

A sermon delivered by Denny Griffith, president of Columbus College of Art and Design, on June 7, 2009, Trinity Sunday, at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio.

“Faith and Art”

Thanks for the invitation to be here today.

In case you all haven't discovered it, you have a very creative and one might say cleverly subversive pastor here. Tim called me a month or two ago and asked that since the Arts Festival would be going on, might I be willing to stop by and “make a few comments”? I said I'd be happy to. Then it began to dawn on me that “a few comments” might be a slightly more formal exercise when he asked if I'd care to have him look up a few relevant verses of scripture. I called back to ask: You mean a SERMON? That's what he had in mind, indeed. Normally on a Sunday you can find me in the Zoroastrian Fire Temple on the south side of Columbus, waving torches, or doing a goat dance around the sacrificial pit. So this is quite a pleasant and civil alternative.

I am, all jokes aside, quite honored to be with you today! Speaking of jokes, I have something for you:

(From Plato and a Platypus Walk into a Bar, Pages 98–99 and 104–105)

Philosophers agreed long ago that it is fruitless for believers and atheists to argue with each other. This is because they interpret everything differently. In order to argue, there must be some common ground, so that one of the participants can say, “Aha! If you concede x, then you must also concede y!”

Atheists and believers never find an x they can agree upon. The argument can never begin because each sees everything from his own point of view. That's a little abstract, but this story brings it down to earth – in fact, right into the neighborhood.

A little old Christian lady comes out onto her front porch every morning and shouts, "Praise the Lord!" And every morning the atheist next door yells back, "There is no God!" This goes on for weeks. "Praise the Lord!" yells the lady. "There is no Gd!" responds the neighbor.

As time goes by, the lady runs into financial difficulties and has trouble buying food. She goes onto the porch and asks God for help with groceries, then says, "Praise the Lord!" The next morning when she goes out onto the porch, there are the groceries she asked for. Of course, she shouts, "Praise the Lord!" The atheist jumps out from behind a bush and says, "Ha! I bought those groceries. There is no God!" The lady looks at him and smiles. She shouts, "Praise the Lord! Not only did you provide for me, Lord, you made Satan pay for the groceries!"

In theology, schisms have opened over such pressing issues as, "Does the Spirit proceed from the Father or from the Father and the Son?" The layperson clearly needs a simple guide to theological differences and, thank God, the comedians are always willing to oblige. The key to determining the religious persuasion of a person, it turns out, is whom he does or does not recognize:

Jews don't recognize Jesus.

Protestants don't recognize the pope.

Baptists don't recognize each other in the liquor store.

My first idea about what to talk about today was to compare what we cultivate at CCAD – creativity – with what you cultivate here – spirituality.

Creativity seems to be nurtured in an environment combining liberal doses of freedom with responsibility and craftsmanship. It always seemed to me that some religions are overly bound up in rules or, worse yet, think they're the only ones with the path to salvation. Some religious rules proscribe behaviors, or set forth "laws" that can be quite intolerant. Or just weird. For example, Deuteronomy 23 always bothered me. It reads: "He that is wounded in the stones, or hath his privy member cut off, shall not enter into the congregation of the Lord." I feel the Lord oughta take a guy whether his stones or

privity member are intact or not. I mean, what does that have to do with his soul?

But I'm not here to try to sort that out. I'm here for Tim and for the members of this splendid congregation. I've always admired your embrace of inclusion and tolerance, your celebration of differences, and your pursuit of social justice. So the more I thought about the invitation, I knew this'd be fun! And since it's about creativity, perhaps I can bend a rule or two along the way! I suspect I already have.

I have another joke for you that wraps up some of what I just referred to regarding salvation:

(From Plato and a Platypus Walk into a Bar, Pages 106–107)

Many denominations have in common that only their own theology is the fast track to the divine.

A man arrives at the gates of heaven. St. Peter asks, "Religion?" The man says, "Methodist." St. Peter looks down his list, and says, "Go to room twenty-eight, but be very quiet as you pass room eight."

Another man arrives at the gates of heaven. "Religion?" "Baptist." "Go to room eighteen, but be very quiet as you pass room eight."

A third man arrives at the gates. "Religion?" "Jewish." "Go to room eleven, but be very quiet as you pass room eight."

The man says, "I can understand there being different rooms for different religions, but why must I be quiet when I pass room eight?" St. Peter says, "The Jehovah's Witnesses are in room eight, and they think they're the only ones here."

So, to get ready for this I did some research over at the CCAD library and found some great stuff. For one thing, there was a catalogue from an exhibition organized by the artist John Baldessari, and Meg Cranston, an artist and writer who teaches at our sister

institution, the Otis College of Art in L.A. The catalogue was for a show called *100 Artists See God*.

In its essay, one of the contributing writers, Thomas McEvilley notes that “for thousands of years art was an appendage of religion. It was used as a magical technique to facilitate access to the gods.”

In early times, the gods were imagined to literally reside in the icons on the altar or in the temple site. By addressing one’s petition to the icon one was communicating directly with the deity. To damage or destroy it as was done to the statues of Hermes in Athens during the Peloponnesian War was to endanger the entire community by provoking the anger and daring the revenge of the god within it. Man! Don’t you just love symbolism! Now THERE’s something that art and religion share!

As Tim pointed out to me, this is Trinity Sunday – the first Sunday after Pentecost. The Holy Trinity can be symbolized by an equilateral triangle, whose three sides are equal. We know in our Christian teaching that this trinity is God the Father, Christ his son, and the Holy Spirit. Against the foil of that notion we can set for comparison a trinity that defines creativity: at one corner is technical skill – which you could also call craftsmanship or artistic ability; at the second corner is individuality, or the artist’s distinctive “voice” or point-of-view; at the third and last is criticality, or the ability to assess and synthesize information to create something new.

In recent times, which to keep things simple I’ll call the last couple of centuries, much of Western art has been secular but there has been a religious aura that still clings to it. After all, the church has been one of the most profoundly powerful arts patrons through much of recorded history. Great works of architecture serve God or gods from the Parthenon to St Peter’s Basilica and from the ancient dolmen monuments like Stonehenge to Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, first a cathedral, and now a mosque.

We know also that from Giotto to Michelangelo and well beyond, the visual arts worked in service to sacred messaging from the pulpit for a congregation that might or might not be literate. The stories told through paintings and sculpture have long served to turn our

thoughts to the divine. Just as this soaring space with its wonderful stained glass direct our gaze upward, whicheven the NASA astronauts who have visited will tell us is where heaven is located.

In the early 20th century, the British critic Clive Bell asserted that religion was the natural ally of art, and science was its natural enemy. I want to come back to this, because I believe the notion of a dichotomy still reverberates in our education system to this day, and I have an alternative to offer. Still, the notion that art could be about “universals” that were anciently defined as the thoughts of the mind of God is embedded in much of what we expect from the arts.

In the mid-20th century, there was a very powerful writer and art critic named Clement Greenberg. His influence was particularly strong around the late 1940s and 1950s during the rise of abstract expressionism. This would be the work of the likes of Franz Kline, Jackson Pollack, Willem deKooning and Mark Rothko.

This new work was inherently non-figurative, and pure paint applied in wild, raw and expressive ways. Greenberg insisted you can't figure such art out; you can only come to terms with it through pure intuition, the way a mystic apprehends the beyond. Greenberg's rival Harold Rosenberg was more direct when he said that abstract expressionism was essentially a theological movement. I can tell you from personal experience that the very first true “art epiphany” I had as a student was sitting before a Mark Rothko canvas. These artists were truly trying to see into God's mind, which accounts for the sense of reverential awe one can experience before their canvasses.

In another book I came across in our library called *The Missing Peace: Artists and the Dalai Lama*, the artist Noa Jones writes, and I agree, that “creativity is the most primal instinct of humankind; without it we could not exist.” Creation has always been the mythic province of the likes of Zeus, Shiva and the biblical God, and as she goes on to note: “On particularly productive days when the juices are flowing, creativity can make us humans feel like we exist on their level”.

Julia Cameron, regarding her widely-read book *The Artist's Way*, a book on creativity and spiritually, says, “Creativity is a spiritual

force. The force that drives the green fuse through the flower, as Dylan Thomas defined his idea of the life force, is the same urge that drives us toward creation. There is a central will to create that is part of our human heritage and potential. Because creation is always an act of faith, and faith is a spiritual issue, so is creativity. As we strive for our highest selves, our spiritual selves, we cannot help but be more aware, more proactive, and more creative.”

It’s easy to see why the ecstasy of procreation and artistic creation are often compared to the ecstasy of a heightened religious experience. And I can attest that coming out of the studio after an intense creative session, there is a sense of bliss when the creative spirit is being satisfied. *The Artist’s Way* is all about cultivating and sharpening the space shared by artistic and spiritual bliss.

Even if we’re not artists we’re constantly creating. Office managers, chefs, parents and construction workers are pressed to think creatively. God knows bankers and hedge-fund managers have been creative of late; maybe too much so!

Still, we tend to look to artists, writers, designers, choreographers, architects and composers to push the outer limits of our understanding. While we all see the world through our own life-lens, artists and designers share theirs in a way that alters our view – as Noa Jones notes: “Sharpening, focusing, diffusing, coloring, and in many ways enhancing our own experience.”

Sometimes you hear this called “life imitating art.” It’s the moment of recognition when some seminal creative work that you recall crops up in front of you in the context of your daily life. Like recognizing that the starkly-lit nighttime street corner looks familiar because it’s a real-life Edward Hopper painting.

Another thing that creativity and spirituality share is they’re somehow emblematic of the highest state humans can attain. I often say, and always feel, that the arts embody the pursuit of human excellence. In nearly an identical sense to the way that athletics do or sacred acts do.

Recently I read a sublime book called *Serpent Box*, written by Vincent Carrella. It's an incredibly powerful and beautifully-composed story about a 10-year old boy, Jacob, from a family in Leatherwood, Tenn., whose father is an evangelist. They make their way through the South handling deadly serpents and drinking lye in front of large gatherings of the faithful. Jacob's father believes he is a prophet, and the story that is told is as magical, shocking and poignant a thing as I've read in years.

The economy and elegance of the author's use of language is amazing and sure-handed. In fact, the book was so rich and distinctively-written that I think it truly embodies the nexus of creativity and spirituality. I was and am so moved, that I thought I would share something with you now inspired by the book (He pulls out a rubber snake).

So to close this out, I actually have a little sermonizing I'd like to do. I mentioned earlier the bit about religion being the natural ally of art, and science being the enemy. While that seems like a quaint idea from a century ago, I think it is being played out in a really dangerous way right now. To explain, I need to first tell you about Daniel Pink.

Dan Pink is originally from Bexley. He lives in D.C. and is a writer. Back in 2004 he caught my attention with an article published in the Harvard Business Review entitled "The MFA is the New MBA" – a treatise on how creativity is now more sought-after in business than nearly any other skill. Let's face it, even in a down market, innovation is the way to get ahead.

He recently published a book called *A Whole New Mind*, which is about the fact that we need both left-brain and right-brain thinking to be successful at innovation. His book compellingly reinforces the fact that true inspiration – flashes of genius if you will – require both linear, analytical thinking (that is, left-brained thinking) and intuitive, emotive, empathetic reasoning (right-brained) to happen.

Pink contends that our society tends to value lawyers, accountants, and computer programmers and that business worldwide is "left-brain dominant." He contends that the future belongs to a different kind of person with a different kind of mind:

designers, inventors, teachers, storytellers, creative and empathetic right-brain thinkers whose abilities mark the fault line between who gets ahead and who doesn't. His book draws on research from around the advanced world and underscores the need for a balanced brain to both work successfully and live happily.

Meanwhile, I've been watching with true dismay as everyone jumps on the K-12 STEM bandwagon. You know: Science, technology, engineering and math. Do we need all these and do we need to rev them up? You bet! But all, and I mean all, the resources available to the education system K-16, including stimulus funding is being directed to STEM, which is inherently and entirely left-brained. Without the arts and humanities – writing, literature, social studies, cultural anthropology, design, art, theater and other relevant pursuits, I guarantee that we will educate a generation lacking creativity, empathy and essential human history and understanding.

STEM is supposed to be the ticket out of our education miasma and the magic bullet for business efficacy. The governor is 100% behind this and is ensuring that what resources that can be mustered in these most difficult of times are reserved for the STEM initiative. Since he and all the rest of us really need for the economy to pick up steam, I suggest we need to insert the arts and humanities smack in the middle of the agenda in order to ensure that we have half a chance of achieving a generation with healthy and creative “whole new minds,” as Dan Pink says. Take the “A” from arts and humanities, insert it into STEM and you get STEAM. There's an acronym I can support.

It's been a pleasure to be with you today. Thanks for bearing with me, snakes and jokes notwithstanding.

