

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the Upper Valley  
The Rev. Patience Stoddard, D. Min and Sparrow Alden, CRE

*On  
Creativity  
and  
Resilience*

*Resilience in the face of constant change demands constant creativity.*

*Thomas Homer-Dixon*

*Imagination is Everything. It is a preview of life's coming attractions.*

*Albert Einstein*

*Don't be satisfied with stories, how things have gone with others.*

*Unfold your own myth.*

*Rumi*

*Conditions for creativity are to be puzzled; to concentrate; to accept  
conflict and tension; to be born every day; to feel a sense of self.*

*Erich Fromm*

*A service with Claudia Kern and Leah Goat*

## **Chalice lighting**

We light this chalice in mid-winter  
to celebrate what each of us brings  
to this fellowship of kindred spirits.

Leah: I start our meditative prelude with the words of that great sage, actor Alan Alda:

*The creative is the place where no one else has ever been. You have to leave the city of your comfort and go into the wilderness of your intuition. What you'll discover will be wonderful. What you'll discover is yourself.*

## **Prelude (Linda Hoover)**

Leah: There is so much creativity in this room. You have made tree houses and dollhouses and forts; you make beautiful meals; you choose what you'll wear each day; you design quilts; you diagnose illness; you make art; you choose plants for your gardens; you solve computing and accounting conundrums; you raise children; you create milkweed pod angels for our church windows; you assemble the things that will make your home functional, comfortable, and uniquely yours; you have good conversations; you knit and sew beautiful things; you write poems and prose and journals (and sometimes homilies). You all know the involvement and joy of meeting a creative challenge.

Kurt Vonnegut believed that *practicing an art, no matter how well or badly, is a way to make your soul grow. Sing in the shower. Dance to the radio. Tell stories . . . (He even encouraged children to draw faces in their mashed potatoes.) Do it as well as you possibly can. You will get an enormous reward. You will have created something.*

Thank you all for giving Claudia and me this opportunity to examine how creativity supports resilience and for the joy of co-creating this service!

And now Sparrow will tell the children (and any adults who want to listen in) the Japanese fairytale, The Boy who Drew Cats.

## **Children's story told by Sparrow Alden**

### **Offering of Food for the Haven/Lebanon Food Shelf**

**Children Depart "This Little Light of Mine"**

Leah: As William Stafford says, "Kids... they dance before they learn there is anything that isn't music."

**Offering** Rachel Clark will play her original composition, "The Moon and Stars Watch over You"

**Sacred Sharing** This is when we share our joys and concerns. Please come up on either side of the pulpit and speak briefly when it is your turn. Instead of our usual bowl of rocks, today we'll be co-creating a small meditation landscape in sand. When you come up please choose a piece of pottery or a stone and place it in the sand.

**Hymn #123** "Spirit of life"

Leah: As Hugh MacLeod writes: Everyone is born creative; everyone is given a box of crayons in kindergarten. Then when you hit puberty they take the crayons away and replace them with dry, uninspiring books on algebra, history, etc. Being suddenly hit years later with the 'creative bug' is just a wee voice telling you, 'I'd like my crayons back, please.'

**Claudia's homily**

Six years ago, I began a journey to explore how I might better know myself and my place in the world--not only through my intellect, but through my intuition, my imagination and my senses. By being attentive to these additional windows of knowing, a more creative life began to open to me. I was able to overcome that voice that is inside so many of us that says, "You don't know how to draw or paint," and I began to create, to taste the deliciousness of being absorbed in the creative process and to see how the creative impulse had been poking through my busyness and preoccupations for much of my life. The seeds of creativity had been there all along, but I had not given them much water. Curious to see what would sprout, I took a few art classes, arranged with friends for art play dates, made a space for doing art, and honored the process by buying myself some quality art supplies.

But still, I resisted making art without the discipline of a class. After all, I had had years of practice hiding away the impulse to create! Finally, I decided to make a commitment to my creative self. For the 70 days leading up to my birthday, I would engage in some act of creativity each day.

Some of the roots of this 70 Day Project were probably in the increasing anxiety I was experiencing in the months leading up to the election. I was turning more and more to art because it calmed and centered me. It kept me focused on beauty and on what is good in the world. It gave me some inner resilience and the confidence to put what I loved doing out into the world. Opening myself to vulnerability, I decided to post each day's creative act on Facebook. I hungered for some deeper connection with others that was not based on current events. I wanted to try to give others some positive touchstone, some resilience, in their days, too.

Certainly creativity does not need to be shared to be meaningful, as you will see from the stories Leah will share in a few minutes, but when it is shared I believe it can build a different, more emotionally based kind of connection with others. A creative act can help us to not only know something with our minds, but also to feel it emotionally and physically. Can you recollect how your body felt a few moments ago as Rachel shared her beautiful composition? What emotions arose for you? How did you tap into spiritual energy that filled the room? This is the

way creativity transcends the mind-numbing glut of information and misinformation we are faced with today. It connects us with others via a shared experience, and, when we are connected, it can move us together toward positive action. Art shared connects us by its power to evoke what lies unspoken or even unspeakable within us.

On Election Day, I meditated, filled a brush with blue and red paint, and in one prayerful stroke painted an ensō, a Zen circle that represents the oneness of all life and harmonious cooperation. I posted it on Facebook. All I can tell you is that, based on Facebook comments and requests to share it, this little creative act from my heart triggered some latent aspiration that was living in all my Facebook friends that day. We were for a time one heart-connected virtual community, and it was beautiful.

These days, we are all striving to understand how we will protect what we love and value and resist whatever threatens those things. I invite you to trust that whatever creative acts you bring to the world will ripple out and make a difference. Please choose to say, "Yes", to that creative impulse you were born with. In ways you may possibly never see or understand, your creativity will make both your inner spiritual and psychological world and your community more beautiful and more resilient. Your own creative acts can make the world *felt*. They can elicit passion, ignite the senses, spark the imagination of another and this, in turn, may spur action and creative resistance in the world. The day after the election, some creative someone somewhere shared an idea to knit pink, kitten-eared hats for the Women's March. The idea sparked something in our collective imagination and tens of thousands of fingers began knitting. Yes, the hats were a great visual, but there was something more. Almost literally these pink hats knit together a global demonstration of shared values and community.

Martha Graham, the icon of creative dance, has said: *“There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all time, this expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and will be lost.”*

To transition to the choir's creative offering to us this morning and then to Leah's sharing, I hope you will enjoy this poem from the young Swedish author, Charlotte Eriksson. Her words are accompanied by a little slideshow of pieces from the 70 Days of Creative Acts project. A few of these were created over a period of days for an art class, but most were quick and simple and not intended as "art" but rather to simply to feed the spirit of creation on a given day. The slides begin with the ensō from Election Day. Enjoy!



**Slideshow** at: <https://sparkofmystery.blogspot.com/>

“... so this is for us.

This is for us who sing, write, dance, act, study, run and love  
and this is for doing it even if no one will ever know  
because the beauty is in the act of doing it.

Not what it can lead to.

This is for the times I lose myself while writing, singing, playing  
and no one is around and they will never know  
but I will forever remember  
and that shines brighter than any praise or fame or glory I will ever have,  
and this is for you who write or play or read or sing  
by yourself with the light off and door closed  
when the world is asleep and the stars are aligned  
and maybe no one will ever hear it  
or read your words  
or know your thoughts  
but it doesn't make it less glorious.  
It makes it ethereal. Mysterious.  
Infinite.  
For it belongs to you and whatever God or spirit you believe in  
and only you can decide how much it meant  
and means  
and will forever mean  
and other people will experience it too  
through you.  
Through your spirit. Through the way you talk.  
Through the way you walk and love and laugh and care  
and I never meant to write this long  
but what I want to say is:  
Don't try to present your art by making other people read or hear or see or touch it; make them  
feel it. Wear your art like your heart on your sleeve and keep it alive by making people feel a  
little better. Feel a little lighter. Create art in order for yourself to become yourself  
and let your very existence be your song, your poem, your story.  
Let your very identity be your book.  
Let the way people say your name sound like the sweetest melody.

**Choral anthem**        *Oh, had I a golden thread*, with words and music by Pete Seeger

### **Leah's homily**

[Body meditation] You've been sitting still and listening for a while. Let's take a little break to stretch. If you wish and are able, stretch one foot forward along the floor, feeling the stretch all the way up into your hip, then relax and move the other foot forward... stretch... and relax.

Stretch your arms forward and (as much as you are comfortable) upwards... stretch first one arm, noticing the opening of your shoulder and the stretch of your ribs, then the other arm... then gently lower them to a resting position.

Now rub your hands together to create heat and rest them on your face. Let the heat relax the many muscles in your face for a moment. Now whisk your hands outward from the center of your forehead a few times... massage your temples... and down the sides of your face... and

finally whisk outward across your cheekbones... and let your hands rest comfortably in your lap.

Take a deep breath in through your nose all the way to the bottom of your lungs, letting your belly expand, and then open your mouth a little and slowly let the air all the way out.

[Homily] This is how a session might begin at SafeArt, a program that my friend Tracy Penfield has been running in Central Vermont for almost two decades. SafeArt helps children and adults heal from the trauma we all store to some degree in our bodies, using movement and other forms of creative expression. She has just published a book with many of the program's therapeutic methods. It looks at how fear and other negative emotions are intertwined in our brains with centers of creativity and how past traumas can be released through immersion in the arts.

Now I'd like to tell you a story of three women, two plates, and the little clay pieces you used in Joys and Concerns to explore the healing capacity of creativity and how important it is in discovering what each of us uniquely brings to the world.

A few years ago I was part of a healing clay class at the League of New Hampshire Craftsmen (thank you, Byrne Foundation). Next to me a young Muslim woman spoke of the pain of her childhood with damaged parents who had fled the terrors of war in Pakistan. As she talked, her fingers stroked the clay, as though acting on their own, smoothing out the shapes of petals until she had formed an open blossom—the woman she was becoming. [Show plate] She rolled out slabs of clay and incised them in sweeping Arabic calligraphy with favorite passages from the Koran, central to the core of her being, the holy text she had memorized in its entirety in her teen years. One of these slabs she made for the meeting space of the Muslim community at Dartmouth College, a group that was at the time not accepting of women. The slab cracked partially when it was fired in the kiln, perfect in its imperfection.

One day I arrived in class to find Monique van de Ven, an old friend from the Woodstock UU church whom I hadn't seen in a couple of years. She was recovering from surgery that removed one of her eyes, replacing it with a flap of skin, and she wanted to make a mask to get used to her new face. She did this, beautifully, and then began making a series of plates that incorporated the textures of materials she found on her walks by the roadside—glass and metal fragments, pieces of rough bark, a discarded pinwheel shaped like wings. [Show plate] This was her life journey—her ability to see clearly what was on her path. Her persistence and willingness to try the untried and to embrace all of life, including the difficulties, defined her pottery and her life (for many years she had worked at WISE, a center for those in crisis from domestic abuse). As her remaining eye dimmed, she continued to create pottery, ever more adventurous, pushing at the edges of what clay can do, pulling in the elements that are meaningful in her life, as it is, on this day. As she journeyed with cancer, gradually letting go of pieces of her life, her creativity accompanied her and brought her focus and joy. Her final request from me, days before she died, was to bring her the last pots she'd created after they were fired in the League's kiln.

In that healing clay class, I found myself making small objects—a miniature Chinese boat, tiny ginger jars--many of the things you added to our meditation landscape during Joys and Concerns—and carving an early form of Chinese calligraphy into clay tiles. Where was this coming from? A bloodline my family had long forgotten? Or, as one friend suggested, a past life experience? Perhaps, but I believe it was born of my young days visiting New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, where a display case of Chinese porcelains bordered the grand staircase. Huge rounded jars so smooth and of such perfectly simple shapes as to seem made by nature rather than by human hand. Subtle colors of celadon, mustard yellow, and oxblood red, in glazes that pooled at ridges and thinned at delicate rims. The beauty of those porcelains loved me into the world and I began to create.

I started with arranging things, sewing, knitting, making little books, writing haiku, dancing, singing... And then I went to college and had the experience that stops many creative people cold. I took a studio art class. The professor told me my drawing was terrible (of course it was—that's why I wanted to take the class—but I didn't have the sense of self to say that at the time) and I withdrew. I turned to biology, where I could continue to record the beauty of nature under cover of hypotheses and measurements.

And now here I was in a clay class, making small rounded forms that through my fingers were gradually revealing to me what I have to give to the world—simplicity, subtlety, persistence, enthusiasm, an appreciation of beauty and mystery... Now I'm part of a group of watercolor painters (it turns out I can draw!) and I watch us sit in a circle around the objects of a still life, each of us painting our own unique visions, each of us finding what we bring into this world.

Creativity is the excitement of imagining what to make or do next. It is stepping into a mysterious process that may end far from where it began. It requires no audience but the creator, no one else's opinions... it is an urge, a meditation, an exploration, a joy. And it can be a way to discover who you are and what you uniquely have to offer.

### **Hymn 396**

**I know this rose will open. I know my fear will burn away. I know my soul will unfurl its wings. I know this rose will open.**

**Closing words** from Rainer Maria Rilke:

I believe in all that has never yet been spoken.

I want to free what waits within me  
so that what no one has dared to wish for

may for once spring clear

without my contriving.

If this is arrogant, God, forgive me,  
but this is what I need to say.  
May what I do flow from me like a river,  
no forcing and no holding back,  
the way it is with children.

Then in these swelling and ebbing currents,  
these deepening tides moving out, returning,  
I will sing to you as no one ever has,

streaming through widening channels  
into the open sea.

### **Extinguishing the Chalice**

We extinguish this flame, but not the light of truth,  
the warmth of love, or the fire of commitment.  
These we carry in our hearts until we meet again.

### **Postlude**