

# CREATIVITY, DISCIPLINE AND LEARNING

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**A**N INDIVIDUAL's spirituality comprises his or her total relationship to God, self, and others; it must integrate all of a person's powers and gifts.

Spiritual writers of every age, aware that distortions block freedom and growth in the life of the Spirit, have tried to hold the key elements of the spiritual life in harmony, without losing sight of any one aspect. Yet every age, in its emphasis on certain dimensions of spirituality, undervalues others. From this perspective, both the widespread search for experiences of transcendence which followed discussions of the death of God in the 'sixties, and the rapid growth of charismatic communities, can be seen as reactions against a spirituality which many felt focused on conceptual notions to the exclusion of contact with the living God. The same spirituality was also criticized for its numerous restrictions and prescriptions, which at times hampered rather than freed the creativity of the Spirit. Stemming partly from renewed interest in mysticism and eastern forms of prayer, there is presently a greater stress on simplicity and receptivity. These current emphases have enriched contemporary spirituality in numerous ways.

Yet our present age, in its quest for the immediate experience of God and its emphasis on the quieter forms of prayer may, in turn, be in danger of losing sight of the essential role which both discipline and learning have in the life of the Spirit. When this happens, as in some contemporary religious searching, the direct experience of God becomes an end in itself, isolated from one's total existence, and anticipation of such an experience is marked by a passivity which precludes any responsibility for human effort. The present article, therefore, underlines the important place which discipline and learning will always hold in the spiritual life.

The importance of discipline and learning in the religious quest

is analogous to the important role they play in developing artistic talent or in artistic expression. A paradox of work and waiting is present in both artistic and spiritual experience: although both kinds of creativity are in one sense gifts, each also involves a human task. Because of this parallel, our study will employ the artistic life as an analogy for illuminating the role of discipline and learning in the spiritual life. The role of discipline in artistic and religious experience will be examined first. Then the place of learning in the life of the artist and in the spiritual life will be considered.

#### DISCIPLINE IN ART AND SPIRITUALITY

It is discipline which frees the spirit. Form provides the limitation which enables the artist's creative inspiration to find expression and therefore existence; so also a kind of limitation opens the way to certain spiritual experiences. A life-giving tension between freedom and discipline is therefore a necessary element in both art and spirituality.

##### *Form and vision in art*

The artist discovers and shapes for us the forms of things which embody his or her inner vision. Only the life or vision which is adequately embodied in sensuous materials has external form. As Theseus says in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*:

And, as imagination bodies forth  
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen  
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing  
A local habitation and a name (v, i).

Artistic creativity exists under certain reservations and limitations which set it free. The philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead, has called creativity the principle of novelty; but he points out that limitation is the key to its existence. The artist must produce the new, within the limitations imposed by material symbols and conditions:

Creativity is the happy juncture of need with the imaginative capacity to give shape to the need; and if this imaginative capacity is to be actualized in a human individual, it has to be able to handle the artistic or other means, the material of imagination, with ease and facility. . . .<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Albert Hofstadter, 'On the Dialectical Phenomenology of Creativity', in *Essays in Creativity*, ed. Stanley Rosner and Lawrence Edwin Abt (New York, 1974), p 140.

Form is a necessary condition for the creative process, since it is the means by which the artist communicates a vision, the boundary which constitutes the artist's style.

Art is a product of both inspiration and skill, of creative gift and dedicated concentration. The sudden flashes of discovery which occur in the process of creation are usually preceded by intense conscious wrestling with problems. Wordsworth remarked that no valuable poems were produced except by one who had 'thought long and deeply'. Picasso's sketches for 'Guernica', which show how he experimented with variations of meaning by trying different relations among the characters, are one example of the process of conscious and unconscious observing, sifting and shaping involved in creation.<sup>2</sup> Inherent in the creative process is also the discipline of detachment or renunciation. Teilhard de Chardin sees this experience of giving birth to the new as not so different from the road of the cross:

To create, or organize, material energy, or truth, or beauty, brings with it an inner torment which prevents those who face its hazards from sinking into the quiet and closed-in life wherein grows the vice of self-regard and attachment (in the technical sense). An honest workman not only surrenders his calm and peace once and for all, but must learn continually to jettison the form which his labour or art or thought first took, and go in search of new forms.<sup>3</sup>

As the novelist Elie Wiesel commented while reflecting on the process of producing his novels: even after an artist has completed a work, the characters and situations and dialogue not chosen continue to beckon.<sup>4</sup>

The abilities and attentiveness which undergird creative expression result from a lifelong process as a function of everything the person has learned. They involve the struggle to master materials and skills, the media for expressing oneself creatively:

It is the struggle of discipline, on the other side of which lies freedom to act in a creative way. It is the struggle of the musician to master the initial five-finger exercises, the calligrapher to get the basic forms.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See Rudolf Arnheim, *Picasso's Guernica. The Genesis of a Painting* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962).

<sup>3</sup> *The Divine Milieu* (New York, 1968), p 71.

<sup>4</sup> 'An Evening with Elie Wiesel', Public Lecture (Willamette University, Salem, Oregon, 1976).

<sup>5</sup> Jay C. Rochell, 'A Meditation on Contemplation and Creativity', in *The NICM Journal* (Spring 1977), p 59.

This process is illustrated in the development of the english poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins. Hopkins's ability to communicate through words the essence and individuality of such forms in nature as 'wiry and white-fiery and whirlwind-swivelled snow', and 'rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim', flows from his early apprenticeship in the world of language and of nature. Hopkins's earliest diaries already evidence his careful study of the meaning and sounds of words and theories on the origin of languages, as well as his sensitive observations of natural phenomena. Both the mastery and the use of such skills and sensitivities require that discipline which frees the artist's vision, enabling it to find expression.

*Asceticism and grace in the spiritual life*

If we turn our attention from artistic creativity to the spiritual life, we find a similar relationship between freedom and discipline: the disciplines of the spiritual life are meant to free one for the action of God in one's life. This is the constant testimony of the classic writers of western spirituality, and is born out by current studies in spirituality. Reflection on the relationship between freedom and discipline in the spiritual life frequently centres on the role of asceticism or human effort in relation to the grace or gift of God in one's life.

It is St Paul's comparison of the christian life to an athlete's training which gives us the term 'asceticism', from the greek term for athletic exercise:

Do you not know that those who run in the stadium all run the race, though only one carries off the prize? Run, then, to win. But every athlete exercises restraint in all things; they do it to win a wreath that fades, but we for an unfading one (1 Cor 9, 24-27).

Paul presents this notion as a part of his reflections on christian liberation, divine sonship in the Spirit. Such freedom implies a subjection which means that we are truly given up to the Spirit in love.

From Paul's time to the present, spiritual writers have included in their works recommendations for educating, through various kinds of training and discipline, the contemplative powers which open one to the creativity of God. The spanish soldier who saw the contemplative life existing in the midst of action and the city, Ignatius of Loyola, termed such preparation 'spiritual exercises':

For just as taking a walk, journeying on foot, and running are bodily exercises, so we call spiritual exercises every way of preparing and disposing the soul to rid itself of all inordinate attachments, and, after their removal, of seeking and finding the will of God in the disposition of our life for the salvation of our soul.<sup>6</sup>

Just as Paul's asceticism is founded on a notion of divine love discovered in faith, so Ignatius's spiritual exercises are rooted in the contemplation of divine love. It is this notion of love of God, self, and others which provides the context and balancing lever in notions of asceticism and discipline in the spiritual life. In her discussion of *The Interior Castle*, St Teresa of Avila will treat of self-knowledge, detachment, and suffering; but her description of the First Mansion opens with reflections on the beauty and dignity of our souls, and closes with a statement on the importance of mutual love. Failure to situate the notions of discipline and asceticism in the context of love has led to some of its past dangers and distortions; and this context of love is essential if discipline is to be a means to freedom.

Though contemporary spirituality has rejected approaches to discipline and asceticism which imply a rejection of the body or the good of creation, it has retained the conviction that a certain silence and discipline are necessary to maintain one's identity and spiritual freedom. Liberation from certain kinds of intellectual, emotional, and spiritual self-interest and preoccupation makes it possible for the Spirit to work freely in one. Abhishiktananda, drawing on the spiritual wisdom of both East and West, has expressed this point by saying that

the real *yogi* is one who has recovered his essential freedom, above all with regard to his own inner world of thoughts and desires. Nothing in him henceforth limits his responsiveness to the Spirit.<sup>7</sup>

As Mahatma Gandhi stressed, it is 'non-attachment' which enables one to act from love rather than anger, hatred or ambition.

Just as form frees artistic creativity, so do certain limitations open one to the Spirit. Since human powers have an innate tendency to dispersion or diffusion, it is necessary to centre one's energies, to form a contemplative body and mind. This relationship between freedom and discipline can be seen in the life of St John of the Cross, where the powers of imagination and desire are filtered through an inner discipline without losing the radicalism and strength of their quest. This renunciation of craving and attachment, this liberation from

<sup>6</sup> Exx 1.

<sup>7</sup> *Prayer* (Delhi, 1967), p 44.

anxieties and concerns, is often the work of God preparing a person for union. What begins as a human effort becomes the work of God's love creating the mystical nothingness and darkness which open the way to God's creative action. The life of the twentieth-century french mystic and intellectual, Simone Weil, illustrates this paradox. Her spiritual life was built around attention, an active waiting for God. Her initial mystical experience of Christ comes to her, however, as a complete surprise and gift from God. Later it is while praying the fixed formula of the Our Father that she experiences the mystical union of love with God.

Concern with the question, 'How does one pray?' has led to the interest western spirituality has shown in the eastern pattern of relating discipline and creativity. In this pattern, exercises for the control of the mind, breathing and body, release vital energy and open deeper levels of the psyche. Buddhist *gyo* or spiritual training leads one to enlightenment.<sup>8</sup> In these disciplines, as in artistic creation, it is the setting of certain boundaries which allows creative depths to come to expression. The concentration on a single object which brings the mind into a state of one-pointedness frees one's deeper powers of love and awareness. The testimony of the great mystics is that their experience is also a kind of one-pointedness. The goal of the disciplines which silence their senses and withdraw their attention from their surroundings and attachments prepares for union with God in the deepest levels of the self: 'The higher part of the contemplative life takes place altogether in this darkness and in the cloud of unknowing with a love striving blindly beholding the naked being only of God himself'.<sup>9</sup>

One final point which is raised by a discussion of freedom and discipline is the question of passivity and activity in artistic and spiritual creativity. Some accounts of creativity place greater stress on the artist as one receptive to the gift of the Muse, the mystic as one who passively experiences the presence of God. However, even with such an emphasis, it is the paradox or dialectic of gift and human labour which best depicts the actual relationship between creativity and discipline in both artistic and religious experience. William Johnston has summarized this paradox as it applies to the contemplative life:

<sup>8</sup> See William Johnston, *The Inner Eye of Love: Mysticism and Religion* (San Francisco, 1978), pp 179ff.

<sup>9</sup> *The Cloud of Unknowing*, trans. Ira Progoff (New York, 1957), p 81.

And so in East and West we find the same tension. On the one hand, some training or education is necessary; on the other hand, all depends on grace. On the one hand, we must strive; on the other hand, our striving is itself a gift. On the one hand, asceticism is necessary; on the other hand, it is spiritually dangerous. In practice the problem has been solved by a principle which states that we strive with our human abilities as though all depended on ourselves, and yet we must wait for the gift as though all depended on God.<sup>10</sup>

Something of this same tension and paradox is also involved in the relationship between creativity and learning or knowledge in both art and spirituality.

#### THE ROLE OF LEARNING IN ARTISTIC AND SPIRITUAL CREATIVITY

Artistic and spiritual creativity are frequently contrasted with scientific or theoretical knowledge as being different modes of awareness or alternate approaches to reality. Artistic creativity relies on perception and intuition as well as reason; it involves unconscious and preconscious levels of the person as well as the conscious. In the spiritual life God is sometimes found in the darkness of unknowing. This legitimate focus on other levels of awareness has sometimes been extended to include an anti-intellectual or anti-rational emphasis in considerations of creativity. It is, therefore, important to stress that the integrity of the artist or religious person is based on the situating of creativity within the poles of previous learning and subsequent reflection. Both artistic and spiritual creativity are closely related to knowledge, even when this becomes a different mode of knowing from that found in one's other experiences.

#### *The artist and learning*

In 1957, the russian-born painter Ben Shahn spent a term as a professor at Harvard University. During that time he delivered a series of lectures on the creative process in art and the role of a university in the preparation of an artist. Shahn was asked what kind of education he would recommend for someone hoping to become an artist. As part of his reply he tells aspiring artists to learn all that they can, not just about art, but about mathematics, logic, history, all disciplines. He tells them to read widely: Dante, Sophocles, the Bible, Hume. For Shahn is convinced that 'painting is able to contain whatever one thinks and all that he is'.<sup>11</sup> He rejects the notion

<sup>10</sup> *The Inner Eye of Love*, pp 182-83.

<sup>11</sup> *The Shape of Content* (New York, 1957), p 59.

of the artist as a mad genius who creates only in a moment of frenzied inspiration.

Depth psychology has stressed the importance in creativity of unconscious processes, of impulses from below the level of awareness. Current discussions of creativity point out, however, that it is 'endangered whenever there is a preponderance of any one of the three powers, the unconscious, the preconscious, or the conscious'.<sup>12</sup> All layers and capacities of the self are involved in true creativity.

In order to develop one's own unique style, an artist must be immersed in learning. A sculptor, for example, must be thoroughly involved with shapes, forms, and spaces. As the poet Rilke has said:

For the sake of a single verse, one must see many cities, men and things, one must know the animals, one must feel how the birds fly and know the gesture with which the little flowers open in the morning.<sup>13</sup>

Since artistic creativity is both an intellectual and an emotional experience, it is enhanced by an expanded range of knowledge and experience. Educational experience has power to assist in creating new realities, because it is able to develop in the artist certain capacities:

first, of perceptiveness, a recognition of values, a certain kind of culture; second, a capacity for the vast accumulation of knowledge; and third, a capacity to integrate all this material into creative acts and images.<sup>14</sup>

Learning enriches the artist's imagery. It provides background, perspective and continuity for his or her work and opens it to new directions.

The knowledge with which the artist creates is often an inexact, intuitive and perceptive kind of knowledge. It is knowledge through symbols and images. In fact, learning is meant to develop in the artist a symbolic attitude, whereby an artist is enabled to

think deeply *through* what he observes so sensitively; and his observation consists in seeing the appearances of our world as embodiments of the significant facts and forces of existence.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Harry Slochower, 'Psychoanalysis and Creativity', in *Essays in Creativity*, p 162.

<sup>13</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, trans. M. D. Herter Norton (New York, 1958), p 26.

<sup>14</sup> *The Shape of Content*, p 139.

<sup>15</sup> *Picasso's Guernica*, p 9. Emphasis in original.



Intellectual abstractions are transformed into visual qualities; the artist aims at visual communication. Such concrete perceiving, done primarily in images, is the mode of creative thinking, a kind of 'visual thinking'.<sup>16</sup> It is a contemplative form of knowledge. In referring to the way in which this symbolic attitude enables the artist to know the individual and the singular in such a way that they open us to the depth and the universal in life, Nathan Scott speaks of the power of the poet to 'invite the mind to gaze, with radical amazement, into the depth of the human mystery'.<sup>17</sup> It is a steady contemplation of the concrete individual which opens the artist to its universal significance. Such contemplation also links the kind of knowing present in both artistic and spiritual creativity.

### *Spirituality and learning*

Even as artistic creativity, which is tied to the symbolic attitude, is nurtured in a life of learning, so spiritual creativity, whose goal is also a contemplative vision of life, must be rooted in such learning. This point is made quite succinctly by a couple who understood well the relationship between christian spirituality and the intellectual life. In their short statement on *Prayer and Intelligence* which was published in the 'forties, Jacques and Raissa Maritain explain that knowledge is able to shorten the spiritual journey and save one from a number of errors, illusions, and blind alleys. The spiritual journey also begins with such knowledge. Evidence for the importance of learning in the spiritual life is found in all of the classic spiritual writers. St John of the Cross insists that a beginner must meditate on spiritual truths. Meditation on the life of Christ is the ordinary means of preparing oneself for mystical prayer. St Teresa of Avila read *The Letters of St Jerome*, *The Morals of St Gregory the Great*, and *The Confessions of St Augustine*. She found other sources of learning in the theologians Pedro Ibáñez and Domingo Báñez, and in Francis Borgia and John of the Cross. With regard to spiritual direction, St Teresa once remarked that she would rather have a learned than a holy spiritual director. But it is the Scriptures which remain the most important source of learning in christian spirituality; they are the foundation of spiritual teaching and experience. The mystics read and reread the Bible, especially the gospels, which are the most important inspiration in the journey toward becoming 'another Christ'.

<sup>16</sup> See *Picasso's Guernica*, p 10.

<sup>17</sup> 'Poetry and Prayer', in *Thought*, 51 (Spring 1966), p 65.

Openness to the creativity of the Spirit is also a constant interplay of experience and doctrine, of theoretical and practical learning with concrete experience. Even the dark mystical knowledge of God, which is beyond concepts and is primarily an experiential process, depends upon the existence of concepts.

Apophatic theology involves both interpretation and criticism, conceptualization and theological argument. But all of these are descriptive or explanatory of the process in which one is engaged, a process in which one must be engaged in order to grasp its interpretation in any depth.<sup>18</sup>

As was the case with learning and artistic creativity, such conceptualization provides background, perspective and new directions for one's life in the Spirit. The objectification of experience which results from such an effort to conceptualize, express, and frame one's experience in words, is also one of the tasks of spiritual direction. The result of such objectifying is that one will be able to understand and appropriate one's own experience, and as a result discern the movements and guidance of God in it.

Just as artistic creativity uses as well as moves beyond certain modes of knowledge without denying their validity, so too does spiritual creativity open one to an experience which transcends reason, moving beyond images and concepts. This knowledge through love, this 'unknowing', is a contemplative love by which one in faith 'reaches God more by not understanding than by understanding'.<sup>19</sup> As reality in its depth and absoluteness is revealed to the artist in visionary or symbolic thinking, so God is disclosed to the mystic as the infinite Depth or Mystery.

This dark disclosure of God — dark because it gradually introduces a surrender to the unconcealment of mystery — is not anti-intellectual or anti-human. . . . It is rather that clear knowledge gives way before the incomprehensible, that there is a *docta ignorantia*, a recognition that whatever is grasped is not the ultimate mystery by which one's own self is grasped.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Michael J. Buckley, S.J., 'Atheism and Contemplation', in *Theological Studies*, 40 (December 1979), p 690).

<sup>19</sup> John of the Cross, *The Living Flame of Love*, in *The Collected Works of John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, D.C., 1964), 3, no 48, p 628.

<sup>20</sup> 'Atheism and Contemplation', p 696.

Nor is such an experience anti-dogmatic. The concepts of faith are the paths leading to such an experience and the safeguards of its incomprehensibility and authenticity.

These reflections on artistic and spiritual experience have revealed the importance of discipline and learning to creativity. Rather than extinguishing creativity, discipline and learning enable its promise to come to fulfilment. The lifelong discipline involved in mastering skills and tools is essential to an artist's freedom to express his or her vision. In an analogous way, the disciplines of the spiritual life free one for the experience of God. Learning enriches and expands artistic creativity, preparing the artist to contemplate the world. In a similar way, the spiritual journey, which also reaches toward a contemplative kind of knowing, must be rooted in a life of learning, which guides, protects, and expands it. Because of the central role which discipline and learning have in maintaining integrity and wholeness in the spiritual life, it is essential that our age retain, along with its emphasis on other dimensions of spirituality, a balanced appreciation of this relationship of discipline and learning to creativity.