without overdoing it and smothering any hope of the Spirit's emergence is very real and something we must grapple with in ministry all the time. Discerning when to let go of a project, idea, habit, practice or program so that the Spirit can take it where it needs to go is an ongoing and vitally important task of ministry in today's world.

3. Improvisation requires advance preparation AND trust in the moment. Improvisation starts with doing the work of learning the music – the scales and forms and the ins and outs of your particular instrument. Then you have to trust all that you know so that creativity and innovation can flow. This is the creative tension between just the right amount of preparation to create space for creative expression and the temptation to script every solo and orchestrate every interaction.

This same principal applies to creativity in pastoral ministry. We must prepare. We must know our traditions, our rituals and our God and then there must be a moment in which we trust our preparation and trust our God to be there as we relinquish control and lose ourselves in the sacred and holy moment of true creativity.

4. Keeping the music alive requires an ongoing process of discovery and learning: This is the practice of deep listening. No matter how familiar the tune or how many times I've sung it, there is always something more to learn. There is always a nuance, an interpretation, an unexpected element that can make the same old tune brand new. Every encounter with the Jazz repertoire teaches me something. Every opportunity to make music is a laboratory of learning. When the learning stops, the growth, development and fun also stop.

This is equally true in the practice of ministry. There must always be learning and growth, experimentation and reflection. There must always be the practice of listening to the stories of the past, the realities of the present and the dreams of the future to chart a way forward. This is how each generation makes the faith its own. It is also how we will ultimately discover the way in this challenging, uncertain, and exciting time.

I am convinced that all of us would benefit from cultivating practices of creativity, spontaneity and improvisation like the ones that sustain jazz and jazz improvisation. How might you (or how do you already) nurture elements of creativity in your own life and in the ministry you share with the people around you? What openings for relationships, deep listening, learning, improvisation and creativity can you step into? Imagine how that might open up new possibilities for transformation in the name of the Creator who has given to us the breath of life and the Spirit of creativity. Amen.

If you're interested, the other books I'm reading for this class are:

The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World by Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow and Marty Linsky

Christian Social Innovation: Renewing Wesleyan Witness by L. Gregory Jones

Leading Change in the Congregation: Spiritual and Organizational Tools for Leaders by Gilbert R. Rendle

On Her Own Ground: The Life and Times of Madam C.J. Walker by A'Lelia Bundles
(This is a book I chose. The assignment was to choose an entrepreneur and read their biography.)