Desert Call
Conemplative Christianity and Vital Culture
Summer 2005

The Landscape of Creativity
The inner landscape of creativity is as varied and infinite as the geography we live in. And like the terrain we walk in every day, it too can challenge, inspire and feed us.

Before finishing this issue of Desert Call I spent some time in the city of Colorado Springs. While not unfamiliar to me, the city is not the landscape of my soul, not the one in which I thrive; the raw beauty of the desert and mountains is where I am at home.

Large parks and hiking trails surround where I was staying, but surprisingly I was drawn to walk through neighborhoods and downtown areas full of houses, cars, people and city noise. And there I was ambushed by beauty.

It was late spring and the city was coming back to life: trees, some heavy with buds and others brilliant in their translucent new green leaves; houses surrounded with a variety of flowers, shrubs and grasses; bright pink-blossomed crab apple trees and the scent of lilac bushes everywhere. I saw families out for walks and having picnics in the warm spring weather, and dogs, dogs everywhere! Next to a beautiful two-storied home with porches and swings and windows wide open was a creatively landscaped vegetable garden with raised beds. My heart leapt. Its beauty and natural organic order drew me and inspired me. It gave me life just looking at it and I began to dream about our gardens at Nada. I felt myself coming back to life.

During my days in the city, as I walked through the streets and took in all of the life and color and sounds and beauty, and thinking about this issue, I began to understand how narrow my definition of creativity and art can be. Its potential is everywhere, and I suspect, in everyone. But we need to think more broadly—out of the box—of what it means to be an “artist.” It seems to me that what is created out of love, that is, from our deepest Christ-conscious center (vs. a kind of self-consciousness) will be true. And in any field of work or project or creative endeavor, being true and honest with ourselves and one another is what really matters. I began to see just how infinite the landscapes and definitions of creativity can and must be. It’s a geography, it’s a landscape that runs from a pen in hand to telling a story; from writing and singing a song to digging in a garden; to creating a safe, loving environment for someone in which to explore their inner landscape to raising a family, building a home, or cooking a meal for friends. We speak to one another through our creativity when it comes out of our clearest voices and from our deepest center, our truest selves. At its best, creativity evokes communication, and it creates, ultimately, at its deepest center, communion. “Deep calls unto deep” (Ps 42) marks the challenge. Everyone is called. The choice to respond is left to us.

There is a lot of darkness in our world. It too runs deep. It feels horribly fracturing. But somehow, I have to believe that what is creative, what is true, what is beautiful binds us more strongly and deeply and will, ultimately, prevail in our hearts and our world.

In this “Landscape of Creativity” issue of Desert Call we offer you a taste of the creative works done by artists who are friends and friends who are artists in their own way. It is not an exhaustive sampling. In future issues we hope to explore more of this landscape with you. My hope is that it can be a continuing collage of creative, challenging, and inspiring beauty, an empty palette, a blank sheet of music, a raised garden bed full of rich soil where artists of all flavors and styles and walks of life will be willing to offer their gifts and give us a glimpse of their part in this infinite landscape of creativity.
Over the span of my creative life, there have been periods of high aspiration and periods of drought. It is cyclic, sometimes spanning decades.

When I was very young, I would draw constantly all manner of subjects. In my early twenties, I became fascinated with different materials and my subject matter was secondary. In the early eighties a major shift took place when I was inspired to create a master work. I put to use the different techniques I’d become proficient in to create this new work. The stages before were like learning the alphabet, practicing scales, preparing myself for this worthy new task.

This inspiration was, I believe, the direct result of a fervent desire to have an impact on my viewers—one that would inspire, motivate, and empower them—a product of the visualizations and meditative techniques I had been doing, which involved delving into my true nature and purpose, the unity of all existence and my desire to make a difference in the world.
These “prayers” were answered in a classic example of Jung’s synchronicity. I made a trip to the Findhorn Foundation in northern Scotland in the summer of 1984 and there picked up a book, Earth at Omega, by Donald Keys, that was to become the primary inspiration for my series Conscious Evolution: The World at One, which is now hanging in the Smithsonian. That book had excerpts from Teilhard de Chardin, whose thought has become my guiding light and source of hope for this world. These ideas made their way into my artwork as I was led to other authors, who reinforced Teilhard’s vision.

That creativity spilled over from the visual arts to other forms: I began to contact others to help expand the ideas I had introduced in my artwork, which contained captions, much the same way as the Chinese use text in their paintings. Everyone I contacted agreed to participate and the resulting anthology, Planetary Perspectives, contains essays in a wide range of disciplines on how we may become a viable human presence on the planet. Again, there was something of what Goethe says that if you commit to something, whether or not you know how to go about attaining it, Providence conspires with you to attain it.

Soon after initiating this project, I began to think seriously about marriage and starting a family. Not long after I began to focus on this, I met the person I thought I would share the rest of my life with. Gradually, and painfully however, I realized it was a very unhealthy relationship and all my creative energy drained out of me. Yet, I still had obligations, including a commission to complete for NASA. Though I completed that work, the process of creating it was excruciating, like wringing the last drops of essence from something that was once alive and vital, my soul. After finishing that commission, I was totally depleted. I came to Crestone, appropriately located in the desert, in the midst of this spiritual crisis.

When I first arrived in Crestone I had no studio and no access to the services that I depended upon in New York to create my mixed media work. I did have an organic garden, though, and I began to put my creative energies and need for beauty into that garden. It became a living mandala, a medicine wheel of concentric circles, with particular herbs, vegetables and flowers growing in the four directions, instinctively arranged in symbolic fashion. This was embodied, living art. Both the reality and symbol of nourishment and healing comprised of living soil, living water, flowers growing in the four directions, instinctively arranged in symbolic fashion. This was embodied, living art. Both the reality and symbol of nourishment and healing comprised of living soil, living water, flowers growing in the four directions, instinctively arranged in symbolic fashion. This was embodied, living art. Both the reality and symbol of nourishment and healing comprised of living soil, living water, flowers growing in the four directions, instinctively arranged in symbolic fashion. This was embodied, living art. Both the reality and symbol of nourishment and healing comprised of living soil, living water, flowers growing in the four directions, instinctively arranged in symbolic fashion. This was embodied, living art. Both the reality and symbol of nourishment and healing comprised of living soil, living water, flowers growing in the four directions, instinctively arranged in symbolic fashion. This was embodied, living art. Both the reality and symbol of nourishment and healing comprised of living soil, living water, flowers growing in the four directions, instinctively arranged in symbolic fashion. This was embodied, living art. Both the reality and symbol of nourishment and healing comprised of living soil, living water, flowers growing in the four directions, instinctively arranged in symbolic fashion. This was embodied, living art. Both the reality and symbol of nourishment and healing comprised of living soil, living water, flowers growing in the four directions, instinctively arranged in symbolic fashion. This was embodied, living art. Both the reality and symbol of nourishment and healing comprised of living soil, living water, flowers growing in the four directions, instinctively arranged in symbolic fashion. This was embodied, living art. We have arrived at the earth, and our culture is the idea that people can find beauty in the desert, in the midst of this spiritual crisis.

The theme of the exhibition, which I helped develop, was Space Exploration and the Changing Self-image of Humankind. The idea was to get beyond the fascination with the technology and hardware of the space program and reveal the deeper meaning, the human ramifications of space exploration. I was familiar with this view from years of conversations with Apollo and shuttle astronauts about their experiences of seeing Earth from a distance and as many years of pondering other great thinkers’ writings, including James Lovelock’s hypothesis that the Earth is a living organism.

Our scientific inquiry into matter, into the origins of the Universe, has revealed a seamless procession: out of the mind of God come elementary particles, stars, galaxies, supernovae, solar systems, planets, our Earth, the waters, atmosphere,
biosphere, consciousness and the products of consciousness. In fact, all art, culture, and social structures. I tried to portray this in symbolic form for the ASE art exhibition. The pieces were different from anything I had done before. At the same time, lacking a studio and embedded in nature as I was, synchronicity paid me another visit as a little flyer posted at the art supply store in Boulder for an upcoming landscape painting class. This was something that I had always been fascinated by and had wanted to try my hand at.

The classes in landscape painting helped me to relate more intimately with the splendors of the San Luis Valley, and to relate back to the iconography. I saw that everything in nature is an image of God, not just humans, saints and angels. Painting both landscapes and icons, I found that one fed the other and in turn both fed my soul. But what I had at first found fascinating and nurturing in icon painting began to weigh heavily on me; to the Orthodox mind, all Western art is decadent. The icons are seen as the pinnacle of expression and the ancients who developed them are considered the sole purveyors of wisdom. And this went straight to my heart as an artist. I began to agonize whether the modern human, the contemporary artist and myself in particular, had anything to offer as a contribution to the human condition. Anything of wisdom. Somehow I knew the answer was yes, but among my colleagues and fellow icon painters, I was alone in my thinking.

Then along came Dr. Ewert Cousins. Again, when the student is ready, the teacher will appear. I had enrolled in a workshop he was teaching called “Christ of the 21st Century,” named after his latest book. I had seen his name in the list of faculty of the School of Sacred Arts, where Vladislav Andrejev had once taught. I’d made a note of his name, because of his interest in Teilhard and in global consciousness. After knowing him for some time, I asked Dr. Cousins what he thought about the ability of the contemporary person to produce forms that were healing. He offered me his understanding that Christianity has two major artistic traditions: icon painting and spontaneous artistic creativity. Although not as thoroughly formulated as icon painting, the spontaneous creativity tradition has been articulated in both theology and mysticism. It is based on the inner divine life as a Trinitarian process, of intimate love and creative self-expression. The Son is seen as the Art of the Father, the Image, the Masterpiece of the fountain-fullness of divine creativity. In the mystical tradition the Son is perceived as Light from Light, the perfect expression of the divine fecundity. It is out of this boundless inner creativity that the creation of the world flows. As a finite image of the Trinity, the human artist shares in this divine capacity for creative self-expression. By plumbing the depths where she or he mirrors the Trinitarian creativity, the artist can co-create with God, bringing to birth a truly sacred art. This is drawing from the Christian example. There are comparable approaches within all the major traditions. Where there is a sacred art tradition you can also find a parallel of a more spontaneous form. It is appropriate to give expression to both.

That was good enough for me. So I began to break with the view that all I could do that was not iconography was decadent and began to explore what my authentic expression could be. Part of that quest was organizing a forum to explore this question, which was given at the New York Open Center, comprised of a Thangka painter and art therapist; Dmitri Andrejev (Vladislav Andrejev’s eldest son); myself, and Dr. Cousins. All during my phase of painting icons, I had the persistent thought that the world in which the icons had come into being was different from the world today, a world that is informed by an important new discipline, science. And the best of that tradition needed to be brought into the picture, so to speak. That information was readily available to me through my studies of the New Cosmology, an interpretation of the empirical, scientific story of the Universe by cultural historian Thomas Berry. Now fully immersed in the symbolism of the icons and greatly helped in
my understanding of the Western Christian mystical tradition by the monks at Nada Hermitage in Crestone, Colorado, I began to understand the Earth in its Marian aspect, a vessel and instrument for the will of God, who always answers with “Be it done unto me according to Thy word.”

The Earth to me is a bio-spiritual entity, not just the material backdrop for the human drama in its journey towards the Divine. Unbeknownst to me, I was attempting to reclaim the tradition of the World Soul.

What’s interesting is how much of what I do contains symbolism which I sometimes do not fully understand or intend, which I learn later precisely symbolizes what I intended to express. For instance, what I created next was “The Earthly Paradise,” a contemporary icon, inaugurating the Third Millennium, which I executed in the same liturgical fashion and with the same materials used in creating a traditional icon. The image is of the Earth from space. It resembles the NASA photos with important differences. For one, the globe is encircled by a ring of light blue, which is traditionally seen surrounding the Christ Child in the icon of Our Lady of the Sign, representing the Holy Spirit. What I did not know was that the Holy Spirit was originally associated with the World Soul, one of the three divine principles in the Platonic-Neoplatonic tradition that was first assimilated by Christianity, but then quickly split off from the other principles, leaving the material world bereft, “an autonomous realm,” according to Dr. Cousins, “which could easily become the world machine of Enlightenment science, devoid of divine presence” and thus free game for exploitation (from Christ of the 21st Century).

We are at a turning point in history, some say beyond the point of no return, where the exploitation of the Earth will result in a vastly degraded human. If God’s presence in the world is real, then we are killing off expressions of God. We are destroying ourselves. We are dismantling our own soul, as Albert LaChance asserts in his forthcoming book, The Architecture of the Soul.

My work as an artist has always been caught up with the human drama of realizing its full potential, its true identity and its highest possible destiny. Thoughts linger sometimes for years before they manifest, and teachers always appear when I am ready. There are still dreams awaiting their full exegesis. They await a time when I am spiritually and materially capable of bringing them into the world. My one worry is that the forces of destruction and deception loose in the world today are outstripping the healing forces, the forces of Truth. But, as Ewert Cousins comforted me the other day, “the devil always wins on the first round.”

So, I must always remember that whatever the forces of evil can dish out, it’s not a knockout. In the current diabolical manipulation of Truth, we must respond like Archangel Michael, protector of the Earth, as he appears in the icon of Archangel Michael of the Apocalypse, vanquishing the lies at the end of civilization. It is for us to get up and keep fighting, for the Earth, for our fellow creatures, and ultimately for God.

Angela Manno’s artwork resides in the permanent fine art collections of NASA and the Smithsonian Institution and in many private collections worldwide. She is teaching landscape painting in Southern France this summer and developing a new body of work based on the tradition of the World Soul as embodied in Chartres Cathedral and as explored in particle physics.
The story is told of a master potter who spent each day throwing exquisite pots on his wheel and then, at the end of the day, took a stick and shattered them. One day a nobleman rode by on his horse and cried out, “Old man, why do you make such beautiful vessels and then destroy them?” The potter replied, “It is not the perfect pot that I desire, but the perfect internal form.”

Making pottery on the wheel provides numerous opportunities for spiritual reflection. The clay must first be prepared through a process called wedging. Wedging removes bubbles of air and ensures consistent moisture and texture. If the clay is too wet it will not hold its shape; if too dry, it cannot be thrown and centered on the wheel. This can reflect the transformative process of grace in our souls in which we allow Christ to wedge, center and mold us into an image of his perfect internal form.

Perhaps the most important step in throwing pottery is centering the clay. Centering begins with slamming a ball of wedged clay onto the wheel. Then, with wet hands, the potter urges the spinning clay into a perfectly centered dome.

Any out-of-roundness at this stage of throwing will be manifest and magnified in all the subsequent stages of the process. One master potter said he didn’t consider himself proficient at centering clay until after seven years of practice!

Once the clay is perfectly centered it must be opened. Opening happens by pushing the thumbs into the spinning mound and drawing the mass of clay outward to form thick, crude walls.

After the clay is opened to the proper size, the sides are drawn upward and given their shape as a vase, a bowl, or perhaps a chalice. But regardless of the final shape, each piece begins with wedging, centering, and opening. Once a piece of pottery has been thrown and trimmed it is glazed and fired in a kiln.

When we inspect our cupboards we are likely to find pieces of pottery that are chipped and cracked. Who doesn’t have a favorite vase or mug that bears a blemish or defect? Yet, we readily overlook those flaws and, often, cherish the piece because it has a value or meaning that supercedes the imperfection.

Are we any different? As the experiences of our lives form us they sometimes also leave us with chips, cracks and wounds that we will likely bear until we experience our final transformation in Christ.
play the guitar and sing almost every day. Some people are surprised when they find this out. “Every day? What for?” I can almost hear the mind thinking, “What a waste of time.” The best rebuttal I’ve seen comes from Antonio in the movie version of Corelli’s Mandolin. Pelagia asks him what, in the midst of war, can he possibly find to sing about.

“What is there to sing about? There is singing when babies are baptized; when you celebrate a marriage; men sing as they work; soldiers sing as they march into battle; and there is singing when people die. I have always found something in life worth singing about. For that I cannot apologize.”

Another answer: God made me this way. If I stop doing music, I begin to forget who I am. Music and prayer keep me alive. Also, I’m a priest, and musical expression is an essential part of my particular priesthood.

Inspiration may be a form of superconsciousness, or perhaps of subconsciousness—I wouldn’t know. But I am sure it is the antithesis of self-consciousness.

Aaron Copland
But not liturgical music, for the most part. For many years I’ve been fascinated by a particular small corner of music: a single person with a single instrument, weaving a folk song out of mid-air. I’ve explored that corner with endless fascination, each facet of it: voice and instrument, words and melody. It’s very difficult to get right, yet the result sounds as natural as conversation. There’s no strain, no showiness when it’s done well. The musician gets out of the way and lets the song speak.

The result is a unique form of heartfelt communication. A good song can say things you can’t put in an entire book. It reaches down into a place beneath words to touch, uplift, renew, resolve; to evoke laughter, tears, or sometimes both. It can change us. Therein lies an entire ministry that touches our ancestral roots, our primal love of stories and songs around a fire, passed down through generations. That ancient love is still with us; when stirred, it can take us places we’ve never been. Songs come from a place inside where the songwriter may have never been; the song leads him there.

By now it’s clear that most music on commercial radio comes nowhere near this level. Much of it is cotton candy, written to merely entertain and make money. It’s very big business, but to call such music “song” is an insult to the genre. A true songwriter must let go, early on, of ever making a dime from it. Then perhaps he or she will write something worthwhile, possibly even timeless.

A real song is communal. It emerges from a highly unique soul living in a specific time and place, yet it communicates something universal. This is a wonderful mystery. A centuries-old song can pierce us to the core today. Such a song travels among people, even if it remains unknown in the “marketplace.” It is passed around, passed down, and can keep us going when life gets dark. One of the best examples in history is Amazing Grace, written by a slave trader turned Methodist preacher. That song came from a “place” utterly beyond John Newton, yet simultaneously from a highly personal, intimate part of his soul. It speaks to the ages. Silent Night is another good example, written on a guitar when the church organ broke down. In the more secular vein also there are multiple examples, a personal favorite is Shenandoah. But where exactly is the line between secular and sacred? In the best songs it is often blurred.

When the people of Latin America were suffering acutely under dictatorships, a movement sprang up: Nuevo Cancion, New Song. The anguish of life was told through this music, and a flame of hope was kept alive. The songs sustained thousands, who would pass them around, sing them, memorize them, and let them become part of their blood. One, All I Ask of God, was outlawed by the government and its author was forbidden to sing it in public. From then on, he would simply play the opening chords in his concerts and the audience would begin singing it. Such music is dangerous, and may carry a high price. One of the best from this movement, Victor Jara, was slain in the infamous soccer stadium of San Salvador, after guards crushed both his hands.

In our own country, a handful of poor musicians and singers helped sustain and strengthen the Civil Rights movement by traveling around the country singing We Shall Overcome, Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around, Oh Freedom, and other classics. Each of these originated in the Black Spirituals. Simple and straightforward, they are suffused with a kind of magic that defies explanation.

It’s fascinating how music like this gets into the blood. I saw Pete Seeger at a folk festival in California. He began singing his Where Have All the Flowers Gone. In the middle of the first verse, the microphone went out. He kept singing, though only the first few rows could hear him. The song moved toward the back in a long slow wave, till everyone was singing it sans amplification. That was a revelation of how songs are supposed to work.

Much that is written today tears down instead of building up; it leaves us dissipated, tired, unsatisfied in our souls. Do we need another pop or country-western tune that reduces women to sex objects and men to good-timing guys or hard-hitting cynics? Layers and layers of instrumental sound can’t camouflage a song that has nothing to say; our hearts know the real thing. It’s worth hunting for.

Over the years I have also discovered many songs that do speak to the soul, and there are always a good number of writers, practically hidden, who continue to create them. Very few ever get near the top forty (nor do they want to); yet they’re out there, even in such a paltry time and culture as ours. Some write profound sacred music; others, earthy ballads that open a new window into life. Both serve the common good, both sustain us, both create lasting art. Anything that uplifts, brings us together, draws meaning from life, is of the Spirit.

One of the best folksingers alive today is Bob Franke. Odds are you’ve never heard his name; yet any good song collection will include a few of his. I had the pleasure of meeting him last summer when I attended one of his

When we are really honest with ourselves we must admit our lives are all that really belong to us.
So it is how we use our lives that determines the kind of person we become.

Caesar Chavez
If I Were an Artist

If I were an artist, I'd paint you
the world
Lavender meadows, sunsets of pearl
Emerald oceans, billowing white
Lake of smooth silver, herons in flight

If I had the skill, I'd paint morning out loud
Impossible orange, not one trace of cloud
Gold mist on pathways that roam
where you will
Carpets of heather that blanket the hills

If I were an artist,..

If I were an artist, I'd never run dry
I'd paint you the midnight and
mid-morning sky
Spires of cathedrals, wheat-covered plains,
Arabian horses that dance in the rain
I would not be heavy, or tied
to the ground
No need to be groping through
tunnels of sound
I'd sing with all colors, glissading on tones
That sail through the starlight,
up mountains of stone

If I were an artist,..

But my palette is simple, and small
as the man
One note at a time, I give what I can
Still I'll sing through the nighttime
of deep royal blue
Just to give you one glimpse of
dawn shining through

It's a beautiful world…

Tom Renaud

Fr. Tom Renaud is a member of the Spiritual Life Institute living at Nada Hermitage in Crestone, CO.

Morning Star

SLI Sampler CD

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Watch future issues of Desert Call or check our web site for release date of the complete new CD!
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There is something about the colour yellow that reminds me of a childhood summer. The summer was never yellow and yet it always was. In a child’s tongue-between-the-teeth high concentration colouring, the sun was always scrubbed in with relentless persistence in chrome yellow, lemon yellow, cadmium…the waxiest, suddenest yellow that a box of children’s crayons could offer.

I kept my crayons in a drawer at the end of the kitchen table. They were in a slender box of twelve frivolous colours. There was a picture of a Chinese girl colouring away madly on the front, enticing me into her world. The crayons were frivolous because, amidst the ear-tags, memorium cards and half-broken half-mended plugs, watches, fuses, spectacles and unknowables, they didn’t really fit comfortably into a Cavan existence. I kept them there with the calendars left from last year. With these two miraculous tools—calendars and crayons—came imaginative escape. I could draw, I could colour, I could design and inhabit princely palaces. How different that was to the pulling and the dragging of the farm work. How tropical and spicy was the smell of wax crayons compared to the dead beat smell of Layers’ Mash, the sickly sweet powder smell of Golden Maverick, the functionality of the diesel drum for lighting the acrid smoke-belching Stanley.

Yellow is an exclamation mark. It reminds me still of summer...of the scratchy yellow hay, of the yellow paint peeling in the back kitchen, of the custard left cooling in a bowl in the window—a stubborn and stretchy skin forming about its stodgy substance. With that custard there would be a melting pool of semi-transparent yellow jelly, the colour of Lucozade. The edible ensemble called out Sunday! Sunday! The only day we had dessert in our house. It was more than frivolity, it was decadence.

After dinner, almost never, but once that I recall really, really well, we went to the seaside. As we were scraping our spoons in our bowls, my father said, “As soon as yez have that lot into yez, we'll take a tip up the road, we'll take it aisy and we'll be there by four o'clock.”

We were going to Bettystown!

This was a frivolity on top of a frivolity multiplied by frivolity several times over and left to set. Many of the well-off ones at school bragged about going to the seaside and picking the shells and the crabs they saw and the great big ninety-nines they had with strawberry sauce and them getting burned with the sun and the sand in their sandwiches and then their younger brother getting sick in the car coming home.... Now all this glory would happen to me!

We had a Triumph.

Every other civilised family had a Ford Something. We
had a Triumph Toledo. It was purple, the colour of an ageing scab. The shape reminded me of an old women’s hat. It broke down more often than it went. My knees pressed hard in front of my teeth when I sat in the back seat because my fathers’ seat was so far back to capture his bulk. Nevertheless, on this particular day, it would carry me to glory.

My mother brought a flask. She always did. She wore her good clothes that smelt nice. My father wore the sports jacket, my brother the good jumper with the diamonds on it. Skip the greyhound sat between my brother and me, flicking his ears and letting off.

I can nearly hear a camera clicking on the moment. My father turns the key.

Yellow.

The moment is yellow.

Summer Day, Bettystown

Sunrise splendid with its fiery fingers splintered the grey curtains of dawn to one side, sweeping night to the wings.

Enter a new day, its shoulders sloping into nature’s garments. Clothed in the dew of doubt, throat beating with fragile possibilities. Earth’s feet clenches shingled stones on the seabed, washing clean, washing over, washing up.

Memories of music, stroking the jabbering air in Bettystown, a summer Sunday when ice creams glide off their cones, the whipped sculpted curves losing the edge to the sun.

Families walk slowly in sandaled steps along a tinkling promenade. Coins converse in silver voices inside men’s pockets. Women dab children’s faces with Kleenex from patent leather clink-clunk handbags. The music comes from the takeaways, from carousels, from Bingo halls and lounges. Laughter bubbles up and out from Paddy’s Emerald Bar like the gas escaping from the very beer itself.

There’s a good-humoured gloss on the day, as transparent as shoe polish, as fickle as the length of the sunshine and the sports shirt sleeves of a Sunday off.

High-days and holy days are held precious in family memory. Sundays are days for doing things together in distanced harmony away from the farm and just occasionally having it recorded by Kodak.

A canopy of fruit-coloured stripes juts protectively over the postcards of places everyone knows, but with surreal colours observed from an alien eye. As discordant as the tune from a roundabout, fair fun for the family but false to the memory’s senses. No one can truly remember the essence of such a day. To write it is to jarringly spike its nature on a specimen board and watch its wings dissolve.

Like the ice cream melting.

The music haunting out to silence.

The crackling of expectancy becoming in an instant an empty wrapper.

The merry jingle of a bicycle bell becoming an empty space where maybe someone once passed this way.

Clare Lynch is an artist and author living in Co. Sligo, Ireland. Yellow and Summer Day, Bettystown are reprinted with permission from the book Short Steps in Long Grass, by Clare Lynch. Published by Black Battler Press, Liber Bookshop, 35 O’Connell Street, Sligo, Ireland.
he hermitages at our Irish monastery, Holy Hill, have lovely, expansive window seats. I have sat here in St. Brigid, on the hill overlooking Ballisodare Bay and beneath Knocknarea, for over three months now. I have imbibed all manner of weather from hailstones and lashing rain, wailing winds and black clouds, to crystal blue skies over sun-drenched golden gorse and thick green grass.

I am a transplant from the desert of Colorado to this west coast of Ireland, known for its wild winds and frequent rains. I was unprepared for the lush spring, those rare perfect days when daffodils, jonquils, and forget-me-nots swing amidst giant flowering rosemary and new buds pop suddenly open on every hedge and tree. Midst such fertility my roots quickly took hold. “A person needs to be planted where he or she can flourish,” says Tomàs, a good friend of mine.

Once again I am offered the opportunity to create a new life in a new hermitage. What colors and themes shall I integrate into my new dwelling, with its stone fireplace and wainscoted walls? It needs texture: perhaps a woven wall hanging, and baskets, plants, flowers and green softness.
And what texture shall I give to my days? The creative act is a courageous, ancient gesture; a dynamic and prayerful exploration of the dark mystery that is human existence. At this time, I have enough manual labor to fill my days and nights, but I have more to tend to than house and grounds. What about leisure and reading and prayer? Relaxation and play? How shall I balance duty and daily exigencies with my vocational call to deep prayer and reflection?

We are not meant merely to drift through our days until we die. Nor are we meant merely to participate mindlessly in the routine of daily work and amusement. We are not machines to be driven until we break down. In other words, life is not a straight horizontal line between two points, birth and death. Life curves upward to a peak of intensity, a high point of value and meaning, at which all its latent creative possibilities spring into action and the person transcends self in encounter, response, and communion with another. Thomas Merton says that it is for this that we came into the world, this communion and self-transcendence.

Merton’s insight rings true for me. How I move from a flat horizontal line between two points and that amazing curve upward toward self-transcendence is my present quandary. How do I shape my days to make possible a life replete with peak experiences and still get the work done? I sense it has to do with pace. When I am at my best, I meet each moment as it comes with full presence and response. I commune with the dogs and cats. I gaze with appreciation at the flowers. I carefully listen to the person speaking.

I know in my bones what gives me the freedom to move at that ideal pace. The energy emanates from a deep well within, the level of being to which I am attracted. I need to return to the depths of that well, not just skim the surface. And, as often as possible, I need to go deeper. That takes time and effort.

If I apply the skills of Ignatian discernment, I listen for the movement or inspiration that brings openness and freedom of heart, not necessarily pleasure. Each day I discern how to get to that place, how to remain there long enough to drink adequately, even to satiation. That listening done, I am ready to respond creatively for the rest of the day. My creative urge will flow to set the table beautifully, to make a bouquet with the garden flowers, to warm the atmosphere with loving attention and response, to welcome the stranger, the interruption, the phone call; to give attention to the highest priority, to bring order out of chaos again and again, to be gracious, ever gracious.

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Sr. Patricia McGowan is a member of the Spiritual Life Institute living at Holy Hill Hermitage in Skreen, Co. Sligo, Ireland.

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Love is the fruit of beauty. When you see a beautiful tree, you fall in love—ah, beautiful flowers, the bluebells, the primroses—beauty enters the heart and creates love. That is why in the world today we lack love, because there is less and less beauty in our everyday lives. Whenever you make something with love, you feel humbled. You could not make such beautiful things on your own. It must come through divine inspiration. In that way, beauty and humility go together. It is an act of surrender to the divine source. The divine inspiration uses your body, your hands, and your talents, as a channel for beauty, whether it is a Henry Moore’s sculpture or a painting by Van Gogh or some beautiful peasant house in rural Vermont. Or beautiful shoes made in Rajistan.... Therefore beauty is a source of spiritual healing. For me, beauty is the essence of our being, the soul of our being.

Satish Kumar, from A Heron Dance interview www.herondance.org
Prayer for the Road
after Antonio Machado

The road has come to an end
Beyond the last house on a shore
Where the young shards of memory
Have been rounded to inscrutable stones.
Once courageous choices
Here seem mere obedience
To a rutted, timid way

Though the pattern no longer stutters
When the road has come to an end.
Out here, the sovereign tidal drone
Gives way to silence without horizon—
A silence drifting into sleepless nights
That hold out for another kind of morning
When daybreak prayer sinks into places
An empty mirror will not fall.

Can there be any hope beyond this house
Where yet one more pattern looms
On a desolate sea that forever opens—
Then shuts!

Only if you
Break your silence,
Lift my mortal fear
Into one more sky,
Let your wind open roads
Upon this sea, beyond these stones,
That I may choose to walk on one
With the familiar echo
Gone from my step.

Albert Starkey
August 24, 2004

I wrote this poem in late August after a long period of waiting for “the new thing” to arrive. On the day before, I had engaged in a wonderful, while unnerving conversation with a Jungian friend of mine on decision and choice. If we think about it deeply enough, we just might find that much of what we have heretofore considered “choices” may not be choices at all but rather mere acquiescence to familiar life patterns. With such a recognition, we have an opportunity to risk walking into the unknown, to allow the “Creative” to intervene, or as the Spanish poet Antonio Machado put it: “Why should we call / These accidental furrows roads? / Everyone who moves on / Walks like Jesus, on the sea.” Of course, we will never know that kind of trust and intimacy with God. But inklings of it are there for us, often and simply through a willingness to wait for unbidden creativity to arrive.
I must have driven people quite, quite mad. My inexhaustible appetite for used kitchen rolls, egg boxes, gift wrap, stickers, stationery, yarn scraps and other odds and ends must have surely had me socially corralled as one of life’s local crazy ladies. There is a cupboard under my stairs that I still refuse to clean out.

Everything in it is valuable: paper plates, glass paints (congealed in chameleon-like brotherhood), coloured card (all shapes and sizes, most torn, many with ringed coffee stains), glue sticks, battered tooth brushes, dried-up markers, runny-nosed paint tubes, wigs, old stationery, broken coloured tiles, spilled grout. And, obviously, much more.

This, you see, is where it all happened.

This cupboard represented the engine room for hundreds of creative arts workshops that I gave to many community groups over the course of the past ten years or so. I used to open that cupboard on a Sunday night, head held sideways, frowning and diabolically surveying my stock room, as it were. Leaning in that myopic stork posture, staring into the semi-gloom I would plan my week ahead. It would take the mind of a mad genius or a community arts worker (though hang on, the two may be identical) to come up with anything meaningful from that domestic scrap yard. But that’s what community arts was all about. Making art out of nothing. Making fun, moments, community, out of nothing.

And so, as a community arts worker, from all matter of discarded “stuff” I learned to make puppets, paper, games, collage, mosaics, and much, much art. In turn, I taught these things to others. For me, the most magic thing about the creativity that I encountered in all those wonderful individuals was its sheer unpredictable nature. The same box of art “stuff” could be brought to two different groups and I guarantee you that two completely diverse workshops would result. It seemed that the more “rubbishy” the raw material, the more wonderful the result could be.

One of my especially rewarding projects usually involved someone who had never had the chance to be creative in the early parts of their lives now producing something delightful in their adult years and being amazed that this ability to create had been latent within them since forever. Oh, the waste. But oh, also, the wonder.

Many adults, unfortunately, may have had an experience in their childhood which fractured their belief in their own creativity. I wonder if you are one of such?

My one personal recollection on the theme of creativity as a child seemed particularly damning. It involved my class teacher saying to me (when I was approximately seven) that no one could create except God. Now, that pretty much narrowed down the field of creative beings. No one could create except God, she repeatedly told us, because he was the only one who could make something out of nothing. Thankfully I got over that without ever quite confusing myself with any deity and managed to plough on into the field of arts and
the many-faceted emotions and learning curves that came with it.

There are two life experiences which I still recall as being my biggest teachers. The first came about when I was twenty-one and employed in my first job as a care-worker. My duty was to take care of adults with learning disability in their community group home. One of these was an adorable young woman of eighteen, confined to a wheelchair. She had no speech and her only means of expressing herself was through laughter, smiles, or tears. I was informed by my superiors that she had a mental age of five and that my duties towards her were to be just in the field of physical care. There wasn't much else that could be done for her, I was told. It was by pure fluke one morning that she spilt tea from her beaker whilst I was feeding her breakfast. Due to the humour I was in, I started drawing faces in the tea spill and telling her that one of them was her boyfriend, the bus driver. I gave her milk dot eyes and an abundance of sugar spill beard bristle.

She roared laughing. I remember that she threw back her head and roared laughing. Then she spilt more tea on purpose and, with her own finger, drew a sun.

That unintentional discovery of this young woman's creativity was one of the most amazing and humbling experiences of my life. It made me realise how very highly educated experts had put a glass ceiling over her ability and her needs, had not taken into consideration the full being that breathed within that body. I in turn was mortified that I had believed them rather than opening up possibilities for her long before that chance break table happening. Why hadn't I seen her before as the wondrous person she was? It seems I had foreclosed on her creative existence, denied her the ownership of such a thing. Anyway, we built on that accidental experience and ended up exploring finger painting, face-painting, blow painting, and even wheelchair dancing around the kitchen. These were just a few aspects of her creativity which, when tapped into, ended up being brilliant for both of us.

She had a brand new vocal expression when we were doing our kitchen dance. It was “wheeeeee!” I think that transcends many languages. To me it’s a syllable of utter gladness, abandonment, and freedom. It’s the innocent child laughing within each of us.

That was my rookie experience of the enormous creative potential within a person with a learning disability. The next life-lesson happened many years later and is a revelation of the stunted awareness of creativity that still existed within my own head. It happened only a few years ago, while I was working in an art capacity with a group of physically disabled people. It was a gang that I had been working with for a few years and I was used to having great fun with them. One day I went in to give the weekly class. I brought my CD player, paints and paper. That was it. I knew exactly what I was going to do and I was excited about it.

A surprise awaited me early that morning: there were two new women in the group. One of the staff members introduced them to me by first name. I was a little taken aback to have two new people to work with, but decided to waltz on with my original plan. I welcomed them and started the ball rolling. Now the ball that day was all about painting to music. I put on different pieces of music, from Dvorjak and Adiemus to African rain dances, Moby, and Russian women’s choirs. I invited the group to respond in paint to what they were hearing in music. To paint fast, slow, staccato strokes, languidly, whatever they felt. I then led into inviting them to paint the colours of different emotions and abstract situations, from anger, fear and happiness, to stormy seas, Saturday crowds, and autumn days.

Oh yes, in my own way I really thought I was wheeling daylight into a dark room. What’s more, the two new ladies seemed to be having a ball: paint splashed everywhere, great enthusiasm in the brushstrokes, lots of laughter. Great! It wasn’t until the class was over and I was packing away jam jars and thanking everybody for washing their brushes that the centre manager came up to me and whispered discreetly, “Sorry for not giving you any advance warning about the two new ladies, Clare.” “No sweat,” I told him. “They seemed to fit right in.”

“Yeah, they had a great time all right,” he said, looking over at them, their illuminated faces still full of fun. “But I should have told you about their impairments. Kate’s sight is extremely bad and Anne is totally blind.” I stared over at the women, now horrified. True enough, in the next minute Anne picked up her white cane from the floor where it had been for the duration of the class and with the assistance of a staff member made her way out to the mini bus. The centre manager called out goodbye to her and Anne shouted over to him, “Tell the art lady I really enjoyed the painting and music. I’ve never been let do that before!”

I just about managed to get out to my car before my mind went into total neurotic spasm. Who’s blind around here, I kept asking myself, me or those women? If I had known about their impairment before the class I would’ve had a panic attack and changed the theme of the day altogether. In other words, I would have deprived them of the opportunity of experiencing what I felt everyone else could experience. I had not seen the white sticks. In turn, they had not seen a problem with what I was asking them to do. Because of my ignorance and metaphorical visual impairment, I had involved them in something creative and fun that they had not “been let do before.”

I have never forgotten that day and how it was so easy for me to mentally put a glass ceiling over others. Nor have I forgotten the wonders that emerged when I was blind to blindness.

I have not given art workshops in a few years, preferring instead to channel my creative streak through writing. I will not say much about the process involved in writing. Writing writes itself, falls down, picks itself up, carries on if you
let it, trust it. My favourite reflection about writing is from
Nabokov. He says: “Caress the divine detail.” And that’s
what I try to do as a creative being. Look to the nothings.
Look to the tiny somethingths in my life, the most drab and
quotidian of things and in them see the wonder. Realise that
nothing is more extraordinary than the ordinary if you really
look at it.

I am only a fledgling writer, but those few words of
Nabokov’s are the ones I use constantly to sharpen the point
of what I write. They have not failed me. Creating is not done
out of nothing, exactly (so maybe my second class teacher
was sort of right), but it comes from the tiniest particles of
things. It comes from the seeming rubbish of dark places
to the experience, even, of having two blind ladies in an
art group who see better than their teacher. It comes from
observing the most infinitesimal of human wonders to the
smallest, most perfectly beautiful thing.

I love the second hand sources of inspiration, from
the overheard conversations on a bus, to the objects from
the past that hang around on the fringes of our lives. Or
sometimes it’s the writings and work of others that inspire
me. No matter how many love poems have been written,
there are still an infinite number to write. No matter how
many trees have been painted, there is still an inexhaustible
number to paint. And each creative expression will be
different because of each person’s unique way of seeing
things.

There’s always something tiny and seemingly insignificant
that can point up the wonders of the infinite. There’s always
something old to be seen in a new way.

Our own sense of creativity is a shutter going up, up, up
on a window to the absolute creator. Will we ever be able
to fully accept the visual wonder of that? And if one day we
do, if one day we really fully do, will we have the internal
wherewithal and freedom of body, mind, and soul to go
“wheeeeee?!”

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Clare Lynch was born near
She currently lives and works in Co.
Sligo as a disability and community
arts worker. Short Steps in Long
Grass takes the reader directly
into the world of childhood in Co.
Cavan in the 1970s. It’s a world
of astringent humour, warmth,
memory, and the pains of
growing up in a sometimes
harsh, always captivating
environment.

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**Digging**

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.

Under my window, a clean rasping sound
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:
My father, digging. I look down

Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds
Bends low, comes up twenty years away
Stooping in rhythm through potato drills
Where he was digging.

The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft
Against the inside knee was levered firmly.
He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep
To scatter new potatoes that we picked
Loving their cool hardness in our hands.

By God, the old man could handle a spade.
Just like his old man.

My grandfather cut more turf in a day
Than any other man on Toner’s bog.
Once I carried him milk in a bottle
Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up
To drink it, then fell to right away

Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods
Over his shoulder, going down and down
For the good turf. Digging.

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge
Through living roots awaken in my head.
But I’ve no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I’ll dig with it.

Seamus Heaney
For me the creative process begins when I assimilate an ordinary life experience into the context of my contemplative exploration. As a contemplative artist, the seed of inspiration for creating a work of art arises from within the depths of my soul. That seed of inspiration is like a mustard seed, so elusive, so tiny, and yet the kernel grows into a large creation. Artist Paul Klee wrote, “Art does not reproduce the visible, rather it makes visible.” For me, the subject of a painting may arise from the experience of a sunset over the San Juan Mountains as I walk to Vespers on a winter afternoon or from one spring flower in a bouquet in the Spiritual Life Institute chapel. I am jolted out of my complacency by experiences that rush through my senses. For example, Fr. Tom Renaud's song, Morning Star, inspired me to create a painting of the planet Venus rising over the Sangre de Cristo mountains in the pre-dawn light. A homily on St. John of the Cross percolated in my being until I woke up in the middle of the night to create a sculpture called Fire and Ice.

As I begin to paint, I put the essence of the original impression from my life experience in my heart and carry it with me until the product of my time and energy erupts into a work of art. How I move from inspiration to final creation is a mystery to me. To say it just happens is an understatement. The process evolves from inspiration through perspiration to realization.

My philosophical approach to art has evolved over the years from reading books by thinkers who have pondered upon this elusive subject, such as Aristotle, who wrote: “the soul never thinks without an image.” And Meister Eckhart, who looked at the creative process in terms of “when the soul wishes to experience something she throws an image of the experience out before her and enters into her own image.”

In my search for words to describe my creative process I look to Joseph Campbell, who summarizes who an artist is in terms of the spiritual journey:
The real artist is the one who has learned to recognize and to render what [James Joyce] has called the “radiance” of all things, as an epiphany or showing forth of their truth.... It’s important to live life with
the experience, and therefore the knowledge, of life’s mystery and your own mystery. This gives life a new radiance, a new harmony and new splendor….

In each attempt to create, I try to bring out the extraordinary aspects of everyday existence by capturing the expansive beauty of corporal matter onto a painted canvas. What I do is impossible and yet I enjoy trying to create an expression of what I experience to the best of my abilities. For me, the process is pure joy.

Looking at my artistic process from both an experiential and intellectual point of view, I have arrived at a definition of contemplative art as the product of creative expression arising out of the pure joy of creating, grounded in a contemplative connection to the “radiance and perfection” of spirit known only through one’s experience of being fully human.

The Creative Process

In my artwork, I use color as the central focus. Paul Cezanne encouraged artists to make color the predominant element in a painting when he wrote: “There is a logic of colors and it is with this alone and not with the logic of the brain that the artist should conform.” The images in my paintings are designed specifically to hold color. The more outrageous the combinations of hues I employ the happier I am.

Exaggeration is my most reliable compositional element in that I try to magnify the small or bring into perspective a small aspect of the large. I continually try to do the impossible and in my effort to create I do not always arrive at what I envision, but I usually end up with a good painting from my attempt.

In each endeavor to capture the “light of life,” I work towards what philosopher Suzanne K. Langer clarifies in her book, The Problems of Art, when she says:

A work of art expresses a conception of life, emotion, inward reality. But it is neither a confessional nor a frozen tantrum; it is a developed metaphor, a non-discursive symbol that articulates what is verbally ineffable—a logic of consciousness itself.

My bottom line as an artist is to excite the eye with color and inspire the mind to look at the world from a colorful perspective.

Art Retreat

The result of my inquiries into what is contemplative art has led me to share my ideas. Since 1996 I have taught experiential art workshops, giving others the opportunity to look at the relationship between art and contemplation. I believe that art is the perfect metaphor for the contemplative experience.

The intent of each retreat is to create the opportunity for participants to discover in their own way the contemplative experience while making art. As Wassily Kandinsky points out in his book Concerning the Spiritual in Art:

The spiritual life, to which art belongs and of which she is one of the mightiest elements, is a complicated but definitive and easily definable movement forwards and upwards. This movement is the movement of experience.

Creative experience assists the intellect in uncovering that special place in our minds where contemplation bursts forth into an understanding of the spiritual.

To assist in this process, I offer a supportive atmosphere by establishing a sense of sacredness within the retreat space. Differentiating between the left and right brain functions, discussing meditation and contemplation, and introducing the concepts of chronos and kairos as an aspect of the creative process gives participants a basis to move in their own special way from the everyday world of living in the American culture to the universal, expansive space of God’s world. I invite each person to trust their inner intuitive process to create a drawing that they had no idea they could complete when they began to draw. In other words, I encourage people to draw without knowing how the picture will turn out.
With television, computers and video games dominating most people’s lives, the current American culture has turned into a left brain dominant society. During the art retreat, I invite the participants to let their left brains take a vacation and open up the opportunity for their creative right brains to dominate their retreat experience by taking themselves out of their everyday lives and giving themselves some time to explore their creativity.

The art retreats are specifically designed for the beginning art student, the professional artist, and everyone in between. Participants with no previous artistic experience can discover their creativity in a safe and supportive environment, and experienced artists have the opportunity to expand their creative experience to include a meditative approach to their personal expression.

At the conclusion of the art retreat, participants discover that they have accessed their individual creativity, looked at their personal artistic style, explored contemplative creativity, and expressed their heart-centered perspective.

Vocation as Artist

Watching the process of creation unfold in art retreat participants and in myself is a mystery. There is a moment when the creative inspiration bursts forth as the mind moves from the calculating, judgmental left brain activity to the flexible, encompassing, forgiving right brain functions. All at once, a person switches from the forced, scattered activity of getting started into the quiet, focused concentration of making art. At the beginning of every art workshop session, I quietly wait and watch as the mysterious transformation moves through a group of retreat participants. Each person responds differently and predicting when it will happen is impossible. It just happens.

At the end of a retreat, I can see in the relaxed faces of the participants the reflection of a weekend of looking at the world with contemplative eyes and expressing artistic experiences with compassion.

I like my vocation as artist because I spend most of my days exploring the infinite possibilities of the creative process. Like the experience of contemplation, art is infinite and one never reaches the end. Creating art is the closest I can come to being with God. That is why I am an artist.

My most recent paintings are of sunset and sunrise. Georgia O’Keefe wrote, “Making your unknown known is the important thing.” Following her example, the goal of my present exploration is to express on canvas the silent presence during early morning and late evening when the light is changing from day into night or night into day. The mystics of many traditions call this moment “the crack in the sky,” when God is close and “the peace that surpasses all understanding” is experienced. Using color as the central focus of my art making, I share my contemplation.

Suzanne Frazier combines a 1989 BFA degree in Studio Arts from the University of Colorado with a 1969 BA degree in Philosophy from Lake Erie College to create a new approach to art. Her work can be viewed at the Crestone Artisans Gallery or at www.suzannefrazier.com.
Years ago, I was asked to write an article on gratitude at a time in my life when I felt anything but grateful. I forced myself to write out of the conviction that gratitude is our normal state and that gratitude brings joy, not vice-versa. The article was well-received and even republished by a newspaper for a wider audience. I was glad I made the effort.

From 1997 to 2002 I helped build Holy Hill Hermitage in Ireland. Being a southern boy from Tennessee, the rain, gray, and short winter days took their toll on me. I would force myself to get out of bed on mornings I wanted to hibernate, do thirty pushups, and say out loud: “This is another great day to be at the Spiritual Life Institute's Holy Hill Hermitage! HUA!” I was told that Marine Drill Instructors say something similar to rouse the recruits for their early morning run. HUA is a military acronym for “heard, understood, accepted.” It worked! For five years I was a soldier out to liberate what was beautiful in wood, stone, and ruined buildings. The spectacular beauty that resulted is one of my life’s most enduring satisfactions.

I would often start the day in Ireland with a six mile run on a nearby beach with our dogs Duende and Sedona. Duende, a Newfoundland, would usually not last long before plopping down on the sand and howling. This, despite all my efforts as her drill instructor. After one such run, I forced my tired, cold, aching body to write an article on the experience which was later published in this magazine. I consider those few paragraphs about coming to terms with winter depression in a distant land the best thing I ever wrote. Writing it meant saying a firm no to physical and mental exhaustion so creativity could find expression.

Creativity does not always demand conviction, discipline, and effort, nor is something new, challenging, and complex required. Brewing beer is creative for me. The familiar ritual of combining and boiling barley malt, hops, corn sugar and other ingredients comes easily, and the smell of the boiling wort is a delight. Adding the yeast (known in the art as pitching) is my favorite part. Then I watch the roiling transformation happen over several days. One month later I am drinking liquid art. Brewing and other creative arts require only a capacity to enjoy familiar paths.

Something about running creates and releases creative energy, especially as I run the mountain trails in the Sangre de Cristo mountains near Nada Hermitage. The athletic motion of the human body is a form of art. In mountain running, the scenery is constantly changing: cascading streams, aspens, firs, and wildflowers combine with the sky and spires of and glorious day.
rock in a constantly changing kaleidoscope in synchronicity with breathing and heartbeat. After an hour and about two thousand feet of altitude gain, I ally with gravity and effortlessly flow downhill like the stream at my side. Being in the mountains challenges, sustains, inspires, and transforms me. My capacity to receive and appreciate beauty grows with each run.

Contemplation is the heart of creativity. Because I want everyone to immerse themselves in beauty and to expand their capacity to create beauty, this summer I am going to begin hosting contemplative days of recollection in the mountains by our Colorado hermitage. My hope is that these days in the mountains together will be a source of creative inspiration for all who participate.

Bro. Thomas Crutcher is a member of the Spiritual Life Institute living at Nada Hermitage in Crestone, Colorado. He may be reached by email at nada@fone.net.

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Two Kinds of Intelligence

There are two kinds of intelligence: One acquired, as a child in school memorizes facts and concepts from books and from what the teacher says, collecting information from the traditional sciences as well as from the new sciences.

With such intelligence you rise in the world. You get ranked ahead or behind others in regard to your competence in retaining information. You stroll with this intelligence in and out of the fields of knowledge, getting always more marks on your preserving tablets.

There is another kind of tablet, one already completed and preserved inside you. A spring overflowing its springbox. A freshness in the center of the chest. This other intelligence does not turn yellow or stagnate. It’s fluid, and it doesn’t move from outside to inside through the conduits of plumbing-learning.

This second knowing is a fountainhead from within you, moving out.

Rumi, Mathnawi, IV, 1960-1968
For me, the heart of creativity is imagination and freedom. Freedom, in this context, is the movement within which one strives towards beauty and form. Perhaps it's the movement in us which corresponds to the generativity of the Creator: that which moved “over the face of the deep” and made all from the great void, the chaos, the deep: light and darkness, plants and animals, rain and rainbows. Certainly, I experience creativity as tapping into a seemingly infinite “deep.” But what I want to focus on here is the utter gratuity of it all: as I grow older, I'm more and more aware that the product is sheer gift. The object, though conceived with my mind’s eye and formed with my own hands, is really much more given than formed; much more received than striven for. It evokes sheer gratitude and wonder much more than pride, for both materials and vision are gifts. And I could say “no” to the work as easily as I could say “no” to eating. For me, to live Christ’s abundant life is to create. It is to do the will of God. Woe to me if I do not! And if on the last day he should say, “well done!” I will answer, “thank you!”

The way to tap into this sheer gratuity is through surrender, the letting go of preconceptions, the “way it’s done,” tried and true methods. I do not scorn these, but lean on them as a ship rests in safe harbor before casting off to open sea. One knows what one knows and is utterly grateful for the many teachers, but is open also to a strange and unforeseen element which, once discovered, paradoxically fits. I ask myself: “Why hadn’t I thought of that before!” It was there all along; I opened the door and in it came!

This method works for me in a number of creative mediums.

I love to cook. I hardly ever, strictly speaking, follow a recipe, but I can spot a good one quickly and often add my own touch of spice which makes it uniquely mine. There are days, naturally, when I’m not open: I’m fatigued, preoccupied, or in some way closed in on myself. But when I’m listening, wonderful things materialize through my hands. It’s as much a miracle as the touch that heals. I feel like Peter in the Book of the Acts: “I didn’t heal this man...the power came from...elsewhere!” It takes leisure, utter respect for the process and a willingness to give your heart over to it. It’s not an attitude of “get supper ready,” so much as “let’s play!” It takes great detachment from the outcome, for the process requires a willingness to fail, to create a mess rather than “art!”

I also love to make greeting cards, and I use exactly the same method but with different materials. I may happen upon a poem full of meaning and rich symbols, symbols which are also simple enough to execute in a paper-tear of white winter birches against a deep midnight blue, with crackling stars and a patient moon over the distant hills. The idea of the poem might be patient advent waiting, but it’s all there, already given in the poem and in the images. I see it. I accept the challenge. The work is simply putting it all together. I’m pleased with the product when it most approximates the original, given vision which is not mine but the poet’s, inspired by Spirit.

But perhaps the medium which most accentuates the "givenness" of my craft is the desert flora. The desert, like the wise pioneer housewife, hoards and protects her potentials until the favorable season. I’m no botanist, but they tell me
that the plants in our high mountain valley are masters of conservation. It’s no accident that the flowers come in ever increasing abundance as the spring rains favor the sandy soil. The rest of the year they lie hidden, protected, buried. When the season favors, I collect yucca pods and blooms, the mahogany red stems and seedpods of what I’ve named “desert baby’s breath,” the airily loose but laden seed heads of our rice grass, the soft green and yellow buds of the aromatic rabbit brush, the bright red berries of the squaw bush. With all these and many other desert delicacies I weave decorative wreaths, sometimes adorned with silica dried cactus blooms or the deep blue delphinium from my garden. All this bounty is sheer grace. I cannot know exactly when the season will favor; I can only be there and willing, for a few hours or days, to drop my normal every day routine and harvest the rare desert bounty.

Finally, I’ll say a word about the trial and error, the fickle fruitfulness of gardening, especially at 8,000 feet. Plants sometimes grow and sometimes don’t. And many times the veteran gardener stands and scratches his head, pondering the mystery of it all, which he may well experience as frustration! If this worked last year, why not this year? The season is not that different. Perhaps it’s the genetics of the seed, the soil, a slight shift in seasonal temperatures? One wonders but never really figures it out. The mind of God is unfathomable! But I can decide my attitude: if the corn is bitten by a late frost or the rabbits break in and steal, I just plant some lettuce and move on without regrets. I had a perfect example of this just this morning. My bird feeder was empty when a hungry chickadee stopped by for a freebie. I went and filled the feeder immediately, but the disappointed chickadee had already wholeheartedly plunged into the surrounding pinion forest. He wasn’t waiting round, banking all his savings on one horse. No, he moved on to whatever else he might find without looking back. This, I think, is the key to any happy creative effort: look, see what’s there, and enjoy it. And if, as sometimes happens, you’re experiencing your own inner desert and nothing is there, be like the natural desert: horde your seeds, follow the regular recipe, use an old pattern of color and form, and wait until the favorable season.

Sr. Betty Brown is a member of the Spiritual Life Institute living at Holy Hill Hermitage in Co. Sligo, Ireland.
Art as Medicine, by Shaun McNiff, PhD
“The medicine of the artist, like that of the Shaman, arises from his or her relationship to “familiars”—the themes, methods, and materials that interact with the artist through the creative process. Art as Medicine demonstrates how the imagination heals and renews itself through this natural process.” (From the Introduction)

Art as a Way: A Return to the Spiritual Roots, by Frederick Franck
Crossroad, 1981

The Artist’s Way—A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity, by Julia Cameron
The Artist’s Way is unique in three ways: it links creativity to spirituality, creativity to personal empowerment, and creativity to learnable skills, guiding you through a variety of highly effective exercises and activities that spur imagination and capture new ideas. (Many of the quotes in this issue of Desert Call are borrowed from The Artist’s Way.)

The Art of Worship: The Vision and Craft of Contemporary Nova Scotian Artists, by Kate Langan
Nimbus Publishing, Ltd., 2001

Centering in Pottery, Poetry and the Person, by M.C. Richards
This book is deeply spiritual and speaks to the emotions as well as the senses. It is a masterpiece of the spiritual/psychological and the spiritual/physical in balance. M.C. Richards accepted an invitation to speak before a group for craftsmen on ‘the contemplations of the poet upon the craft and that talk became the inspiration for this book.

Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain, by Betty Edwards
J.P. Tarcher., Inc, 1979

Fearless Creating, by Eric Maisel, Ph.D.
“A Step-by-Step Guide to Starting and Completing Your Work of Art”
For writers, visual artists, musicians, actors and creators in any field, this book covers such topics as the stages of the creative process, anxiety and the creative process, struggle and the creative process, arriving at ideas through visualization and active aloneness.

Freeing the Creative Spirit—Drawing on the Power of Art to Tap the Magic and Wisdom Within
by Adriana Diaz
“Diaz integrates art and the social and ecological redemption of humanity. She demonstrates how learning to see and being willing to feel are preparations for justice making, thus bringing into wholeness the aesthetic and the ethical and freeing the creative spirit to bestow its gifts.” (From the foreword by M.C. Richards)

Fritz Eichenberg Works of Mercy, editor, Robert Ellsberg
Orbis books, 1992

The Gaze of Love: Meditations on Art and Spiritual Transformation, by Sister Wendy Beckett
Harper, San Francisco, 1993

Go Down to the Potter’s House, by Donagh O’Shea, O.P.
(out of print)
Piecing Together, by David Scott
Springing from ordinary events, or a picture, or an aspect of the priestly life, David Scott’s beautifully restrained poems work up the detail into a moment of significance. They are rooted in an English culture which is found not only in locality, but also in understatement, and the sideways look. But his poetry has wider reverberations, exploring spirituality and ways of praying as well as momentary glimpses of meaning caught in everyday life.
Bloodaxe Books, 2005 www.bloodaxebooks.com

Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art, by Madeleine L’Engle
Bantam Books, 1980

Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within
by Natalie Goldberg, Shambhala, 1986

The Zen of Seeing: Seeing/ Drawing as Meditation
by Frederick Franck, Vintage Books, 1973

Books for Kids!

Is This Forever, Or What! Poems and Paintings from Texas
Selected by Naomi Shihab Nye
Harper Collins

Come With Me: Poems for a Journey
Naomi Shihab Nye
Harper Collins
(Winner of 2000 Lee Bennett Hopkins poetry award.)

Magazines

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God saw all that he had made and said that it was good.

Genesis 1:31

In 1999, the late Pope John Paul II wrote a letter to artists encouraging them in their “search for new epiphanies of beauty.” He wrote of the artist as an image of God the Creator. The following are excerpts from that letter.

The artist, image of God the Creator
None can sense more deeply than you artists, ingenious creators of beauty that you are, something of the pathos with which God at the dawn of creation looked upon the work of his hands. A glimmer of that feeling has shone so often in your eyes when—like the artists of every age—captivated by the hidden power of sounds and words, colours and shapes, you have admired the work of your inspiration, sensing in it some echo of the mystery of creation with which God, the sole creator of all things, has wished in some way to associate you…. With loving regard, the divine Artist passes on to human artists a spark of his own surpassing wisdom, calling them to share in his creative power.

The special vocation of the artist
All men and women are entrusted with the task of crafting their own life: in a certain sense, they are to make of it a work of art, a masterpiece. In producing a work, artists express themselves to the point where their work becomes a unique disclosure of their own being, of what they are and of how they are what they are. The history of art, therefore, is not only a story of works produced but also a story of men and women.

The artistic vocation in the service of beauty
Those who perceive in themselves a kind of divine spark which is the artistic vocation—as poet, writer, sculptor, architect, musician, actor and so on—feel at the same time the obligation not to waste this talent but to develop it, in order to put it at the service of their neighbour and of humanity as a whole.

The artist and the common good
Within the vast cultural panorama of each nation, artists have their unique place. Obedient to their inspiration in creating works both worthwhile and beautiful, they not only enrich the cultural heritage of each nation and of all humanity, but they also render an exceptional social service in favour of the common good. Every genuine art form in its own way is a path to the inmost reality of humanity and of the world. It is therefore a wholly valid approach to the realm of faith, which gives human experience its ultimate meaning.

Towards a renewed dialogue
Even when they explore the darkest depths of the soul or the most unsettling aspects of evil, artists give voice in a way to the universal desire for redemption.

The “Beauty” that saves
My hope for all of you who are artists is that you will have an especially intense experience of creative inspiration. May the beauty which you pass on to generations still to come be such that it will stir them to wonder! Faced with the sacredness of life and of the human person, and before the marvels of the universe, wonder is the only appropriate attitude. Artists of the world, may your many different paths all lead to that infinite Ocean of beauty where wonder becomes awe, exhilaration, unspeakable joy.