

# Creativity & Spirituality

SUSAN BLACK



As an artist, writer, and Benedictine oblate, I thank God for the gifts of creativity and spirituality. It is my deepest desire to use these gifts in my work and as I strive to live out the Rule of Saint Benedict. I believe that creativity and spirituality are intimately joined together as essential and God-given elements of life. I believe that creativity and spirituality permeate every aspect of our existence and all that any of us do in any part of our lives for ourselves, for each other, and for God.

God blessed us at the time of our creation. We are created in God's image and likeness, and so we are God's co-creators. God let us loose upon the Earth that he created to enjoy it and to actively continue the work of creation. Scripture tells us that after God formed Adam out of the dust of the ground and blew the breath of life into his nostrils, God "took the man and settled him in the garden of Eden, to cultivate and care for it" (Gn 2:15). Adam's first job was to till the Earth; his second job was to name the animals (Gn 2:19-20). God wants to be with us, to know us, and to be known by us. God liked to walk with Adam and Eve in the garden in the cool of the day (Gn 3:8).

Creativity and spirituality are universal qualities. All of us possess these gifts, yet the ways in which they can be seen and experienced are as individual as we are. Many people think that creativity is limited to certain artistic types and that spirituality is limited

to specific religious identities or practices. I take a much broader view. Creativity has to do with the *how* of living. Ideally, it is choosing to act with curiosity, humility, openness, gratitude, integrity, generosity, joy, compassion, and love in everything we do. Spirituality has to do with the *why* of living. Spirituality is choosing to seek, find, and love God in everything we do.

I repeat the word "choosing" in both descriptions. Creativity and spirituality lie at our fingertips, within our grasp as we exercise our God-given free will. Free will being what it is, creativity and spirituality can also be repressed and ignored.

I also repeat the word "everything." In an authentic life, each element supports the other. Each is essential. Each is a jewel that, polished by the answers we give to the questions of how and why, becomes part of the beautiful mosaic of co-creation.

Three eloquent Benedictine viewpoints intertwine gifts of creativity and spirituality. The first is from a blog post on Chapter 57 of the Rule, "The Artisans of the Monastery":

Any creative act, at its best, is an unambiguous part of the ongoing act of Creation flowing from the love-life of God. Any human act, when blooming with this self-forgetfulness, can reveal to us the joy and purpose, the fruitfulness and meaning that happens when love has no agenda except creative

expression. The message here is simple: turn from self-consciousness and bear love's fruit: life fully alive. (www.theruleofbenedict.com)

The second is a reflection by Father Michael Pearson, OSB, of Saint John's Abbey in Minnesota, which was published in the monthly periodical, *Give Us This Day*:

To be fashioned in the image of God is to be life-giving, generative, imaginative, full of fecundity. All of us are gifted with this potential. We're not merely consumers, we're creators! To the point — create more than you consume. Create peace and justice. Create connections between diverse peoples. Create art and music. Plant, grow, cultivate life. Create love and support for family, friends, and community.

The third is from *Boundless Compassion* by Sister Joyce Rupp, OSM:

The indwelling lure of God within each human life is not only an inner impulse to creatively adapt to new situations; it is also an impulse to seek the good, to be open to what is true and to celebrate what is beautiful.

Goodness, truth, and beauty are known as the "Three Transcendentals." Throughout the ages, they have been regarded as attributes of the Divine.

Coming as they do from God, creativity and spirituality are very powerful concepts. Indeed, more than concepts, they are realities. At the same time, they are also delicate treasures. They can be squelched or diverted. Sometimes, creativity and spirituality can be smothered by the give-and-take of conversation even in a monastery. Benedict warns about excessive and idle talking. Outside the monastery walls, there is pervasive noise and daily bombardment of life.

Mystery is often the hallmark of creativity and spirituality, reflecting the nature of their Divine giver. Lines from a poem by Mary Oliver called "Where Does the Temple Begin, Where Does It End?" express this:

There are things you can't reach. But  
you can reach out to them, and all day long.  
The wind, the bird flying away. The idea of God.

And it can keep you as busy as anything else,  
and happier. (8-9)

Looking, thinking, reaching out, the poet says, but reaching to "the idea of God"? That's a mystery, for sure.

Even if we don't write poetry, we can learn from Mary Oliver about how to lead lives of creativity and spirituality. She relied on a disciplined structure, a daily work practice. She went out every day, usually into natural settings, and looked at the world with complete openness and receptivity. She knew how to be silent, how to wait, how to listen. She perceived that God, or at least "the idea of God," was everywhere. She wrote poems to tell us what she saw in her uniquely creative and spiritual way.

In Oliver's devotion to process, to her daily work, I find an echo of Saint Ignatius of Loyola. His great work of spiritual creativity, the *Spiritual Exercises*, remains in use worldwide almost five centuries after his lifetime. Ignatius believed in the power of "practice" that can be described as "a regular endeavor through which we come to build our lives on the love of God, to order our lives according to God's plan for us" (Muldoon, 209).

There is the powerful practice, "the regular endeavor" of following the Rule. Sister Joan Chittister, OSB, in her book *The Monastic Heart*, speaks to the necessity of paying attention, a charism that the Rule instills:

The truth is that this deeper part of everyone does not simply develop in us like wild grass. It needs to be cultivated, to be cherished, to be sustained. (xiii)

Sister Joan then goes on to offer a bit of a challenge. After the six days of God's work and the seventh day of God's rest, what was next? It was time for the co-creators to step up:

Though God created the world, God did not finish it. That part of creation was left to you and me to do. It's up to us. We can choose, and it's even more elevated than that. As Marilyn McIntyre writes, "We are given the privilege of participating in the divine dance of creativity" (203). We are privileged to be

people gathered in communities as well as acting as individuals. We are privileged to dance our way along unique paths through the world and towards God.

Many excellent paths are already set before us. We are free to make decisions about them and to learn from them all. Untold numbers of other paths exist or might be dreamed into reality. We are free to search for them, to find them, to carve out our own way, and to pursue them. 🌿

#### *Works Cited*

- Meditatio London House. "Chapter 57: The Artisans of the Monastery." [theruleofbenedict.com/2015/05/08/chapter-57-the-artisans-of-the-monastery](http://theruleofbenedict.com/2015/05/08/chapter-57-the-artisans-of-the-monastery).
- Pearson, Michael, OSB. "Dazzling Masterpieces." [giveusthisday.org/2023/08/08](http://giveusthisday.org/2023/08/08)
- Chittister, Joan. *The Monastic Heart*. New York, NY: Convergent Books, 2021.
- McEntyre, Marilyn. *Word by Word*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016.
- Muldoon, Tim. Excerpt from *The Ignatian Workout*, quoted in *An Ignatian Book of Days*, compiled by Jim Manney. Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 2014.
- Oliver, Mary. "Where Does the Temple Begin, Where Does It End." *Why I Wake Early*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2004.

---

*Susan Black is an artist, writer and oblate of Queen of Angels Monastery, Mount Angel, Oregon.*



## ***Thank you for your Will to Give***

Your gift will support our life of prayer, and our prayer will be the gift we offer in return, to support you and your loved ones.

*Carefully planning your gifts can result in major benefits to you, to your family and your charitable goals. Giving securities is just one of many ways available for effective estate and financial planning. Always seek sound financial advice when making such decisions.*

#### **FORM OF BEQUEST FOR A WILL**

I give, devise, and bequeath to the Benedictine Convent of Perpetual Adoration, 31970 State Highway P, Clyde, MO 64432-8100, a corporation organized and existing under the laws of the State of Missouri ... (state here the amount of money or description of the property willed). For wills, bequests and estate planning, our legal name is: Benedictine Convent of Perpetual Adoration.

### **Exodus 31:1-6**

*The Lord said to Moses:*

*See, I have singled out Bezalel, son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with a divine spirit of skill and understanding and knowledge in every craft: in the production of embroidery, in making things of gold, silver, or bronze, in cutting and mounting precious stones, in carving wood, and in every other craft. . . . I have also endowed all the experts with the necessary skill to make all the things I have commanded you . . .*

