

# *The Work of Art*

A Sermon Delivered on May 12, 2019  
by  
The Reverend Axel H. Gehrman



Unitarian Universalist Church  
of the Monterey Peninsula  
490 Aguajito Road  
Carmel, CA 93923  
(831) 624-7404  
[www.uucmp.org](http://www.uucmp.org)

**Meditation:** by Janet Bowering, “The Many Names for Mother / Father / Parent”

Blessed is the person who feeds and warms, washes, and comforts a child and soothes them in illness.

For they shall be called caregiver.

Blessed is the person who gives shelter and food, clothing, toys, books and tools.

For they shall be called provider.

Blessed is the person who opens doors in the child's experience, who explains the puzzling and wonders at the mysterious

For they shall be called teacher.

Blessed is the person who shields a child from that which will wither or warp, who protects a child from abuse and exploitation, who guards against bullying and scorn

For they shall be called defender.

Blessed is the person who takes the time to listen, who is there for a child in the darkness, who is aware of the fears, who speaks words of encouragement in moments of despair.

For they shall be called sustainer.

Blessed is the person who guides a child in the search for beauty, who encourages them at what is daunting who steadies them as they explore new experiences, who fires their aspirations and their dreams

For they shall be called inspirer.

Blessed are all these persons who help bring an infant along the many paths to maturity  
For in them is the future well-being of humanity.

**First Reading:** by John Daido Loori, who was raised Roman Catholic in New Jersey, and worked as a chemist, before studying Zen Buddhism, and becoming the abbot of Zen Mountain Monastery in upstate New York. This is from his book *The Zen of Creativity: Cultivating Your Artistic Life*. He writes:

Creativity is our birthright. It is an integral part of being human, as basic as walking, talking, and thinking. Throughout our evolution as a species, it has sparked innovations in science, beauty in the arts, and revelation in religion. Every human life contains its seeds and is constantly manifesting it, whether we're building a sand castle, preparing Sunday dinner, painting a canvas, walking through the woods, or programming a computer.

The creative process, like the spiritual journey, is intuitive, non-linear, and experiential. It points us toward our essential nature, which is a reflection of the boundless creativity of the universe.

**Second Reading:** by Natalie Goldberg, a poet, painter and teacher. This is from her book *The True Secret of Writing: Connecting Life with Language*. She writes:

This summer I visited the Aspen Art Museum and found [the book] *642 Things to Draw* in their bookstore. No author. No instructions. A thick blocky tome. School bus bright yellow cover. Blank pages, whole or divided into halves, quarters or thirds. And in the upper left of each section, a single noun, remember those? A person, place, or thing. Something to draw, something you can get your teeth around. Sometimes a phrase, “an uneventful street.” The book felt so meaty (excuse me, vegetarians), so full of protein and possibility. I snapped it up and took it home.

... I had an idea: What if we drew with words?

But first, for fun and to warm up: Try actually drawing these in your writing notebook. You don't have to be Michelangelo. Just use your pen in different motions, spend maybe one to three minutes on each:

- a [hammer]... root beer... a bus stop... a truck... a tennis racquet... an iris... fried eggs...

Though no author signed his or her name, as I page through the book I get a feeling for the person who created it, even in these nouns. Urbane, connected to society, caring about human, daily life. He or she, let's call her Alberta, walked around a city and picked out, noted things she saw. Jotted them down. “Trolley car” gives it away. She walked up and down the streets of San Francisco, and then had the good grace to step completely out of the way. Not even an introduction, only draw, however you like. No delicious epilogue, a culmination, an outcome. You just do what you do. Alberta found 642 things and she was finished, didn't round the number out.

What is around you that can be seen? Look. Don't miss it. Right now in early autumn everything is giving itself up, ripe raspberries, last tomatoes, sunflowers, cosmos, squash, chilies, soft air, a slight twitch of cold in the early morning hour before the sun rises, a smell of winter if you turn your head quickly at the corner, vines clinging for the last moment. Everything is rising up to meet us. Don't turn your back. Be here, even when it aches. Acknowledge what has been given.

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I would generally not consider myself an artist. I am neither a poet nor a painter, and I am pretty clumsy with crafts. I can carry a tune. I wouldn't say I am a singer.

But I do appreciate art. I like to listen to music. I enjoy performances whether drama or dance, or all sorts of concerts, whether in music halls or jazz cafes, or open air in parks and on city streets. I like to walk the halls of museums, and ponder the pictures, whether classic or contemporary.

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In his book *Religion for Atheists* the Swiss-born philosopher Alain de Botton says that museums and churches share a lot in common. In fact, in this secular day and age, for many non-believers museums have become their new churches. “Like churches, museums enjoy unparalleled status: they are where we might take a group of visiting aliens to show them what we most delight in and revere,” he writes.

“Moreover, time spent in museums seems to confer some of the same psychological benefits as attendance at church services; we experience [similar] feelings of communing with something greater than ourselves ... We may even get a little bored sometimes, as we would in churches, but we emerge with a sense that we have, in a variety of indeterminate ways, become slightly better people.”

But just as religion isn’t only found in churches and temples, art isn’t only found in museums.

For instance, Elaine and I are big fans of Banksy. As some of you know, Banksy isn’t the real name of the artist, but rather a pseudonym. The identity of the person called Banksy is unknown. Most people believe he is a British man, who was initially known for his graffiti art, which many police officers and property owners considered vandalism. His art combines political commentary and dark humor, using a distinctive stenciling technique, painted on walls and bridges in cities around the world.

When we visited Bethlehem and the West Bank a few years ago with a group of UU ministers, we had the opportunity to experience some of his work. For instance, on the road we traveled several times on the way from our hotel to various famous religious sites in the area, we passed the original depiction of this image: the masked protester in the act of throwing – not a rock or a Molotov cocktail – but a colorful bouquet of flowers.

I was surprised to realize the original wasn’t the size of a framed picture, or even life sized, but rather twenty feet tall. It looked like this.



Near the wall separating Israeli and Palestinian territories, we also found this image by Banksy, of a white peace dove, with an olive branch in its beak, wearing a bullet proof

vest. The image was especially striking, right there, because it conveyed the spirit of hope and resilience we experienced in Bethlehem, in the midst of an oppressive military presence.



Banksy, we learned, has taken a special interest in the conflicts in today's Near East, especially given Britain's historical role in creating the situation. And, in fact, just when we were visiting, in the spring of 2017, Banksy had just opened a hotel and art gallery right next to the separation wall, to bring attention to the plight of the Palestinians. Thanks to Elaine's research skills and initiative, we caught a taxi late one evening to take a look.

Playing on the name of the famous Waldorf Hotel in New York City, it's called the "Walled Off Hotel." It looked like this.



In the lobby of the hotel, we settled in for a cup of tea, and also explored a variety of original Banksy pictures and sculptures on display.

I was especially struck by the display of security cameras mounted like the animal head trophies of a big game hunter, along with slingshots and sledgehammers – all of which were reminiscent of the many check points we passed along the wall, and various implements of resistance.

In a gallery upstairs, there were art works by several contemporary Palestinian artists, many of them poignant portrayals of their living conditions under Israeli occupation.

But the most memorable part of our visit, thanks, again, to Elaine's powers of observation: we noticed a man emerge from a hidden door, and settle in at the hotel bar as if he owned the place. And indeed, as it turned out, this was the artist himself, putting the final touches on several art installations in the hotel's guest rooms, for the grand opening that week.

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The art critic Zoë Lescaze says, "*Art doesn't just reflect the world — it engages with it.*" She admires the work of contemporary artists in this country, who are also undocumented immigrants, for instance the Mexican-born artist Felipe Baeza, who, through his art practice hopes to challenge the notions that keep marginalized people in the margins.

Baeza writes,

"When it comes to migration, the discourse rarely focuses on the stories of real people trying to succeed; instead, the conversation is dominated by criminality and punishment.... I believe that when we share our images and tell our stories, we illustrate the human struggle — and this has the power to win over broad audiences. Art drives ideas home in a way that is unmatched by any other medium. We need multidimensional, complex stories about who we are; we need to represent ourselves in our full humanity. That is how we can combat racism and that is how we can achieve justice. But more importantly, that is how we reclaim our existence."

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There is a growing number of young artists who share this passion for artistic activism. Artistic Activism, as Stephen Duncombe and Steve Lambert describe it, "is a dynamic practice combining the creative power of the arts to move us emotionally with the... activism needed to bring about social change... At first glance [art and activism may] seem at odds with one another. Activism moves the [political and] material world, while Art moves the heart, body and soul. In fact, however, they are complimentary. Social change doesn't just happen, it happens because people decide to make change. As any seasoned activist can tell you, people just don't decide to change their mind and act accordingly, they are personally moved to do so by emotionally powerful stimuli."

Alain de Botton says, we need art because we are so forgetful.

"We are creatures of the body as well as of the mind, and so [we need] art to stir our [...] imaginations and motivate us in ways that mere [philosophizing] cannot. Many of our most important ideas get flattened and overlooked in everyday life, their truth rubbed off through casual use. We know intellectually that we should be kind and forgiving and empathetic, but such [words] have a tendency to lose all their

meaning until we meet with a work of art that grabs us through our senses and won't let us go until we have properly remembered why these qualities matter and how badly society needs them for its balance and its sanity."

Seeing Banksy and his art installation in Bethlehem was a powerful experience. But we don't need to fly halfway around the world to see art. There is plenty of art right here. Just look at our current display in the Welcome Hall, with portraits by members of the Monterey Youth Arts Collective. Did you see the pictures of our long-time member Darby Worth, and the young artist Lizzy Loh; or Peggy Olsen and the artist Amanda Cusenza? All the pictures were made by 14-22 year-old artists from a variety of backgrounds, nationalities, races, religions, orientations, and socio-economic levels. The mission of the Youth Arts Collective is "to inspire creativity, kindness, and confidence in our youth through artistic expression and mutual respect. Do art. Be kind." It's a creative social experiment that is clearly working, they say.

And we don't need to rely on the work of gifted amateurs of all ages and professional artists. As John Daido Loori writes, the creativity of the artist is our birthright, every one of us. And the creative process shares a lot in common with the spiritual journey.

For instance, in ancient Japan Buddhist priests used painting and poetry to express their religious insights. As Loori writes:

"Although they were not trained artists, many of the abbots and monks that made up the orders of the great monasteries were renowned calligraphers, poets, painters, and musicians. ... As a teaching vehicle for the Zen masters in Japan, these arts – tea ceremony, bamboo flute, landscape gardening, [drama performance], ceramic arts, and archery – became known as the "artless arts of Zen." They transcended technique and were primarily used as tools for communicating spiritual insight."

The American art curator Lynn Herbert writes: "For many of us, art can open a door into the spiritual realm. And if we look back through the history of civilization, we discover that art and spirituality have always been inextricably linked..."

The Catholic monk Thomas Merton agrees. He writes: "Art is not an end in itself. It introduces the soul into a higher spiritual order, which it expresses and in some sense explains. Music and art and poetry attune the soul to God because they induce a kind of contact with the Creator and Ruler of the Universe."

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Some religions say God is a heavenly creator, and we are God's earthly creatures. We are cosmic clay being worked by holy hands. We are color on a divine canvass. We are all notes ringing in a sacred symphony. And the world in which we live, the natural world with all its wonders and all its beauty, is God's masterpiece.

We are part of this world, but we are not powerless puppets. We are created in the image of the divine. This means we are co-creators, each of us endowed with creative powers,

each of us on a spiritual journey, called to create a world of ever greater beauty, greater justice and greater love.

We are all children of Mother Earth, AND we are all called to feed the hungry, comfort the afflicted, free the prisoner, and welcome the stranger. We are all called to be caregiver and provider, teacher and defender, sustainer and inspirer.

Regardless whether or not we consider ourselves poets, painters or performers – we are all artists, each and every one of us a creator. And the first step of our creative, spiritual journey is to pay attention. Pay attention to the world around us. Pay attention to all its people. Pay attention to everything – hammers and root beer, bus stops and trucks. Pay attention to ripe raspberries and last tomatoes, to sunflowers and squash, to the soft air and the slight twitch of cold in the early morning hour before the sun rises.

Everything rises up to meet us. Don't turn you back. We are called to be here, even when it aches. We are called to gratefully acknowledge all we have been given.

May we be inspired by the spirit of creativity and courage.  
May we join the spiritual journey of the painter and the prophet, the singer and the saint,  
Each of us doing our part, so that together we might create a better world.

So be it. Amen.

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