

What the *Blank*?
Rev. Luke Stevens-Royer
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First Unitarian Universalist Church
Rochester, Minnesota

Readings

This Is For Us by Charlotte Eriksson

Air and Light and Time and Space by Charles Bukowski

SERMON

For some, it can be a terrifying thing.
For others, it is like a gift, an invitation, a possibility.

A blank canvas –
or an uncertain, undefined, wide open future –
the little cursor on the blank word document
or a schedule now freed, broken open –
because something has changed in life,
some context, or relationship,
some work or task or situation –
has shifted, changed, the ground beneath one's feet and the air you breath
somehow, changes –
and before you lies uncharted territory,
a blank canvas.

For some, perhaps it is that gift –
an opening from what has felt like a constricted or pre-scripted life;
for others,
they notice the changing landscape,
they are filled with anxiety and uncertainty,
and look at this blank canvas saying,
what the blank?

I walked into a professor's office, one day,
for, you know, a normal conversation
about epistemology – the study of knowledge and knowing,
and the theological anthropology of the human soul –
you know, just typical Tuesday afternoon conversation –

and hanging there on the wall was this print –
*chaos carefully, with the slightest shift of line and angle and weight of ink,
formed and morphed into order.*

At least that's how I saw it –
but, of course, perhaps it was order ascending into chaos.

I looked at it for a few moments –
with one of those looks like when you are looking at a stereogram poster –
where you need to *un-focus* your eyes to see the image –

I was sure this was some kind of misprint—
because chaos and order couldn't possibly be that closely related.

I had grown up much preferring order than chaos –
which I think a lot of kids, do – routines, and dependability, structure –
but even more than that,
I was more of the paint by number as compared to a blank canvas –
more of a “let's draw a decipherable piece of art –
like a tree and a house and the sun”
as compared to scribbles, or what I might have called them,
“crayons spiraling into chaos.”

Later, this was confirmed, in a deep source of wisdom in my generation –
the movie *ghostbusters*.

Whether you have seen it or not, you can understand this:

There is a power, an energy, that when released and uncontrolled,
and unhampered by boundaries and structures, becomes destructive.
That is the energy that fuels the ghosts which are wreaking havoc over the city and
the people, and creating state puff marshmallow men...

If you know the movie, you know the red and gray traps that are stored,
much to the EPA's dismay, in the ghostbusters warehouse.
These traps are filled with the collected negative energy from the ghosts.

When you have a container,
by its very nature, it has limits, boundaries, edges.

At times, I wonder if we think about creativity as an either/or –
that containment is safe, and lack of boundary is bad -
instead of a both/and, with room for flexibility and interpretation and context.

That you are creative or you are not.
That you think outside the box and are eccentric,
or you're boring and conventional and uninteresting.

The either/or, of course, often ignores the realities of life –
the complexity and diversity of human experience and possibility –
the close proximity, and just the slightest slip of a pen,
that separates chaos and order.

There is a reason, at times, that we have containers –
that we have clear boundaries or guidelines,
that we have filters –
in our actions, in our language, in our society –
otherwise, toxic fumes fill the air, just like out of a car –
toxic words fly out of unfiltered mouths all the time -
limits and clarity are sometimes really important, and really helpful.

But within that container, within that space,
there can still be room for breath and movement and change –
for creativity.
Even a blank canvas has edges –
some intentional area –
to know where to begin.

The canvas on which we live
can have some definition, some clarity,
without those edges and boundaries feeling
containing or constrictive.

Our boundaries need not be only understood or experienced as limitations –
sometimes, they are part of our identity.

We are human; we live on the earth –
we come from a particular culture or background,
we grew up in a particular family –
our identity is formed and shaped out of our social location –
our canvas is made up of our hopes, our dreams, the story of our people.

And while in some ways these things can be limiting,
in other ways they can be proud sources of identity and inspiration,
deep wells of wisdom and narrative
to help guide how we will sculpt, color, create our life.

*Air and Light and Time and Space having nothing to do with it,
writes poet Charles Bukowski –
you are going to create
within the particular confines, whatever they are –
you are going to create if your heart and mind
is intent about creating.
Air and Light and Time and Space have nothing to do with it.*

Creativity need not mean just a certain type
of person, or activity, or artform –
sometimes creativity happens within the chaos –
and the art, or the writing, or the relationships
or the games or the stories or the food or the literal life of a child
is an act of creation – it doesn't need to be a masterpiece in a museum
to be infused with creativity.

Gabriel Marcel, in *The Mystery of Being*, writes,
*Creativity is not necessarily the creation
of something outside the person who creates.
To create is not, essentially, to produce.
There can be production without creation,
and there can be creation without
any identifiable object remaining to bear witness to the creation.*

*I think that we must all, in the course of our lives,
have known beings who were essentially creators;
by the radiance of charity and love shining from their being,
they add a positive contribution to the invisible work
which gives the human adventure the only meaning which can justify it.*

I wonder, at times,
what the word *create* invites us into.

Our social connotations with the word tend to lean toward
production of something –
making something – creating something new,
often out of material and color –
to create is to take the inner spirit
and put it into something tangible, tactile – that you can feel or see or touch.

And, that is sometimes very true –
of course to create something tangible can be creative –
both in a very literal understanding, but also in less tangible ways –
you create an experience, a reaction, a moment through art.

In a recent conversation with a group of younger adults in the church
and if you don't know about it, and are interested, let me know –
we discussed creativity.

Among so many angles and perspectives and experiences with it,
one of the areas that kept coming up was about language –
the very language we use is often about what people make or produce –
what we ask a stranger or a new friend – *so, what do you do?*
Or when we interact with a child, *what are you making?*

And it isn't that these phrases are necessarily bad,
at times they are exactly the best way to engage with someone.

But our language leans toward addressing one another
as human doings, instead of human beings.

Sometimes, it is a simple phrase of a child –
“wow”
about the snow, or the wind,
about a splash of color
or the movement of an animal –
a sense of amazement and wonder
at the seemingly most simple things in the world.

It isn't that producing something tangible is bad,
but art, when in the context of a wider productivity-focused culture,
at times is easily swayed into the necessity of creating objects –
to sell, to or to have – a culture that likes to make money off of creativity,
which isn't necessarily bad,
or a culture that encourages us to have stuff, cluttering our lives.

Ben Katt, a contributing fellow from *OnBeing*, recently wrote about a life of productivity, and the *art of inefficiency*.

He writes,

On that soggy fall morning, my legs burning and my heart racing from sprinting up the steep hill, I stopped abruptly as a string of words welled up inside me: “If you don’t have your heart, you have nothing.”

Breathing deeply, I pulled out my blaring earbuds and placed my hands at my sides. The words hovered in my head. And I knew exactly what they were telling me. “If you don’t have your heart, you have nothing,” was not a caution about my heart rate; it was a warning about the fallout from how I had been approaching life...something deep within me had risen up to declare that my pace was not sustainable.

Somewhere along the way, my obsession with productivity had eclipsed my passion and sense of purpose. I was obeying the greatest commandment of current startup culture — I was hustling — but I was losing my heart, becoming emotionally distant, and extinguishing my inner fire for my work. To get my heart back, I would have to turn away from efficiency and embrace another way of being and doing. I would have to explore the art of inefficiency.

I replaced running with the more unhurried and less outcome-focused practice of yoga. It was the least efficient thing I could have done — to move slowly and then be still on a mat for an hour in the middle of the day when I could have scheduled a lunch meeting or caught up on a project. Since then, habits like reflective writing, meditation, and seeing a spiritual director have been powerful inefficiency experts, nourishing and protecting my soul from the incessant demands of efficiency.

Yoga, my children, and many others — poetry, pour over coffee, friends, and questions — schooled me in the way of inefficiency during that season. Ultimately, these inefficiency experts gave me my heart back. I transitioned out of the roles I was in and discovered new things about myself...

Indeed, if I desire to actively affect healing in the world, then I have no choice but to expand my inefficiency repertoire. Inefficiency experts are all around us. It’s time for us to slow down and pay attention.

I know that when I give myself over to our accelerating cultural obsession with hustle and disregard the inefficiency experts, I will inevitably crash and burn. And if I don't have my heart, I have nothing.

To slow down, to pay attention
is to create some order, some intention,
right in the middle of the chaos of our lives, of our world.

If I don't have heart – I have nothing.

It's an echo of ancient teachings,
from wisdom sayings in the Tao Te Ching from Lau Tzu,
and spanning time and culture and tradition and text –
the idea that the core of life is less about having,
and much more about being –
an orientation and practice of the heart
toward a life of meaning and purpose and service and joy.

How might we expand our *inefficiency repertoire*.
Who are our *inefficiency experts*?
What practices or approaches or ways of being in our life –
what do we do, or, perhaps more appropriately,
how can we be
in such a way that allows not some special studio, necessarily,
but a space within the clutter of life
for us to find a creative spirit – to create beauty, moments, joy.

How might we see our mistakes, our limits,
as part of our *becoming what we could, might be*?

Or as another poet writes,
*I meant to do my work today – so many plans I had made.
I'd check the mail, and make the calls,
save the world and sweep the hall –
finally get my accounting done,
and sort the beans one by one;
but I got waylaid by the morning sun –
and I got absolutely nothing done.*

Perhaps the most creative thing
is to pause and breathe
right in the midst of the spiraling chaos and order in our lives,
and engage in whatever our artform,
in whatever our skill or gift of attunement of heart –
and create or dwell in the most inefficient beauty we can find.