

Sermon: A Beautiful Life

I grew up in a family of artists, professional artists who leaned more towards famous than towards starving. It was a lot of pressure being amongst people who took art so seriously, because it meant my desire to be creative was inconsequential, definitely not worth my time, and maybe even embarrassing - at least that's how it seemed to me for a long time.

It meant that learning how to shade properly - creating an even transition from charcoal to paper white was an important life skill, to be mastered in childhood. As was perspective - my dad is an architect so I grew up around his old school drafting table and mechanical pencils. My grandmother taught me to sew with great precision, but my cousin was simultaneously showing her own collections at New York fashion week. There are BFAs and MFAs galore. And yes, it gave me a clear eye for color and proportion, but it also had a chilling effect.

I once told a relative I was thinking of taking an intro painting class as a college elective and got summarily scolded for having the audacity to think I could take a painting course at a university. Art, after all, is serious. I still want to learn how to paint. Have I done it? No.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, it took a really long time before I became acquainted with my own creativity. Not the outward facing impress-the-art-professors-at-Thanksgiving kind of art, but the creativity born of a full spirit, creativity which exists to impress exactly no one. That took a long time. And it looks nothing like the creativity of my family.

There are no exhibits, no art reviews, no accolades, but I do feel more alive. I feel more acquainted with myself, less driven by fear and trying to play small. And this is what Elizabeth Gilbert is talking about when she refers to "creative living" in today's reading, she's "talking about living a life that is driven more strongly by curiosity than fear." (p.9)

And that, a life driven by curiosity, can take all manner of forms. No art degrees necessary.

The first time I had to write a sermon in grad school, I cried. In the cafeteria. At lunch. Because I didn't know what I was supposed to do, how to go about it - I frankly couldn't even figure out what the point was. And yet it felt like this hugely important task - I was planning to be a minister, after all. But I was being taught within a Christian frame in which preaching was about being a conduit for the word of God, interpreting Biblical texts, and bringing the good news. It was like being given a task that I held with reverence and had to complete publicly, and finding that the instructions were in a language I didn't understand. Terrifying.

Long before Elizabeth Gilbert wrote the book "Big Magic," she gave a Ted talk on creative genius. She spoke about how, in long ago times, a genius was not a thing you were, but a thing you had - it was external and separate and sometimes came to visit. It was not part of who you were, not some core trait that made you worthy or special, but rather a sort of spirit that sometimes came to deliver ideas and inspiration. She talked about how this provided a profound psychological buffer against both creative egotism and the despair of mediocrity. Because neither the masterpiece nor the lack of inspiration were entirely your fault. Sometimes the genius showed up with treasures and sometimes it did not.

This makes sense to me, this idea of creative deliveries that are not of you or your own making. The willingness to show up, to be open to inspiration, and to try to channel it through our craft - that we can control. But the genius? No luck - it belongs to itself. The practice of creative living, in my experience, is about how we move through the world, open and curious, unguarded and open to enchantment. Present enough to notice when the genius has something to tell us.

It wasn't until the pandemic hit that I really started sewing again, and then became an obsessive knitter. I had channeled all of my energy into academia and writing for years, and the pressure of pandemic life forced a sort of re-evaluation of what mattered. It helped that I was living in my grandparents'

house where my grandmother had taught me to make doll clothes nearly 30 years before. And making clothing was the most important thing I did for my spirit, my well-being, and even my capacity to be a minister. Because maintaining a sense of creativity and possibility under the isolation of pandemic life was a powerful antidote to the boring and the bleak. And that is no small thing.

I did eventually write that first sermon after much hand wringing and existential confusion. And then I wrote another. And now I've lost count. I eventually realized I didn't have to try so hard - trying hard was actually counter-productive, and that no one could teach me how to speak for myself, as myself. That task was my own personal Goliath, a thing that was more about vulnerability and courage than it was about accolades or intellectual armor.

During my internship year after graduate school, a congregant asked me how I wrote such good sermons, which gave me pause - it was sort of a paradoxical question and a self-flattering trap. But somehow I had already, thankfully, learned that trying to make anything "good" was bound to fail. Because being motivated by how people might receive your work is death to authenticity and authenticity is kind of a requirement when it comes to preaching. At least if you want people to stay awake. My response was this: "show up with your whole self and tell the truth."

Gilbert puts it this way:

"the older I get, the less impressed I have become with originality. These days, I'm far more moved by authenticity. Attempts at originality can often feel forced and precious, but authenticity has a quiet resonance that never fails to stir me. Just say what you want to say, then, and say it with all your heart" (98).

I'm the youngest of four granddaughters - two pairs of sisters - and about five years ago, the younger of my two cousins asked if I would officiate her wedding. I said yes - I was honored to be asked and glad to help. The whole thing was unremarkable to me - weddings are part of what we ministers do after all - and

yet, doing it in front of my entire extended family was...odd. It seems to be the eternal fate of the youngest child that the rest of the family will see you as a child far beyond what is reasonable. And in truth, officiating that wedding was when it seemed to finally dawn on my relatives that I was not, in fact, twelve.

I remember a family member asking, baffled and misty eyed, how I got through it without crying. And then my aunt having a somewhat awe-struck conversation with me after the cake was cut and the dancing had begun. It wasn't until that day that she understood that my work was a kind of artistry, too. That my craft took an entirely different form than hers, but it was still, most definitively, a craft, a creative endeavor. And I remember feeling like it was the first time in my life that she actually saw me, that she imagined that I, too, belonged to our shared lineage of creative spirits.

But to get to that place of being recognized, I first had to imagine that I mattered, that my voice was worth sharing. I had to gather up my courage and finally just go make something.

Gilbert talks about this struggle and I want to share another passage from her book, because I think this part is both important and theological.

“In order to live this way—free to create, free to explore—you must possess a fierce sense of personal entitlement, which I hope you will learn to cultivate.

I recognize that the word entitlement has dreadfully negative connotations, but I'd like to appropriate it here and put it to good use, because you will never be able to create anything interesting out of your life if you don't believe that you're entitled to at least try.

Creative entitlement doesn't mean behaving like a princess, or acting as though the world owes you anything whatsoever. No, creative entitlement simply means believing that you are allowed to be here, and that—merely by being here—you are allowed to have a voice and a vision of your own.

The poet David Whyte calls this sense of creative entitlement “the arrogance of belonging,” and claims that it is an absolutely vital privilege to cultivate if you wish to interact more vividly with life.

Without this arrogance of belonging, you will never be able to take any creative risks whatsoever. Without it, you will never push yourself out of the suffocating insulation of personal safety and into the frontiers of the beautiful and the unexpected.

The arrogance of belonging is not about egotism or self-absorption. In a strange way, it’s the opposite; it is a divine force that will actually take you out of yourself and allow you to engage more fully with life.

Because often what keeps you from creating living is your self-absorption (your self-doubt, your self-disgust, your self-judgment, your crushing sense of self-protection). The arrogance of belonging pulls you out of the darkest depths of self-hatred—not by saying ‘I am the greatest!’ but merely by saying ‘I am here!’”

I’d say that’s as good a definition of Universalism as any, the arrogance of belonging. Because it is intrinsic to our theological heritage that no one gets cast out, no one is unworthy; everyone is tied to the creativity of the universe, everyone belongs to this great transcendent web of life simply because you are here. And I’ll admit that it took me a long time before I found my way to the arrogance of belonging - it is a hard and vulnerable thing, especially in a world that puts all kinds of conditions on our worth.

So maybe you’re not there yet, or maybe you just need to remember what it feels like, maybe your belonging got buried somewhere along the way. Maybe this idea feels a little threatening, maybe impossible. If that is the case, I want to invite you to imagine that more is possible, that you, too, belong to this lineage of creative spirits. That creative living is more about belonging to yourself than it is about artistry.

As Gilbert says,

“this, I believe, is the central question upon which all creative living hinges: Do you have the courage to bring forth the treasures that are hidden within you?” (p.8).

Maybe it’s painting or beer brewing, dance or poetry, maybe it’s just moving through the world feeling more curious - no one can tell you what brings your spirit to life, no one can tell you how to live your most beautiful life.

But I do believe that it’s possible.

Blessed be and amen