Creativity, Art and Failure

BY **SEAN PARKER DENNISON**, MINISTER AT LARGE, FLINT, MICHIGAN

Neil Gaiman, who is a writer and creator of many things, gave a commencement speech that was later published as a book. In it, he urges:

> *I hope you'll make mistakes. If you're making mistakes, it means you're out there doing something.…Make interesting, amazing, glorious, fantastic mistakes. Break rules. Leave the world more interesting for your being here. Make. Good. Art.*

I hear something in Mr. Gaiman's words that inspires me to a new kind of courage, to new ways of being brave. If our congregations are going to be relevant, I think we have to lead the way toward creative engagement with the world. And we have to lead without—or at least, in spite of—the fear of failure. Perhaps we can learn some of this by reconnecting with the muses, playful and dangerous partners that they are.

Art and spirit are close kin, the only two realms in which people talk openly about inspiration—about being claimed by the beauty of a thing or an idea or a cause. For centuries, if you wanted to see art you would head to a cathedral, temple, or mosque. You might walk through gardens made to resemble paradise on earth or be bathed in light filtering through stories told in glass. For millennia, people understood art to be a gateway to spirit and spirit to be at work in art.

Only in the past few centuries, as industry and capital have begun to determine what is of value, has art been demoted to an avocation, a hobby.

When I was planning a project we called Cabaret Church, we used a quote by Lee Ustinich as our motto: "Art is spirituality in drag." It may have made people laugh, but I hope it made them think as well. Art and spirituality are deeply connected, and I think we have much to gain by reclaiming not just a connection to art, but a sense of ourselves as artists and the work of ministry as art.

I have to say that my understanding of ministry was shaped by serving a congregation full of artists. We had actors, sculptors, fabric artists, painters, poets, and glass artists. I can't think of anyone in that congregation who doesn't make art. Even the chair of their Endowment Trustees plays the banjo and sings at the coffee house.

One Sunday after the service I was talking to a few board members, and I spontaneously asked, "So, when I say *minister*, what image comes to mind?" Their list was unsurprising, "He's tall and thin, in his mid-fifties, has gray hair and a beard, wears black, and he is *very* serious."

Next I asked, "What about when I say *artist*? What do you imagine then?" "Oh, she's young! She has blue hair and tattoos and wears colorful, funky clothes and she is lively and unique and FUN!"

As I observed these long-time leaders of my congregation, it wasn't the answers they gave, but rather the way they gave them that caught my attention. They spoke with joy and enthusiasm, with heart! "Now you're going to dye your hair blue, aren't you?" And I said, "Maybe." And the chair of the Board said, "Good!" Something began to shift and we began to claim art as part of our mission, and it began to change us.

When I said at a planning meeting, "I really should probably teach a class on UU history…." they were savvy enough to ask, "Hmm…. Is that your 'serious-minister-all-in-black' showing up? What do you *want* to teach?" I answered,

Quest

Vol. LXXII, No 4 April 2017

Creativity is piercing the mundane to find the marvelous.

—Bill Moyers

A monthly for religious liberals

THINKING ABOUT CREATIVITY

"Well, there is this poetry class I've taught a couple of times.…" and they said, "THAT! Teach that!" So I did.

Nine women signed up for the class. Four of them were already leaders in the congregation. Two came because they wanted to get to know people better. A mom and daughter decided to take the class together. The ninth woman was new. She'd been on our mailing list because she'd once attended a documentary film we'd shown. That very week her therapist encouraged her to start a writing practice and she saw our poetry class in the newsletter and spontaneously signed up. As we introduced ourselves, she mentioned that she attended a local evangelical megachurch.

Art is healing.

The next week the assignment was: "Write a poem that tells a very short story." When it came time to share, the newcomer blurted out, "I'm really terrified to read this. I've been terrified all day. Can I please go first?" We agreed and she introduced her poem by telling us that she was in counseling because her marriage was abusive, and she was wrestling with what to do. She then read the most honest and painfully beautiful poem telling a story of power and control that, while deeply personal, was also a story anyone who had known abuse would find familiar.

In that moment, the class became more than a bunch of people who wanted to experiment with writing poetry. We were claimed by a mission, the most fundamental mission of art: truth-telling. From that moment on, none of us could share a single poem that pretended to be something it was not. We bonded into a community that could tell and hear truth.

More than that, the Unitarian Universalists in the class gained—seemingly instantaneously—the ability to interpret and accept words spoken in a language of faith that they themselves had rejected. No one felt the need to correct her when she said, "God bless you" or to dismiss her when she said, "Praise the Lord." The mission of truth-telling was too important.

About halfway through the class, she found the courage to move into a local shelter. It was hard for her to be there, and she kept writing poems and we kept listening, without judgment, without correction. Her poems told her story and we learned the terrifying truth of the danger she was in. We heard how the leaders of her church told her to go home, to have faith, and to pray. She couldn't tell them what she'd told us: that she'd locked his guns in the trunk of her car because she was afraid he would kill her while she slept. We held her and heard her truth and shared a profound artful and spiritual community.

She didn't become Unitarian Universalist, and like many women in her position she struggled, returned home, left again. Her road to freedom and safety will likely continue to be bumpy, but her willingness to be honest made it possible for all of us to set aside the façade of perfectionism and connect around our common, flawed, humanity.

Together, we witnessed two things: the value of her life, *each* life, no matter how far from perfect *and* the power of art in spiritual community to affirm that value and beauty. In this small circle of truth-tellers she could see herself—flaws and all—through our eyes, and ultimately, through our belief that eternal, all-embracing Love would never, ever let her go. She didn't become a Unitarian Universalist, but she knows we're here. She knows there is a religious community that doesn't believe she is being punished, doesn't blame her for the abuse, and will not abandon her for being human.

Art is healing. Making good art is more than paint on canvas or a moving melody line or beautiful turn of phrase. Making good art is opening our hearts—our whole beings—to the emotion, inspiration, pain, and courage of being alive. Making good art demands that we let go and allow ourselves to be claimed by something bigger than our egos, something bigger than our fear. Making good art means being willing to face the inevitable messes and mistakes and be brave. When we do this, we sometimes succeed in ways we could never have imagined.

Excerpted from ***Sean Parker Dennison's*** *essay* "Mission Impossible: Why Failure is Not an Option, *delivered to Ministerial Conference at Berry Street in 2015.*
You can read the complete essay at uuma.site-ym.com/mpage/BSE2015 ■

We journey together in a way that we believe is best for supporting an individual's growth in the community. We organize around shared values, purposes and practices and leave the details of particular beliefs to the creativity of the individuals themselves.

Wherever you are in the world, wherever your truth takes you on your spiritual journey, the Church of the Larger Fellowship is there to keep you connected with Unitarian Universalism.

Will you support us in continuing to offer open arms to all who seek? Please consider making a donation today online at www.questformeaning.org/clfuu/giving/ or via telephone at 1-800-231-3027. ■

The Creative Spirit

BY **PEGGY CLARKE**, MINISTER, FIRST UNITARIAN SOCIETY OF WESTCHESTER, HASTINGS ON HUDSON, NEW YORK

My son is in kindergarten. Every morning before we leave for school, I check his backpack for the essentials—a sweater, a snack packed neatly in his Star Wars lunch box, an empty water bottle to be filled up at school, some toy cars in case he gets bored on the bus ride home, *and* one blue, plastic folder, standard issue for every kindergartener. It gets put into the back pack empty each morning and in the afternoon it returns filled with papers. Sometimes there are flash cards with new sight words or a note from the school about an upcoming assembly.

But every day, without exception, there's paper colored with crayons or glitter or something else to give it flare. Which means that in class every day, without exception, each six-year-old has a reason to draw something, to paint something, to cut shapes from colored paper and paste it onto something. And every day that blue folder is filled with treasures of the day's lessons and adventures—pictures of butterflies emerging from a cocoon, of the Earth rotating around the sun, or maybe of horses *flying* in a jungle made of *lollipops*.

If you ask my son what he can draw, he'll say, "Anything. What do you want? Want to see me riding my bicycle over an ocean? Or Grandma learning ninja moves from her cats? Or how about daddy playing soccer against a team of tigers in space?" He can do it all. And, at six years old, he's encouraged to do it. It's part of the day's curriculum. They learn math and reading and science and they play outdoors and they color and paint and glue things. Hanging in every cubby is a smock ready on a moment's notice.

In kindergarten, everything you need is in one room. There's paint and music and room to dance, there are science experiments and lab equipment and materials to read and write and sing and build. Those things are also available in middle school and high school and college, but they are in different rooms, maybe different buildings, and as we get older, we limit who has access to them. The older we get, the more specialized and focused our learning. This room is for painting and that room is for singing, and science experiments are done over there.

> Trusting our creativity and indulging our imagination is our only option if we want transformation, if we want to build the new world that exists in our dreams.

And, with each passing year, we discern—generally for ourselves but sometimes for each other—who belongs in which room. Are you a singer? Can you dance? Can you act? Can you draw? That's your room over there. Or, maybe you need to find another building. Our birthright as artists and dreamers is drained away from us.

Daydreaming is part of the creative process. I spend a lot of time daydreaming. I imagine beautiful old houses and I decorate them in my mind. Ceilings, walls, windows, floors, furniture. I imagine textures and colors and scents in each room. The other direction my daydreams take is imagining the perfect community. It's always attached to a farm where animals are safe, a place people can work and be cared for, a place everyone is getting what they need. I create this beloved community in my mind over and over again.

Daydreaming is a critical part of the creative process and a key to how we survive a world that can be cold and lonely and frightening. It's how we know where we want to go and how we're going to get there. It's the door into whatever's next.

The other day I called a man I know. This man is at the top of his game, well known and respected in his field. He's met with the pope and the Dalai Lama and recently turned down an invitation to the White House because he had something more important to do. When I called his cell phone, he answered but sounded a little dazed. He then confessed he'd been daydreaming. I laughed and apologized for interrupting the most important thing he'd do all day. He didn't get it and responded by saying, "I hope not," but I actually meant it.

I think that for this man to do all he does, to imagine the world a better place, to build the world we all dream about, he's going to need to do a whole lot of daydreaming. He got thousands of people to St. Peter's Square at the Vatican for a massive demonstration of support for the Pope's recent encyclical "*Laudato Si*: On Care For Our Common Home." You might have seen it on TV or read about it. The only way for that to happen is to be willing to dream big, to let your imagination run free.

Daydreaming isn't a waste of time; it's the mandatory preliminary action without which nothing else can be done. First, we dream. First, we imagine Beloved Community. First, we let ourselves believe that what we wish can be.

Trusting our creativity and indulging our imagination is our only option if we want transformation, if we want to build the new world that exists in our dreams. ■

Pure Imagination

BY **MICHAEL TINO,** MINISTER, UU FELLOWSHIP OF NORTHERN WESTCHESTER, MT. KISCO, NEW YORK

We each were born with the powers of creativity. While we're not all going to be famous artists or poets or musicians, we each have the faculties to use our imagination to create. To use these gifts allows us to change our relationship with the world around us.

Mid-20th century process theologian Henry Nelson Wieman writes about the power of creativity as the ultimate source of goodness. In *The Source of Human Good*, he explained:

> *The creative event weaves a web of meaning between individuals and groups and between the organism and its environment. Out of disruptions and conflicts which would otherwise be destructive, it creates vivifying contrasts of quality….*
> *In weaving the web of richer meaning, the creative event transforms the individual so that he [*sic*] is more of a person.*

To Wieman, the ultimate power of any being is its ability to create—to deepen and transform its relationship with those things around it. As humans, we use this power of creativity, including our powers of imagination, to create meaning by interacting with the world in new and different ways.

Creativity and imagination create community. Weaving together words or capturing the play of light in the trees both create a common cultural reference point for the people who see and hear them. They allow people to discuss, to interpret, to imagine for themselves what those words might mean or what that light might look like.

Philosopher and theologian Rabbi Jonathan Sacks identifies creativity as one of the most important virtues to cultivate in our increasingly complex world. In his book *The Dignity of Difference*, Sacks argues for the importance of education, which he thinks is the key to developing creativity: "Creativity is itself one of the most important gifts with which any socio-economic group can be endowed."

Creative imagination is not just nice. It's necessary—for connections with the world around us and with others, to enrich our lives and to stimulate our mind. It is necessary for a deep and full spiritual life. Imagination is also necessary to survive when times are rough. Throughout time, those facing hardship and oppression have turned inwards for inspiration for living, even in the harshest of conditions.

> "The great instrument of moral good is imagination." —Percy Shelley

I once met with a group of colleagues seeking to create resources for congregations to embrace multiculturalism in authentic and worshipful ways.
As part of our meeting, we sang—a lot—which was wonderful. We began and ended each session with song, and we were careful to put each song into a cultural context that allowed us to connect with its origins and meaning.

One morning I was slated to lead us in song, and I chose the hymn "Over My Head." Perhaps you know it: "Over my head, I hear music in the air… There must be a God somewhere."

The hymn comes from African-American slave communities in pre-Civil War America. Unlike so many other songs of that period, it had no hidden meaning about escape or freedom. It was sung, to remind slaves that wherever they heard music, God was present; that song, no matter how harsh their circumstances, could bring them to a place of peace and worship.

It was meant as a reminder that song sparks our imagination—imagination that brings us to another place. For slaves toiling in the fields, this imagination was life-saving. It allowed them to face another day.

The ability to imagine what is not goes hand-in-hand with the ability to dream up what could be, and leads us to yearn for the possible instead of finding complacency in the present.

In their book, *Spiritual Literacy: Reading the Sacred in Everyday Life*, Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat quote poet Percy Shelley: "The great instrument of moral good is imagination." They take a lesson from that: "We often forget that there are creative ways of bringing about change in our communities and society at large…. When Jesus suggests we love our enemies, he is imaginatively expanding our concept of what it means to be a good person."

Indeed, the teachings of great moral leaders throughout time have relied upon human imagination to see a world that did not exist—and upon human creativity to make that world a reality. Martin Luther King, Jr. is as famous for his dream as for his hands-on work of community organizing, but both required him to imagine a better future for people of all races and ethnicities.

Both required him to communicate that vision to others, and to have them imagine it also. Both required him to inspire people to dive in and do the work that needed to be done in order to bring our nation to a place that existed only in the collective imagination.

Imagination is necessary to dream. Dreams are necessary to form goals. Goals are necessary to make change. If we want to build a world better than the one we have today, change will be necessary, even when it's not easy.

Together, we can dream up better days, better ways of relating to each other, better ways of being in harmony with the web of life we're a part of, better ways to see the world. Together, we make that imagination reality. ■

The Spirit of Creativity

BY REV. BARBARA WELLS TEN HOVE

While I believe it is true that no one can take your creativity away from you, there are those who sure try. Take this, for example. I was in my seventh grade art class, where we were working with clay. I don't exactly remember what the assignment was, I just remember that I was having fun, creating, as I recall, a tiny gas station out of the red clay.

Suddenly the vice-principal, who was wandering through our classroom for some reason, sat down next to me. He looked at my little bits of clay and asked me what was I doing. I explained about my gas station. "That's the dumbest idea I've ever heard," he said. "You clearly don't have much talent, do you?"

I felt as if I'd been punched. I can still feel the anger and the shame that was in my seventh grade heart. I knew I wasn't much good at art. I never could draw, but I liked working with clay. Somehow the three dimensional aspect made it easier for me. But after that day I never made anything. My creative spark was effectively doused.

Nevertheless, I believe art and religion are powerfully connected. One source that helped me to understand this was a book written many years ago by the writer Chaim Potok. In *My Name is Asher Lev* the title character is a Hasidic Jew, born in Brooklyn shortly after the Second World War and the Holocaust. His father is a traveler who moves around the world trying to save Jews from the fate of the six million. It is serious business.

When Asher Lev is born, it is assumed he will follow in his father's footsteps. But instead, Asher discovers in himself the gift of art. Not just talent or skill; Asher Lev is blessed (or cursed) with an extraordinary gift to draw and paint—at a level not unlike the young Mozart's gift for music. Asher Lev's artistic ability made him suspect in the conservative religious community where he was born and raised.

Yet the boy could not deny the call to his art. He knew his father didn't understand it. He felt his mother's pain as she tried to encourage him without angering her husband. He bore the taunts of his classmates. He did so because he could not deny the powerful force that was his artistic creativity. When, for a short period, he gave up his art, it almost killed him. Only when he answered the call could he become whole, and grow into his humanness, even at the cost of great pain to himself, his family and his community.

> If we stifle our creativity, we run the risk of smothering our spirits.

At the end of the book, he finds he has to leave his religious community, at least for a while. Chaim Potok writes, in the voice of Asher Lev:

> *I looked at my right hand, the hand with which I painted. There was power in that hand. Power to create and destroy.… There was in that hand the demonic and the divine at the same time. The demonic and divine were two aspects of the same force. Creation was demonic and divine. Creativity was demonic and divine. Art was demonic and divine. … I was demonic and divine. Asher Lev paints good pictures and hurts people he loves.*

He then hears the voice of God reply, "Then be a great painter, Asher Lev; that will be the only justification for all the pain you will cause… Journey with me, my Asher. Paint the anguish of all the world. Let people see the pain."

Asher Lev does so, even though to answer the call of his art is excruciating. He discovers that through his call to creativity he becomes fully human, and also fully connected to the divine.

Creativity, as Asher Lev discovered, is not always something that moves easily through us. Creativity requires a willingness to take risks.

It is tempting to hide our creativity in a box, and never take it out for others to see or experience. But I believe that taking the risk to share ourselves with others in creative ways is a profoundly spiritual process.

One Sunday in the church I served, I chose to sing a solo. When I had practiced earlier that week, it had gone perfectly. But there, in front of God and everybody, as it were, I failed to find my starting note. Not once, but twice. Finally, I had to ask the pianist for the note. He obliged, I sang, and after I finished I felt that familiar sense of shame. I had failed.

I waited in trepidation to hear comments after the service. To my surprise (and great relief!) several people came up to me to tell me how much my perceived failure had touched them. They appreciated me for taking the risk and for not giving up. They knew what I had forgotten—that taking a creative risk is always worth it, even if at first it feels like failure.

Our spirituality is, I believe, that part of our being which is continually evolving and growing in response to the world around us and the world within us. If we stifle our creativity, we run the risk of smothering our spirits. Spirit needs the lively interaction of creative hearts and hands and minds to keep it alive and growing. People can actually die when deprived of beauty. And I have seen the spiritual death that occurs when people lose (or have forced out of them) the ability to be creative.

So I challenge us all to take the risk of being creative, and let's see what it does for our spirits. May we be blessed with an abundance of creativity, and use it to make this world just a little more beautiful, a little more exciting, a little more whole. ■

From Your Minister

BY **MEG RILEY**
SENIOR MINISTER,
CHURCH OF THE
LARGER FELLOWSHIP

Years ago, a therapist told me that people would rather feel absolutely anything besides helplessness. He used, as evidence of this, his work with an elderly Holocaust survivor, who, some fifty years later, still blamed herself intensely for "killing" one of her children in a concentration camp in Nazi Germany. Evidently she was given a "Sophie's choice" kind of non-choice and had to leave one of her children to die. She had spent her entire life hating and blaming herself.

I remember clearly when the therapist said, "Think what a miserable life she had, locked into that self-blame for something she had no control over. The worst situation any of us could imagine, feeling responsible for your own child's death. Yet, to acknowledge her abject helplessness would have felt *even worse*."

To avoid the feeling of helplessness, some of us go to self-blame and recrimination, self-hatred and shame. Others go to anger, or even rage, or blaming other people. Most of us are stuck with some combination of these two horrible twins, shame and blame, that both come from and produce a sense of victimization.

Why do I say all of this in a column about creativity? Because when we are locked into these feelings of self-blame and rage at others, as we try to avoid the abject helplessness we feel in the face of forces much bigger than us, we are not in a place where we generally feel in touch with our creativity. Yet creative acts, no matter how small, could be our way out.

Creativity requires believing that we have the power to make, to shape, to be in the role of actor. Creativity, therefore, puts the lie to our total and complete helplessness. It is an antidote to a sense of victimization. Even if all we can create is a note to someone we love or dinner for ourselves, taking creative action helps us to remember more of who we are. Even if while we create we feel uninterested, or disengaged, the act of creativity itself may remind us that we have agency. Agency— the power to make choices—is the thing that is denied to people who are helpless.

Many of us fear the lack of agency that may come with sickness, or imprisonment, or old age, or poverty—situations where other people might control our lives without asking for or caring about our consent. And yet, knowing people who are old and poor and sick and imprisoned has shown me that anyone can exhibit agency, although we all do it in different ways.

Sometimes when we are frustrated our agency can come out in bitterness or complaint or even cruelty. Making a choice to *not* go down that path, but instead to create something in the world that is beautiful, or tasty, or kind, or builds community, can take us out of helplessness.

Recently I was watching a video of Leonard Cohen, a musician I greatly admire, who suffered from depression a great deal of his life, and eventually moved into a Zen monastery to do some healing. The interviewer asked him if he had feared that letting go of depression would limit his ability to create the kind of soulful music that people love. (This is a man, after all, whose final album before he died was called *You Want It Darker.)*

Cohen looked at the interviewer, shook his head in something like disbelief, and said, "That's a popular notion, that it is exclusively suffering that produces good work…. But I think that good work is produced in spite of suffering and as a victory over suffering."

I like the concept of creativity as victory over suffering, often done in spite of suffering. And so, when times are hard, I invite you to insert creativity where you can, even in tiny places, to claim your part in the co-creation of the universe.

We're all making it together, every day. The smallest actions and choices may ripple out in ways we cannot imagine. As the saying goes, it is better to light one candle than to sit and curse the darkness. And even a very, very tiny candle still creates light! ■

Notice of Annual Meeting

To all members of the Church of the Larger Fellowship, Unitarian Universalist

Per Article VII, Sections 1 and 2 of the Church of the Larger Fellowship (CLF) Bylaws, the 44th Annual Meeting will be held via video/telephone conference call and screen sharing on June 12, 2017 at 8:00PM EDT.

We will post all the necessary documents and contact information to the CLF website (www.clfuu.org/annualmeeting) by June 5, 2016. You can download materials, print them, and if a ballot is needed, send it along to the CLF office at CLF UU, 24 Farnsworth St., Boston, MA 02210-1409. Or call the CLF office at 617-948-6150 and request a paper copy.

The purpose of the meeting is to: elect a moderator from among members present to preside at the meeting, elect three members to 3-year terms on the board of directors and one member to the nominating committee, plus elect a clerk and treasurer from the slate of candidates presented on the ballot.

Rebecca Scott,
Clerk ■

REsources for Living

BY **LYNN UNGAR**, MINISTER FOR LIFESPAN LEARNING, CHURCH OF THE LARGER FELLOWSHIP

Many, many years ago I visited the palm reader's booth at a Renaissance Faire. The palm reader studied my hand for a minute or two, and then pronounced: "You have a lot of creative energy." She looked again and said "You have a LOT of creative energy!" I was amused and pleased to hear that from her (although I don't particularly believe in palm reading). After all, I'm someone who loves to write and sing and dance. I hope people who actually know me think I'm creative.

But I've wondered since then what it means to have a lot of creative energy. Does it mean that you create things like drawings and songs and poems? Does it mean that you create those sorts of things and other people think that they're good? Or does it mean that you have a flexible mind, and you can come up with solutions to problems that nobody else thinks of?

Or does having creative energy mean that you are able to connect ideas or information in surprising ways, so that you come up with new of understanding the world? What does it *feel* like when we're full of creative energy? Is creative energy something that some people just have more of than others, or it is something you can encourage and grow? If it is something that you can get more of, just how do you go about doing that?

I was recently riding in the back seat of my friend's car, along with her nine-year-old son Dylan. (Another adult in our carpool was in the front.) My friend had mentioned that Dylan felt left out of the adult conversation on our previous ride together, so I was paying particular attention to including him as we chatted. This, as it turned out, meant that our conversation wandered from talking about leafy sea dragons at the aquarium toward contemplating what a leaf dragon would look like, imagining leaves with smiley faces that turned vicious and full of teeth if you got them mad. We eventually came around to the makings of a story in which our hero had to cross a magic forest without stepping on any leaves, lest those leaves turn out to be the dragon kind that not only would bite if angered, but would turn themselves into trees that shed thousands more chomping leaves.

I think it's safe to say that it was a conversation with quite a lot of creative energy. And it reminded me that since my own child has become a teenager, I rarely have conversations that are quite that imaginative. I have lots of interesting friends, and we talk about interesting things, but rarely in that same inventive, playful way. Adults mostly forget to do that.

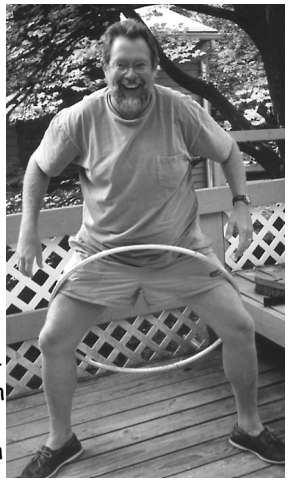
> When we play...we aren't worried about what it is that we are creating. We let things happen in the moment, without any agenda about what *should* come out of the experience. You play in order to play, just for the fun of it.

Which made me wonder about the connection between creative energy and play. Adults tend to think of being creative as making things—stories or songs or paintings or what have you. Which is great. But it's awfully easy when you're creating things to get caught up in whether what you're making is *good*, whether other people will like it or be impressed with it or even if other people will want to buy it. And those are the kinds of concerns that can squash creative energy.

But when we play, like Dylan and I did during that car conversation, we aren't worried about what it is that we are creating. We let things happen in the moment, without any agenda about what *should* come out of the experience. You play in order to play, just for the fun of it. And part of the fun is that you don't know what is going to happen.

That's one reason psychologists are now telling us that video games and educational software aren't as good for developing brains as unstructured play alone or with a group of friends. If your activity has a goal—to get to the next level, to learn a skill, to win the game—then it isn't really play. There isn't room for creative energy to flow. Our brains wire themselves into predictable pathways, and the creative path that wanders, making surprising connections to arrive at surprising conclusions, gets lost.

The good news is that it's never too late to take up playing as a hobby. And it's also never too late to create new connections in your brain (although it's easier when you're young). So whatever your age, you might want to get serious about building play time into your life. If you're an adult, and you feel like you don't really know *how* to play, you might want to start hanging out with young people like my friend Dylan.



It turns out that playing is something that people (and other animals) are naturally good at, so if you want to play you just need to find someone who hasn't forgotten how, and then be open to entering the game. Creative energy wants to flow. You might be surprised (and pleased!) to find what comes pouring out if you remove the dam. ■

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after half a century
you would have dusted
every familiar corner,
but look! The medicine cabinet
swings open on a garden
in France. Beneath the kitchen
table an African safari
sends antelope racing
over your slippered feet.

The spare room closet
contains worlds known only
to the imagination.
So many years
have already passed.
There is only time left
to explore.

*By **Lynn Ungar,** CLF minister for lifespan learning, from her book*
Bread and Other Miracles,
available at www.lynnungar.com