

Knit Together

A reflection by Rev. Jackie Clement
Delivered at the First Parish Universalist, Malden, MA
January 11, 2009

For as long as I can remember, art has been my primary spiritual practice, certainly for as long as I've known what a spiritual practice is. It has changed forms over the years though – drawing and painting for many years, then papermaking and bookbinding. There's been dabbling in calligraphy, clay and cooking. The fiber arts, though, have never really figured in there.

I come from a family of sewers, knitters and crotcheters, but except for half a scarf at the age of eight and one very ill-advised pair of hostess pants in order to graduate from the seventh grade all forms of fiber were anathema to me. But then something unexpected happened. I became a Unitarian Universalist minister. And I've said it before, no Unitarian Universalist minister has completed the requirements for ordination until they've learned to play the guitar or to knit. Since there was in my past one brief episode that culminated in a triumphant guitar performance of *The Red River Valley* in the Randolph Elementary School first grade recital, I decided to retire at the top of my craft and take up knitting instead.

So my friend Marisha, who has been knitting her own socks since she was six and has trained several UU ministers to knit, taught me to knit. I began with a miniature, lace afghan. Well, actually it was just a two inch swatch using left over yarn Marisha gave me, but it ended up with a few random holes in it so I decided to call it lace. That accomplished, I turned to felting purses because in felting you can knit a hole the size of your fist in something and it will just close right up in the felting process. Finally I decided it was time to take on something recognizable as knitting so I decided to make my husband a sweater.

Now, as a public service, I offer you Marisha's three rules of knitting that any experienced knitter will affirm for the beginner – small people, large needles, light color. My husband is not a small person. He's 6'4". I chose a fine weight wool – small needles. I chose a very dark purple. Enough said.

But Marisha is still hanging in there with me, and we still knit together every Monday afternoon. What I recently discovered from Marisha is this – we knit for different reasons. I admit that I am prone to the use of strong language while wrestling unruly yarn into recognizable garments, and after one such bout, Marisha turned to me and said, "Now let's review. Why is it we knit? To relax." Well, I realized that relaxation is not at all the reason I knit. I find nothing whatsoever relaxing about it. It is one of the most frustrating things I've ever done. I knit to create. And creation is not necessarily relaxing. Plus knitting requires counting and nothing that involves counting do I find relaxing, including the counting of sheep.

But knitting, like all the arts I do, *is* a different frame of mind than normal attention. It takes me out of ordinary time and makes space for a greater sense of consciousness in which some new form of connection is possible. Because I'm not very experienced at knitting, it happens less than when I am making a book or drawing a landscape, but it happens. Many artists, whatever their medium, talk about this same sense of "other" time, in which time simultaneously stands still and flies. In no other activity than creation does this happen to me that a whole day can pass without notice, or a meal, or guilt about not doing a single thing on the to do list.

From a scientific viewpoint there is little surprise that this happens, because art and all creative endeavors, engage the right side of your brain whereas most of us live largely on the left side of our brains a great deal of the time. While both sides are involved in complex thinking and reasoning, the two hemispheres have different characteristics, different ways of seeing the world if you will. The left side is verbal and analytical and rational. It is where language, numbers, symbols and concepts of time are processed. The right side of the brain, by contrast, is nonverbal, intuitive, holistic, concrete and without a sense of time. Little surprise that when we are involved in the creative, non-rational kinds of thinking that our sense of time is also skewed.

Another interesting thing about the right brain is that it is where both holistic and spatial reasoning happen. It is the part of you that sees things in relation to other things, how things all fit together into the whole.

So involvement in art moves you from the verbal, analytic and time-bound toward the relational, holistic and timeless. And that is what spiritual practice is all about, about stepping outside the ordinary and opening yourself up to whatever flow of connection or insight or creation may come. The outcome is not always connected or insightful or creative. Sometimes the result is just a flop, but the space is made for it to happen.

This not only opens up the idea of what is art, but what is spiritual practice. In my list of arts before I listed cooking, because I think that cooking, approached from the viewpoint of creativity as well as sustenance, is an art. Music, poetry, prose, dance – all of those are arts. But so too is gardening when the aim is expression of the self. So, too, is woodworking and building a house or a high-rise building. What is building, after all, but sculpture on a really big scale? What all of these things and others have in common is the urge, the need to create. Not always something lasting or tangible, sometimes something as fleeting as a single note. Not always something that will earn you a living or keep you warm, but something that will express something about who you are, something about your very soul. As the great artist Albrecht Durer said, "From this, the treasure secretly gathered in your heart will become evident through your creative work."

Sister Wendy put it another way. Years ago I saw an episode of her PBS show where she toured art galleries and discussed the works of great masters. I wasn't completely paying attention, but I did hear her say that "art only works when it comes from love." That doesn't mean that the subject in any way needs to reflect love. A great deal of art, in whatever form, is about social protest, about anger or conflict, even about simple

pettiness. But I think what Sister Wendy was saying is that in order for it to be art the source must be the soul, the work must reflect something of the artist's self and love for the craft. We all know when we are just going through the motions and not investing ourselves and our joy in what we do. Like Meg Barnhouse, it is completely possible to make lumpy, heavy loaves that we forgot to knead our gladness and joy into. This is also true of any spiritual practice. Only when you invest the best of yourself in it do you progress.

You also have to bring some level of awareness or intentionality to it that it is art or it is spiritual practice, otherwise it is just fashioning something to keep you warm, making dinner or hammering nails. No art I can think of is wholly right-brained. Poetry relies on left-brained verbal skills, music is highly mathematical, knitting has that pesky counting thing, and it is engineering that keeps your house from blowing over in a high wind. So it is possible to engage in arts with no artistic or spiritual component. Just because it falls under the category of art on Wikipedia doesn't mean that when any particular individual engages in the activity with any particular attitude that it turns out as art.

It's pretty much like that with things of the spirit, too. We have to bring our whole selves to it, not just half a brain. We have to bring the best that is in ourselves, our love. And usually, not always, but usually, a little intentionality helps.

Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, an art historian and curator of the Indian collection at the MFA, would tighten the connection even farther. He said that "Art is religion, religion art, not related, but the same." They are certainly about the same things – about making meaning, about expressing our view of the world, our understanding of the world, about expressing our deepest selves. More simply, they are participation in divine creation.

I have spoken before about the theology of Gordon Kaufman, but not about his view of creation specifically, though it is one of the areas of his theology I most relate to. Kaufman says that the problem with the traditional idea of God as creator of the universe is that it rests on the idea of transcendence, a God outside of creation, and therefore it creates a disconnect between God and God's creation. This theology has turned God into a tyrant playing out personal schemes on a helpless humanity. It is an image that can be arbitrary, unjust and downright terrifying. But Kaufman finds it more than unhelpful. He finds it religiously dangerous when it stands the basis of unquestionable authority behind destructive human actions such as holy wars, persecutions, inquisitions crusades and torture.

Kaufman proposes, instead, a form of creation manifest through the universe that he calls "serendipitous creativity." It is the continuous coming into being of the new, but it implies no human perception of the result as either great good or horrifying evil. It includes events that from our perspective would be considered good: the sun keeps rising and the seasons keep coming, crops keep growing and babies keep getting born. But serendipitous creativity also includes things that from our viewpoint are unwelcome or in classical theology would be called natural evil: diseases mutate and grow, earthquakes, floods and other natural disasters claim lives and destroy the earth. Serendipitous

creativity is creative but it is also destructive. It has a trajectory toward the good, but is not perfect. It is powerful, but not omnipotent.

I like this idea of serendipitous creativity for theological reasons, but I also like what it says about human creativity and about our own spiritual explorations. It says that creativity is aimed toward the good, but that the outcome is not always what we judge to be good. Looking at that from the other direction says that while our attempts at creativity or spiritual growth may not always, in our estimation, succeed—may not yield the result we desire—still they are worthwhile. The creative process, whatever the outcome, is still worthwhile. The spiritual search, even when we feel we have not progressed, is worthwhile for there is benefit in the attempt.

So in this month of celebrating the arts I invite you to look more intentionally at the arts you enjoy. Whether you are the artist or the one who enjoys the art, take a closer look at the intentionality you bring to the act. Is it a spiritual exercise for you? Do you want it to be?

Robert Henri, in *The Art Spirit*, wrote this,
When the artist is alive in any person, whatever his kind of work may be, he becomes an inventive, searching, daring, self-expressive creature. He becomes interesting to other people. He disturbs, upsets, enlightens, and opens the way for a better understanding. Where those who are not artists are trying to close the book, he opens it and shows there are still more pages possible.

Do you wish to be one who turns the page, to write upon it the beauty and struggle of life? To sing the songs written there. To find the blueprint for something new? And if it turns out to be a pattern for mittens, it is never too late to learn to knit.

Namaste.

Por lo tanto, puede ser.