

Thrive

Creating a Thriving Spiritual Life Week Seven

A Sense of Connection and Flow

This week we'll cultivate the attitudes that help connect us to the deeper flow of our creative souls and the Creator.

Listening

The ability to deeply listen is a rare thing in our culture. We are forming our response to another before they are half finished with what they are saying. The Morning Pages and our Creative Soul Dates are honing our ability to listen to our soul, to the Creator in us. We are learning to hear past the Censor, the Accuser, so we pick up the voice of inspiration. What we learn is that our creativity is not so much something we think up. It is something we get down.

If we are trying to think something up, we are striving, straining, grasping for something creative. There is an attitude of *it's all up to me to make this happen*. But when our attitude is one of getting something down, there is less strain. We listen. The focus is on being open, receptive.

Creativity is an act of tuning in and dropping down the well of life. It's as though all the paintings, stories, songs, blueprints, business ideas, live just under the surface of our normal consciousness. Like an underground river, they flow through us as a stream of ideas that can be tapped into, not by *coming up* with the ideas, but by *letting the ideas come* to us. We hear what's down there in us, and we act on it.

We are more the *instrument of* rather than the *author* of creativity. Michelangelo is said to have remarked that he released David from the marble block he found him in. Jackson Pollock said, "The painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through."

I have found this to be true in ministry, painting, and song writing. Instead of sitting down and trying to come up with a song, I'll start noodling on the guitar, with nothing particular in mind. And invariably something comes together, a little riff, a chord progression, a rhythm, a turn of phrase, a metaphor. And the feeling I get is not that I wrote it, but that it came through me. I'll have an idea for a painting, so I'll start going toward that idea, but invariably I find myself asking the painting, "What do you want?" I start listening to the shapes, the lines, the colors. It's the same with a sermon, or a class. I start with an idea, a topic, but then I let the scripture work on me, and I listen for the deeper thing that's under the surface. If I force it to go a certain way, it sounds stilted. If I let it come to me, it has more life.

Julia Cameron uses the image of radio waves. We don't create those waves, we are receptors for picking up those radio waves of creativity. With practice – Morning Pages,

Creative Soul Dates – we learn how to tune in, pick up the signal, recognize the frequency. Once we accept that it is natural to create, we learn to accept that the Creator offers whatever we need as we move into our creative soul. We are invited to accept the possibility that the universe is helping us along our path. So we are invited not to strive so much as to deeply listen, and then act. If Source, God, is the great Creator, would not God assist, guide us along the path of our soul's own creativity? I believe the answer is "Yes."

Perfectionism

Let's talk now about the opposite of Listening – Perfectionism. We have high-minded ways of putting this: *Getting it right, fixing it before I go any further, having standards*. What we should be calling it is *Perfectionism*. Perfectionism is a refusal to let ourselves move ahead. It is a loop – an obsessive, debilitating closed system that causes us to get stuck in the details of what our creative soul is working on, and lose sight of the whole.

Instead of creating freely and allowing errors to reveal themselves later as insights, we often get mired in getting the details right. We correct our originality into a uniformity that lacks passion and spontaneity. "Do not fear mistakes," Miles Davis told us. "There are none."

How does the Perfectionism show up? You work over and over one paragraph of a business proposition, or you keep rewriting one line of a poem, or you micromanage a team project. For the perfectionist there are no first drafts, let's see how it plays out, warm-up exercises! It should be perfect, final, set it stone, done! Julia Cameron writes, "To the perfectionist, there is always room for improvement. The perfectionist calls this humility. In reality, it is egotism. It is pride that makes us want to write a perfect script, come up with a brilliant business model, put together the most inspirational class. Perfectionism is not a quest for the best. It is a pursuit of the worst in ourselves, the part that tells us that nothing we do will ever be good enough – that we should try again. No. We should not."

A good friend of mine, an oil painter, struggled with this. He would start a painting, get a good first run at it, then a second and third go at it and it would come to life, and I'd think, "Man, that's good!" But then he would start "fine tuning it," as he put it, and invariably he'd become upset because he had this notion of perfectionism and he would mess it up rather than complete it. I've seen him completely scrape all the oil paint off a painting because he couldn't leave it alone. We are invited to let things be good enough, to let them go. And certainly to become better, we must be willing to go through the ugly stages of learning anything.

Risk

Question: What would I do if I didn't have to do it perfectly?

Answer: A great deal more than I am.

This is so true. Perfectionism constricts, limits, diminishes our lives, rather than letting them expand and flourish. We've all heard that the unexamined life is not worth living. True. But perhaps even more so, the unlived life is not worth examining. Our soul's creative recovery hinges on our ability to move out of our head, and into action. This brings us face-to-face with risk. Most of us are practiced at talking ourselves out of risk. "I'll look like an idiot," we say. But what we're probably doing is comparing ourselves with the masters in our creative field. We compare our creative business ideas to Steve Jobs and Apple's success! We deny that in order to do anything well we must first be willing to do it badly.

In order to risk, we must jettison our accepted limits. We must break through “I can’t because...” Because I am too old, too broke, too shy, too proud? Self-defended? Timorous? Usually, when we say we can’t do something, what we mean is that we won’t do something unless we can guarantee that we’ll do it perfectly. As blocked creative souls, we unrealistically expect and demand success from ourselves and recognition of that success from others. With that as an unspoken demand, a great many things remain outside our sphere of possibility.

There is something enlivening about expanding our self-definition, to go beyond what we think we can do, or who we thought we were. And that takes risk. Selecting a challenge and meeting it creates a sense of self-empowerment that becomes the ground for further successful challenges. Viewed this way, writing your first poem increases your chances of developing that non-profit. Developing that non-profit increases your chances of writing your first poem.

Once we are willing to accept that anything worth doing might even be worth doing badly our options widen. As an exercise, quickly come up with twenty responses to, “If I didn’t have to do it perfectly, I would try...”

Jealousy

Jealousy is a difficult emotion. It’s hard to admit we are jealous. We want to get rid of it as quickly as possible. But just like anger, jealousy is a guide, a map. Julia Cameron uses her own story as an example. She was never jealous of women novelists, but she took an unhealthy interest in the fortunes and misfortunes of women playwrights. She was very critical of them until she wrote her first play. By writing her first play, her jealousy vanished, replaced by a feeling of camaraderie. Her jealousy was a mask for her fear of doing something she really wanted to do but was not yet brave enough to take action toward.

Jealousy is always a mask for fear: fear that we aren’t able to get what we want; frustration that somebody else seems to be getting what is rightfully ours even if we are too frightened to reach for it. Jealousy is a stingy emotion. It doesn’t allow for the abundance and multiplicity of the universe. Jealousy thinks there’s room for only one architect, entrepreneur, poet, singer-songwriter – one of whatever you dream of becoming.

Jealousy produces tunnel vision. It narrows our ability to see things in perspective. It strips us of our ability to see other options. The biggest lie that jealousy tells us is that we have no choice but to be jealous. Perversely, jealousy strips us of our will to act when action holds the key to our freedom.

The Jealous Map: An Exercise

Your jealousy map will have three columns. In the first column, name those of whom you are jealous. Next to each name, in the second column, write why you are jealous of them. Be very specific and accurate. In the third column list one action you can take to move toward creative risk and out of jealousy.

WHO

WHY

ACTION ANTIDOTE

Archeology: An Exercise

The phrases that follow are a continuance of our sleuth work. We have buried parts of ourselves that can be uncovered by some digging. Not only will our answers tell us what we missed in the past; they will tell us what we can be doing, now, to comfort and encourage our creative, child-like soul. Complete these phrases:

1. As a kid, I missed the chance to...
2. As a kid, I lacked...
3. As a kid, I could have used...
4. As a kid, I dreamed of being...
5. As a kid, I wanted...
6. In my house, we never had enough...
7. As a kid, I needed more...
8. I am sorry that I will never again see...
9. For years, I have missed and wondered about...
10. I beat myself up about the loss of...

It is important to acknowledge our positive inventory as well as our shortfalls. Take a positive stock of what good you have to build on in the present. Finish these phrases:

1. I have a loyal friend in...
2. One thing I like about my town is...
3. I think I have nice...
4. Writing my morning pages has shown me I can...
5. I am taking a greater interest in...
6. I believe I am getting better at...
7. My artist has started to pay more attention to...
8. My self-care is...
9. I feel more...
10. Possibly, my creativity is...

Weekly Tasks: These tasks explore the presence or lack of abundance in your life.

1. Make this phrase a mantra: *Treating myself like a precious object will make me strong.* Post it where you can see it daily. Read it aloud to yourself every day.
2. Take yourself into a sacred space – a church, synagogue, library, grove of trees, a riverside – and allow yourself to savor the silence and healing solitude. And simply listen.
3. Soul Card: Collect a variety of magazines and give yourself twenty minutes to tear or cut out the images that reflect your interests or you simply like. Think of this collage as a form of pictorial autobiography. Include your past, present, future, and your dreams. Take these images and, with a glue stick, stick them to a large piece of card stock, arranging the images in a way that is pleasing to you. Then spend some time pondering what you see, and be receptive to the connections you find, or that find you, between the images. Find a place of honor for your soul card, keep returning to it, and let its impact on you deepen.

Check In:

1. How many days this week did you do your Morning Pages? What did you get rid of, and how do you feel about that now?
2. Did you do your artist date this week? What did you do and how did it feel?

3. What changes do you notice in yourself? How does that feel?
4. Were there any other issues this week that you consider significant for your soul recovery? Describe them.