

Art and Spirit: Waiting for the Light to Change at the Intersection of Faith, Creativity, and the World

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My grateful thanks to Mary Bennett, for your gracious invitation to be with you today.

Some time ago I went to a Unitarian web site on which there was a handy quiz. You answer twenty questions about your belief, click “Your denomination” and it tells you what you really are. If you promise not to tell my bishop, I'll tell you that when I clicked the button, my denomination came up as.... Unitarian! It's fun and a delight that we aren't caught up in the old prejudices in that you can invite me to be amongst you and that I can accept with delight as well.

And agree with you absolutely there is only one underlying reality, one real God. And that the old idea we had to insist that our God, our reality, is right and your God and your reality is wrong is patently absurd. Our perspectives and histories have created the illusion that there are competing realities. Thank you for your insistence that there is only one. That's rationality - that things are ordered.

The alternative is chaos. And art is a profound statement in opposition to pure chaos.

I'm not an artist in the usual sense. I failed out of grade 1/2 piano, once tried to draw a horse for a child who complained that she didn't want a giraffe, and was asked by a choir director every week if I still had that cold. My art is to design and nuance a particular kind of theatre in which there is audience participation in a weekly drama to experience that one deep reality. I call it liturgical worship in which every single detail is managed to deepen our experience of the one deep reality.

That's simply to say I have that one small window through which I see a tiny glimpse of what goes on in art. My perspective, then, is not much as an artist but from the experience of artists with whom I have worked and one very special artist with whom I live – Claire – who is gifted with an amazing ability to discern nuances in colours – nuances of which I am only barely aware.

What I notice first in artists is the skill. I sat once right at the front for a chamber quintet, and became fascinated with the skill of the violinist. Throughout the piece which he played in total concentration, he was rocking, glancing, swaying, all unaware, each finger placed with millimetre accuracy just on the note or ever so slightly off it to provide colour and all the time his other hand moves the bow back and forth with different pressures, on different or multiple strings with a wide variation of motion. It was an extraordinary ballet which he never noticed he was doing. Or how often have I seen an organist, her fingers flying or sedate, nodding to the page turner, adjusting the stops, playing the sharps and flats on four different keyboards, sometimes with fingers on one and a thumb on another, and a fifth keyboard played with her feet, and her fingers or foot momentarily leaving the keyboard to push or pull a stop, and return to the frenetic fingering as if nothing had happened, and all the while conducting a choir with nods of her head. Or a painter mixing colours, layering paint, creating texture, nuancing brush strokes, creating a

harmonious whole. Distinguishing between one nuanced colour and another in differences that I can hardly perceive. These are astounding skills which artists take a life-time to learn.

But it's not the skills that the artist is about. The skills fade into the background for the artist. If the organist starts to become aware of her fingers and feet she will lose her place. If the dancer doesn't get past the positioning of his body, he expresses nothing. If the poet never gets beyond, "Aren't I clever with words!" nothing will be said. The skill which so awes me, and which the artist worked so hard to develop for years and years, isn't there for its own sake. It simply opens up the possibility of enabling me to see into the depths of the creative reality in which we live. When the deep art is happening the artists is unaware of the skills which make it possible. Like the violinist who so intrigued me – unaware of the precision of his fingers, aware only of the music which he is creatively interacting with. Musicians will speak of those occasional performance experiences in which everything fades away – the discipline of being a team, the focus on each other, the particular interpretation of a piece, and they are caught up together in a moment of pure awareness.

So what is the art about? We in the audience tend to think that art is about beauty. It is, of course, but if that's all then there is a danger of art devolving into entertainment. Entertainment is about making me feel good. As choirs who sing that gorgeous 16th or 17th century polyphony will tell you - they aren't doing it for entertainment - they are expressing something profoundly deep and true for which there is no other medium - each art is the reality which unveils the deep reality while being a new reality in its own right.

Art connects to the deep reality in which we live, and opens us to something more. That more may shake us. Our social custom is so ingrained that at the end of a great symphony performance, the audience claps wildly. But I wonder if there aren't times when the best response is to simply be silent in the face of the symphony's profound awe and disturbing challenge to who I am, to who we are.

If we have heard something of the disturbing beauty that has been opened to us, then there are implications. I must conform my life to such order and imagination. That implies change. We must conform our human history to such beauty which requires social justice and that will require change. To make those changes, we must immerse ourselves in that beauty without counting the cost. The response to art may well be utter silence. Then the performers will know we really heard what they glimpsed in the wonder of the reality they have themselves first encountered.

Yet, art is not always experienced as beautiful or intended to be so. In some periods the expectations of what we should experience become oppressive and art deliberately breaks out and people react by saying it's not art – The Rite of Spring, Cubism, stream of consciousness, all seemed meaningless chaos at first. But if there is no rhythm at all it's simply chaos, if no words it's gibberish, if the canvass is blank, nothing is suggested. At the very least there is some unifying factor which the artists hopes we will experience, if only the relationship with the artist's other work. A new unification that we have never experienced before – a disturbing statement that there is more to reality than we had thought. New forms of art seem at first to be

sheer chaos. Energy, yes. Challenge yes. Utter chaos, no. It's the same No that unitarianism says to multiple gods. There must be a single reality, a vision, a cohesion around which our world, and that created by the artist, revolves. But we may be pressed into unfamiliar places by the artist in order to experience that unity even more deeply.

How strange that all these forms of art should emerge from one deep unity. Yet each form is utterly unique as is each piece of art. There's only one Tempest, only one Lear, only one Guernica, only one Bach, only one Mahler. And yet that one deep reality to which they are all responding, enables virtually unlimited variations by which we are able to create magnificent mini-realities which astound us. But they are creations - they are not simply copies of the original reality. We get to create reality, too, as artists. How strange that one deep reality, as Unitarianism insists, should give rise to infinite realities that we are honoured to create.

This planetary home of ours could last for tens of hundreds of thousands of years. During which there will be innumerable Bachs, Picassos, Shakespeares, choreographers and novelists. Time after time astounding us with their creativity. For the virtually unlimited future. Wouldn't that give us purpose!

Such art touches the sacred. Unveils the sacred. Enables us to smell the sacred. Allows us to be sacred. So if art shows us the sacred, what do we see?

We look around at this particular time in history. A time like no other before. We find ourselves standing at an intersection. Down one road we glimpse this inexpressible reality in which we live and move and have our being. That reality which fascinates us. Which artists allow us to touch and to be touched by. We call it the sacred.

Down another intersecting road we glimpse the endless new realities which art and artists create. That one deep reality providing infinite freedom, so that we become participants in deep reality, ourselves creating mini-universes in novels, painting and dance.

Down a third road we see a world that cares less and less about the reflection of reality which art makes possible. And the world seems to close off those possibilities both in the current rejection of specific faith practices and in the pressure to make art a dispensable and unnecessary luxury in school and in public places. It's as if there is an agreement that there is nothing sacred. That reality is simply a box of widgets for us to use as if it were an infinite entertainment factory intended to meet every passing whim. But what's different now is that this difficult road is a road we have made ourselves. It is we humans who prevent art and human fulfilment from taking place. That's a very difficult road to look down. How is it that we, who emerge from the creativity of the universe, are stifling that creativity and life for our own people and our own selves and for our planet?

Faith communities have an essential role as we find ourselves standing at the Intersection of Faith, Creativity, and the World. It's not just that faith communities have a sense of deep reality, we know something about that deep reality that the world desperately needs to hear.

Sometimes we call that deep reality God. But not God in the sense of a being out there that watches us and is really just an imaginary version of a really big human. That's too small to be

taken seriously. That kind of God is simply silly. Someone once told me that there is awe for him in the vastness of the universe, but that the idea of a very big imaginary human called God seemed simply silly in comparison.

What we need that tiny word to refer to is something so astonishingly disturbing that it forces us into silence. It's too bad that English has only that tiny one-syllable word. In a language of East Africa the whole experience of deep reality is incorporated into their word – “Mlungu whamphamvu zonze!” the spirit powerful over all. That elicits awe. The idea of God as an old man in the sky, is just silly. There's no awe. Faith traditions have the resources to re-present that awe to the world. Faith traditions are a form of art.

Faith communities stand, waiting at the intersection of those roads of awe, of creativity open to all humans, open to the threats posed to us, and open to our culture's opposition to the sacred. We are waiting for the red light to change so we can get on with the journey of awe and of justice.

We hope that public policy, and public attitudes will change. We long for the time when the human race is about endless exploration of the infinite possibilities of creative acts in music, drama, dance, writing, representation, and of spiritual gatherings like this. And such creativity isn't limited to what we usually call art. There is a profoundly important creativity in designing economic systems to ensure that all people have dignity, in developing and administering policies that draw on the extended power of a wide society so that oppression, violence, hunger and poverty are removed – all of which prevent people from expressing their unique creativity. It's really an offence against the one reality that such destruction continues to happen and is threatening to grow even greater. Bureaucrats, much as that word has strange connotations, are consummate artists. They study policies, and enable the money to get to where it is needed. Politics is a holy vocation, the art of creating a world in which the deep goodness of reality is embodied in fact, and in the bodies of all people. So that every single person lives with dignity. So many artists, all exercising their skills, all poised at this intersection in our world.

But so far, the light stays red. We don't see the hope of infinite creativity about to break out around us. We don't see the start of a world of justice for people, for other creatures or for the planet.

So, standing, waiting at this intersection of faith, creativity, and the real world, what are we to do?

We have two options. We can simply long for that future and passively wait. Perhaps hoping that all will be well in the end. Perhaps keeping busy. Perhaps using art as entertainment to make ourselves feel better about the fact that the light stays red and the world isn't moving toward the creativity for which it exists.

Or there is a second option.

The second option is dangerous. It's like the danger of real art. Real art pushes the artist beyond where they have been before, often into the danger of being laughed at, often being misunderstood, often into their own fear that what they are called to create is simply silly. We all know that fear, whether our art is sculpture, designing of liturgy, speaking, or policy

management. Doing something new and creative is always threatening, always to oneself, and likely to others.

Standing at this intersection immobilized by the red light, waiting for it to change, is the place where we discover whether our art is entertainment, or whether it is dangerous. Dangerous enough to create that new world for which we long and which we know is the only option.

How do we cope with our fear if we choose this latter option? Although there really is no option.

Personally, I find trying harder doesn't go far enough. We can screw up our courage to put more and more effort into calling the attention of our society, of our governments, and of our friends to the destruction that lies ahead. And so we should. But when the light stays red, and governments don't respond, and our friends listen to us patiently until we change the subject because they are friends, and our society continues with no significant change to its lifestyle, it's hard to know what to do. Just be patient, and try a little harder. Really? That's all? For ever?

But the unique contribution which faith communities like ours can bring, comes from a place of faith. And art. Faith isn't the blind belief in supposed facts - like the ancient Greek root of the word – *pistis* – refers to trust. It's about trust. Trust in the deep reality in which we find ourselves. One way of trusting that deep reality is to say it is rational, it makes sense, it is the expression of one creative faith experience, in art, of one God. One of the qualities of that deep reality is that it allows, indeed seems to enquire, us to venture into the unknown of the artistic invention. That could be in putting brush to canvass, entering a new relationship, developing a scientific hypothesis, publishing a book, the babe taking its first breath. Those are risky, dangerous moments. Yet there is not other way to be alive. Faith communities have a vocabulary to express the journey towards a deep trust that's not passivity.

One important aspect of that deep reality is how disturbing it is. Call it God, call it *Mlungu wamphanvu zonzé*, call it deep reality, if it doesn't shake us to the core, we haven't experienced it. The deep reality requires risk. We've seen that risk in the artist who breaks out of familiar tradition. We've seen that risk in the artist who take an immense act of courage to place the brush to the blank canvass. But what we may not have seen is that such risk is foundational to deep reality, to God, to *Mlungu*. It's true in evolution where risk of near extinction is the cost of new species, as it is in personal development where the slow painful risk of disturbing self-knowledge is the cost of gradual maturity. It's the risk we take in meeting a stranger, in entering a new relationship. Even in the deepest rationality, as Goedel the brilliant German mathematician proved, there's a risky inconsistency even in mathematics. No complete mathematical system is without contradiction. The exact opposite of what we thought. Physicists say the same – there are no tiny balls of indestructible matter, only vague gossamer filaments which weave and glisten and move in and out of reality and seem to us to be solid but are not. Deep down, whether in quantum physics, or in my struggle to maturity, or in the art of sculpture, risk and the unknown are an essential experience of deep reality, of God, of mathematics, of all that is real.

Strange that risk would be a quality of deep reality, of God, of *Mlungu*. If the universe so deeply requires that risk of us, in traditional art as in the art of life, there must be a sense in which deep reality also participates in risk itself. And that has important implications for us as members of

faith communities. Because faith communities have an essential contribution to make. It's the confidence that taking risks is not only necessary, it's the only way to be alive. On a planet at this time in history, being able to take risks is the most life-giving gift faith communities can give.

We aren't about religious entertainment. We are about living deeply, living infinitely, living without limitations into the virtually infinite future of this planet. Faith communities have what it takes.

We sometimes call it faith – a deep trust that the creativity in which we find ourselves immersed is not random but is real and pervades all we are and all the world is. That kind of deep trust allows us to move into the risky places where art, and the future of this planet be assured.

Sometimes we call it hope – not an attitude that all will automatically be well, but a stance, unrelated to evidence, that chaos is not the ultimate reality. That means taking risks – acting as if there were a secure future. Not in blind ignorance of the dangers, but as a deliberate stance opposing all the forces which would stifle hope.

And love. Not that we are nice people, or that we think everyone is nice, but that deep respect and longing for dignity for all are intimately related to the creativity we are part of. To stand for justice, for dignity for all, is to take a risk. It's evidently not our culture's priority. But it's the only way forward.

The world needs that faith hope and love. Because without them, the world has nothing to rely on except the illusion that an ever growing economy is the solution to all things, but which leads to social and environmental disaster.

But without the faith community's contribution, that life comes only when we take risk, the world hasn't any other option. As the light stays red, and we cannot venture into the street, we can start saying there are other ways of intersecting as faith and creativity and the world meet.

As artists of life, of music, of city planning, of sidewalk sweeping, of surgical intervention all of us can say to the world, "There is another way."

We do not have to be controlled by the red light at the intersection. We could climb up the light pole and paint it green.

That would take courage, skill, and artistic inspiration. We can say to the economists – there are other ways to uphold community which will bring better life for all. We can say to our inner demons, you may be able to be my friend instead of my enemy. We can say to those who live without hope, I'll stand beside you in your discouragement because I know it too, and thereby provide both of us with courage. We can say to the politicians that leading a society is a sacred calling – engage the risk of leading us beyond what is popular and safe – lead us to that life-assuring risky sacredness. That's being like God, like deep reality. That's to be an artist.

We can venture into the darkness that the red light symbolizes, and claim the deep creativity that the universe provides us. And if it's true that risk and courage is built into the deepest reality, then

we are consistent with God, with reality, with rationality, when we take such risks. And if we are consistent with deep reality, we are alive indeed.

Our faith traditions and their handmaid, the arts, are utterly essential to the modern world. We hear that a lot because we like the arts. We like faith. Or we wouldn't be here. But there's more to that than simply meeting our own preferences. Faith and the arts are ways of articulating the reality in which we live. To ignore that reality is to become insane. To cooperate with reality is to be really alive.

You and I are not simply waiting for the light to change. We are the light. We shine in the darkness when in our art and our faith we insist against all opposition that there is deep order and energy, and not the desperation of the devil take the hinder-most or the laziness of saying that a rising economy raises all boats. That's lazy art. That's lazy faith. True art, true faith is far more risky, far more alive, and far more hopeful than that. And far more representative of the creative artistic process of which all reality is a part.

The faith community is the light, too. It's not about convincing ourselves of unprovable beliefs. It's about the weekly enacted trust that there is something in deep reality calling us to more. Not simply to mindless competition of military might or economic control, but the more that consists of releasing the artistic potential in very single person and every single creature on the planet. That's a green light that the world so desperately needs.

The world is reluctant to cross this street because there is so much to risk. But we faith artists, we who live life deeply, know that risk is the only way to be alive.

So, at this intersection of faith, creativity and the world, let your green light shine so that the world can see a better way forward. If that sounds risky it is. If that sounds alive it is.

May you be deeply blessed as those truths shine through you and you make it possible for the world to navigate today's intersection of creativity, faith and the world.