

Thrive – 3rd Edition

Creating a Thriving Life Week Seven – June 21, 2021 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 listen deeply is a rare thing in our culture. We form our response to another before they are half finished talking. The Morning Pages and Creative Soul Dates hone our ability to listen to our soul, to the Creator in us. We learn to turn down the Censor, the Accuser, and more clearly hear the voice of our soul. We learn our creativity is not so much something we think up. It is something we get down.

Trying to think something up, is striving, straining, grasping for something creative. But when our attitude is one of getting something down, there is less strain. The focus is on being open, receptive. We are listening for what wants to come to life.

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 here in us, and we act on it.

We are 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 trying to come up with a song, I'll just start noodling on the guitar. Invariably something comes together, a little riff, a chord progression, a rhythm, a turn of phrase, a metaphor. And the feeling I get? I didn't write it, it came through me. I come to the canvas with an idea, I start, but I soon ask the canvas, "What do you want?" I listen to the shapes, the lines, the colors. It's the same with a sermon, or a class. I start with an idea, but then I listen for the deeper thing that's under the surface. If I force it to go a certain way, it becomes 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 - we pick up those radio waves of creativity. With practice – Morning Pages, Creative Soul Dates – we learn to tune in, pick up the signal, recognize the frequency. Once we accept that it is natural to create, we accept that the Creator offers whatever we need as we move into our creative soul. We are invited not to strive, but 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 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.* But it's *Perfectionism.*

Perfectionism refuses to let us move ahead. It is 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 turn our *originality* into a *uniformity* that lacks passion and spontaneity. "Do not fear mistakes," Miles Davis told us. "There are none."

How does Perfectionism show up? You spend half a day on 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 rooted in the part of us that tells us 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. 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 our lives expand and flourish. The *unexamined life* is not worth living. True. But more so, the *unlived life* is not worth examining. Creative soul recovery requires we move out of our head, and into action. This brings us face-to-face with risk. We usually talk ourselves out of risk. "I'll look like an idiot," we say. But we're probably comparing ourselves with the masters in our creative field. We compare our creative business ideas to Apple's success!

To risk, we must jettison our accepted limits. We must break through "I can't because...I am too old, too broke, too shy, too proud, self-defended, timorous. When we say we can't do something, we mean we won't do something unless success is guaranteed. 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, 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, who we thought we were. 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 accept that anything worth doing is – at first – worth doing badly, our options widen. Quickly respond to, "If I didn't have to do it perfectly, I would try..." What do you learn?

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 will not get what we want; frustration that somebody else gets 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 of the universe. Jealousy thinks there's room for only one architect, entrepreneur, poet, songwriter – one of whatever you dream of becoming.

Jealousy produces tunnel vision. It narrows our ability to see things in perspective. It limits our 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, list the people you are jealous of. 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

Beauty

It might seem odd to talk about beauty, but it brings us back to ourselves, and connects us to Source, the Divine. John O'Donohue writes, "When we awaken to the call of beauty, we become aware of new ways of being in the world. We were created to be creators. At its deepest heart, creativity is meant to serve and evoke beauty. When this desire and capacity come alive, new wells spring up in parched ground; difficulty becomes invitation, and rather than striving against the grain of our nature, we fall into rhythm with its deepest urgency and passion. The time is now ripe for beauty to surprise and liberate us."

What O'Donohue suggests is that even in difficulty, conflict, and struggle, beauty is there in a deeper way than expected, to heal and bring hope. "The confidence of creativity knows that deep conflict often yields the most interesting harmony and order." The example he gives is of music. "The mystery of music is its uncanny ability to coax harmony out of contradiction and chaos. Often the beauty of great music is a beauty born from the rasp of chaos." Music becomes a metaphor for finding beauty in our life. Some of the most amazing pieces of music are full of discordant chords, clashing passages, yet they find a way to a resolution, not trite or cheap, but profound. The beauty does not leave the conflict behind, it includes it. If we think our creative soul at its essence is all happiness and delight, we are mistaken. Our creative soul embraces the pain and loss, and makes something of it: beauty.

We return to where we started, with listening. We listen to our creative souls, but we also listen for beauty. What would it mean to look for and expect beauty in life, in others, in work? How does the word beauty open our eyes to the more that we don't usually see? Again this is not just for "art," it is for all of life. It is to claim that our creative souls, our lives, are beautiful. "Only if there is beauty in us can we recognize beauty elsewhere: beauty knows beauty. In this way, beauty can be a mirror that manifests our own beauty. This has little to do with narcissism or self-absorption. To achieve a glimpse of inner beauty strengthens our sense of dignity and grace. The glimpse ennobles us; it helps awaken and refine our reverence for the intimate eternal that dwells in us...there is beauty in every life regardless of how inauspicious, dull or hardened its surface might seem."

Beauty is one of the five Transcendentals: Being, the One, the Good, the True, and the Beautiful. Without Beauty the search for truth, the desire for goodness and the love of order and unity would be sterile exploits. Beauty brings warmth, elegance and grandeur. Beauty calls for a thing's, a soul's presence. But beauty is not just a quality in things or others. Beauty is *a way of looking* at things. It is everywhere and everything has beauty; it is merely a matter of discovering it.

Beauty dwells at the heart of life. If we can free ourselves from our robot-like habits of predictability, repetition and function, we begin to walk differently on the earth. We come to dwell more in the truth of beauty. Beauty calls us beyond ourselves and it encourages us to engage the dream that dwells in the soul, our creative soul. Talk of truth makes it sound as if truth were the cardinal virtue. Yet without beauty, truth becomes blind and can be turned into a blunt and heartless imperative. When we hold truth and beauty together, truth will always have a sense of compassion and gentleness. And that holds for the way we look and feel about ourselves.

*Today, like every other day,
We wake up empty and frightened.
Don't open the door to the study and begin reading.
Take down a musical instrument.
Let the beauty we love be what we do.
There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.*

This poem by Rumi, says it well. Old thoughts assault us upon waking, and the temptation is to read, watch television, or scroll through the endless social media posts and You Tube videos. Instead, take down a musical instrument, do what you love to do, the beauty we love – do it. This is recovering our creative soul.

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. Simply listen.
3. Soul Card: Collect a variety of magazines and give yourself twenty minutes to tear or cut out the images that you are drawn to, or they have energy for you, whether positive or negative. Take these images and, with a glue stick, arrange them on a large piece of card stock, 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.
4. Beauty. Indulge in something you think is beautiful: dance, play music, listen to a symphony, surround yourself with beautiful art, talk with someone you think is a beautiful soul. Write about your experience. Write about your own beauty.