



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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## “Inspiration: Where Does it Come From?”

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### Centering Thoughts:

*Where there is joy there is creation. Ask to know joy.* Upanishads

*Everybody has a gift. Your job is to find it, love it, nourish it and give it space to grow. It's not too late for anyone to commit to making space for their own nature to blossom.* Denis Brown

*You can't use up creativity. The more you use, the more you have.* Maya Angelou

*We all have something in us to express. That's what creativity is all about.* Matthew Fox

### Reflection: (after telling the story of *The Pink Refrigerator*, by Tim Egan)

The magical Pink Refrigerator prodded Dodsworth to be creative and try new things. Like Dodsworth, we can be creative, too. But where does *our* creativity come from? What is the source of *our* inspiration?

Perhaps it makes no difference knowing where our inspiration and creativity come from. If it comes, that's good enough. But as any writer, artist, idea-generator, or problem-solver knows, inspiration doesn't always come. Sometimes creative juices dry up. Sometimes paper stays blank, ideas don't flow. Knowing how to nourish our creative spirit may be vital to meeting our needs or accomplishing our goals.

I'm no stranger to facing that proverbial blank piece of paper or computer screen. Each week I must fill an hour's worth of time and it must be worth your time. I want you to take away something that's meaningful, that serves your life in some way. To insure I don't parrot the same message each week, I need creative inspiration each week. I need to get in touch with that Mystery that, hopefully, helps me inspire you.

Some weeks I'm more successful than others.

Sometimes Amber, Kelli and I brainstorm together to develop a creative approach for a message, feeling, or question. Sometimes one of you will inspire me. But many times, I seek inspiration from my research and exploration. I 'Google' the subject to see what others have said and

I check out books from the library. If I get stuck, if the ideas don't flow, I can turn to these resources for possible inspiration. And usually, in time for Sunday morning, that little light bulb of creativity lights up, I find my voice, and words fill the page.

But sometimes I get stuck in the middle, not sure where to go next. Or I write myself into a dead end, not sure how to get out. When that happens, the delete button saves me.

Sometimes I don't get into the flow until I've written a bunch of words that really aren't what I want to say, but need to get out anyway. Unless I dump out these thoughts swirling around in my head, I won't get to where I really need to get to.

Whether I'm stuck at the beginning or in the middle, sometimes doing something else is my only salvation, such as going for a walk. Other times I'll simply change the room I'm working in. Experts on creativity confirm that changing one's surroundings or focusing on something different gives your brain time to work unconsciously. Then, when you go back to your work, you start fresh with new insight or inspiration.

Taking a shower helps many people get past creative blocks. Perhaps the sensation of water rushing over their body takes them out of their heads; perhaps it's simply a distraction. Going outdoors does that for me. Feeling the breeze, hearing the rustling trees, seeing the frolicking chipmunks, watching the clouds progress across the sky, all these sensory inputs shift my focus and give my mind the break it needs, allowing me to return with renewed inspiration.

I imagine my creative process sounds like yours, whether you're solving a problem at work, dealing with a toddler's tantrum, or balancing your bank account. But we might differ in where we attribute our source of inspiration.

Ancient peoples imagined that creative inspiration came from the divines, a source outside of us. The Greeks imagined goddesses, known as the Muses, who inspired poets, dancers, musicians, as well as astronomers, historians, and others. Homer and Hesiod began their writings by asking a Muse to 'speak into' them. Plato asserted inspiration came from being possessed by a Muse. He wrote "When the poet sits on the Muse's tripod [or seat] he is not in his right mind but ready to flow like a fountain..." We still refer to being in the flow when creative inspiration strikes. We even claim to have lost our Muse when inspiration doesn't flow. [<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-aesthetics/>]

In Jewish, Christian and Islamic scripture, God created the world with God's spirit or breath. Inspire, like expire, refers to God's giving us the breath of life. Biblicists, those who believe Christian scripture to be the inerrant, unmediated word of God, consider the Bible to be God's holy breath. The Bible also says God created humans in God's image, thus we are creators, too. Author Madeline L'Engle says, "God is constantly creating, in us, through us and with us, and to co-create with God is our human calling."

Medieval Christians could not explain how something, like an original idea, came from nothing, 'out of the blue' as we might say. They could not explain why some people exhibit great artistic talent, and others do not. Many past and present creators humbly believe God blesses them with a quality of talent far beyond their own means.

Creation Spirituality theologian Matthew Fox, in his book *Creativity: Where the Divine and the Human Meet*, suggests three sources of inspiration: the Universe, our Joys and Sorrows, and the Heart of God.

By the Universe, Fox means the very creative power of the cosmos itself. Whether described by scientists or theologians, the universe exudes the spirit of creativity. In every moment, change occurs. With every death comes new birth. Evolution exemplifies the natural world's creativity. Fox warns that disconnecting ourselves from this creative spirit will result in losing our souls. He believes our imaginations, our emotions, our intellect, and our souls all need the example of creativity found in the world around us. Nature's wildness prods us to be wildly creative. Nature's diversity cries out for us to welcome difference. A Meso-American song describes a poet's creative connection to nature:

Who am I? I live flying. I compose hymns, I sing the flowers: butterflies of song. They leap forth from within me, my heart relishes them. I have arrived among the people, I have come down, I, the bird of spring. ... My song arises over the earth, my song bursts out. [Matthew Fox, *One River, Many Wells*, page 228]

By our Joys and Sorrows, Fox means our life experiences. Unless we lead a numb existence, life's sorrows make us vulnerable and they open our hearts to compassion, triggering creative responses to life. And life's joys connect us to others and make us feel alive, awakening our senses to the best in life. Down through the ages, great music and poetry has movingly expressed our universal suffering and joys. Echoing this idea, jazz musician Charlie Parker said, "Music is your own experience, your thoughts, your wisdom. If you don't live it, it won't come out your horn."

By the Heart of God, Fox refers to what I call the Spirit of Love. Fox's God has many names, including the Creator who fills our human hearts with love and welcomes the many ways goodness is creatively expressed in the world. Fox says, "All creation is in us, and the Divine Godhead who dwells in creation is in us." [Fox, *Creativity*, page 51] Fox believes we are all meant to connect with this divine source of creation, for 'when we connect, we grow our hearts and increase the compassion, connections, and beauty of the world.' [Fox, *Creativity*, page 53]

The Universe, my life experiences, and Love as the Heart of God encompass all that inspires me. We're all exposed to these same sources, yet we're not equally creative. I don't imagine God or the Universe favors some of us with greater creativity, at least not consciously or intentionally. However, I do believe we are variously blessed with characteristics fostering creativity. In their book *Wired to Create*, co-authors Scott Barry Kaufman and Carolyn Gregoire write:

Creativity is informed by a whole suite of intellectual, emotional, motivational, and ethical characteristics. [In their research] The common strands that seemed to transcend all creative fields was an openness to one's inner life, a preference for complexity and ambiguity, an unusually high tolerance for disorder and disarray, the ability to extract order from chaos, independence, unconventionality, and a willingness to take risks. [Kaufman/Gregoire, *Wired to Create*, page xxiii]

Sounds like Unitarian Universalists, doesn't it? Since we don't give you a doctrine, you have to create it for yourself.

The various qualities these authors describe differ among us because we differ in our genetic inheritance, our response to experiences, our interests or passions, and our basic neurological and psychological wiring. Ultimately, science may describe what's happening when we're being creative, and who is likely to be creative, but science can't predict who will actually *be* creative. It's a mystery perhaps only known to the Muses and gods. Even the Pink Refrigerator couldn't guarantee Dodsworth would use the paints, cookbook, or garden seeds.

That unknown factor makes me grateful when creativity strikes. Not just so I can create a service, or for some artist to beautify an already beautiful universe. I'm grateful for the creatively-inspired people seeking new solutions to the world's problems. I'm grateful for people who appreciate the universe we live in, understand its fragility, and are inspired to preserve its diversity and health with innovative energy sources and other means that lessen our impact on the world. I'm grateful for creative people who through music, poetry, and dance inspire peace and justice and harmonious living.

May this community always be a birthplace for such creative inspiration.

**Questions for Reflection or Discussion:**

1. What do you believe is the source of your gifts, talents, skills, or inspirations?
2. How do you nourish your creative spirit? Do you create space or time for it to blossom? Share.
3. When you are at your most creative, do you feel your whole heart and soul are engaged? Share.