

Network Church

www.networkchurch.org



Unearthing Creativity

Some thoughts and theology from potter Trevor Withers

There is something intrinsically buried in each of us, which rests in the core of our being – which is our desire to emulate our creator God who made us in his image. In the Bible, in the book of Genesis we read these words: ‘Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness” ’. ¹

These words are set in the context of God creating the world, so one of the out workings of us being made in his image in this context is that we are made *by* him, to be creative *like* him.

Creativity is often referred to as a gift. We say, ‘she has this wonderful gift of creativity’. It stirs in all of us if we will receive it as a gift and acknowledge it in our lives. Creativity however sets a battleground for many people, where self-doubt and the weapons of words spoken over us many years ago have won long-held victories in keeping this treasured gift buried and moribund.

We often use our busy lives or changing priorities as excuses for the lack of attention given to this area of creative endeavour in our lives. I have lost count of the number of conversations I have had with people who tell me they don’t have time to do the creative things that they once enjoyed. Often this busyness is an unintentional cover for a loss of confidence and fear of failure which besets so many of us in adult life.

Ask any class of young children if they would like to make something, and every hand in the room goes up and the air is filled with anticipation and excitement at the prospect. I experienced this on a regular basis as I went to help with design tech in a local junior school. We were making vehicles from cardboard boxes, with bottle tops for wheels. The energy and enthusiasm in the room when it was announced that we would be making things was

amazing. Lots of chatting and on one occasion a big cheer and several children leapt to their feet with excitement! They could hardly contain themselves.

Ask the same question however to a group of teenagers, let alone adults, and the response is very different! A few sheepish hands may be raised tentatively, and an air of nervousness and a sense of being 'found out' is in the atmosphere. What happens to these youngsters as they grow up? They lose their sense of fun, excitement and confidence at being creative. Somehow, it's not cool to make things any more.

Fortunately being cool has never featured much on my list of things to be. It would appear however that it features very highly for many people and that 'fitting in' is essential, and apparently you don't fit in if you own up to making things or being artistic. Why has this happened? How have we lost our sense of identity around this idea of creativity?

It is partly driven by our desire to get things right, particularly in education. 'If you're not prepared to be wrong, you'll never come up with anything original.'² Creativity is about exploration, which needs the freedom to explore and experiment without the need to arrive at a predefined outcome. This is not to say we don't have an end in view but the way we get there is not predetermined and the result is not defined around prescribed criteria.

Our systematised approach to education is a major stumbling block in this regard. 'The fact is that given the challenges we face, education doesn't need to be reformed - it needs to be transformed. The key to this transformation is not to standardize education, but to personalize it, to build achievement on discovering the individual talents of each child, to put students in an environment where they want to learn and where they can naturally discover their true passions.'³

Inevitably we in the church have picked up on this idea of 'getting things right' and to some degree have squashed people's natural creativity. Our overlay on this has been to add the sin dimension where getting things wrong is often linked to sin. This creates quite a blockage as you can imagine, and I will pick up on this idea later.

This is further solidified by our understanding of God from a Greek philosophical perspective in which God is seen as being perfect and therefore complete and set. God has been described like this from very early on in philosophical thought. Aristotle made the proposition that God is the 'unmoved mover', by which he meant that God set things going and then retired into the wings to watch what happened and was unmoved by what he observed. There are many statements about God which find their roots in this Greek style of philosophy, which is the basis for much of our western thought.

This contrasts strongly with the Hebrew view of God seen in the Bible, where things are interconnected and God is integrated and part of life rather than somehow separate. As Christians the God we believe in is integrally connected to the world we inhabit, and he walks *with* us in every situation. He is the God who will 'never leave us or forsake us'⁴ and so can be trusted, not just because he is all powerful, but because he chooses to use that power in ways that encourage rather than damage his relationship with us.

If God is the 'immovable unmoved' God of Greek thought, how can we talk in terms of experimentation and creativity? Surely everything is fixed and pre-ordained. Add to this the

strong sense of determinism that is prevalent in many areas, which says that there must be only one right way, and this leads to a double roadblock for creative thought let alone any expression of creativity.

From this background we convince ourselves that we must just keep doing what we have always done. Perhaps if we do it more or work harder at it, then it will work. This is a very poor substitute for the creativity that should flow from us, bringing with it change and life to our various situations.

Linked to this is the idea that failure is sin, which I mentioned earlier. What do I mean by this? Well, let's walk through the process. In the Greek view of God, ie as an unmoved mover, God had to be unmoved because the Greeks believed that God by definition was perfect. 'If He was perfect he could never change, because if he were to change, he would either no longer be perfect, or he would not have been perfect to begin with.'⁵

From this we define perfection as the ability not to change, perfection is a static state. This line of thought influences our theology. We strive for perfection in order to be like God, and in doing so resist the idea of change because we think that God does not change. We can also be influenced by seeing any failure as sin; we extrapolate that as God is perfection we must strive for perfection and anything less feels like sin. Getting it right becomes essential. Getting it wrong becomes not just failure but sin.

This works against the idea of experimentation, as this goes hand in hand with failure. By its very nature experimentation exists alongside the need to risk failure. This pushes us towards needing God to reveal everything to us directly in all its minutest detail lest we should get it wrong. We are stuck, caught in an impassable dilemma where faith traps us rather than frees us. In this place we forget the well known words that 'faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see'⁶

So I think we need to do some reflecting around who we believe God to be and how he works in the world. We need to pull away from the Greek way of thinking about God as disconnected, and from thinking about him as the unmoved mover that Aristotle describes. We need to see him instead as 'the Hebrew God, the dynamic, living God that we deal with, who undoubtedly changes and is not the philosophical abstraction that we invent for ourselves. Hence I have re coined Aristotle's definition of God as the unmoved mover to become the moved, moving, mover - a catchy epithet perhaps'⁷

We can see him as the moved, moving, mover, in the way he sustains the world and indeed the universe by his direct involvement in it moment by moment. The Bible teaches that God continually preserves creation all the time, two New Testament verses particularly come to mind around this - Colossians 1:17 and Acts 17:28.

Colossians 1:17 states, 'And he is before all things, and by him all things consist.' The verb 'consist' is in grammatical terms an imperfect verb. That means it was initiated in the past but continues to be active from that time into the future with no ending point. That is an important grammatical point to understand. This doctrine will make no sense unless you grasp this. God is still working, even now, to uphold creation. Christ attests to this continual work when he said "My Father has been working until now, and I have been working."⁸

So God is the business of ongoing creativity as he continues to create and sustain the world that we live in. He calls us to this creative venture, to partner with him in his creativity, to become moved, moving movers as he is. Not to stand on the sidelines and watch but actively participate and use the creative gifts he has given us.

As Christian communities we should be in the very forefront of creative endeavor, believing more than anyone that God has created us to be creative in his likeness.

Scientists occupy this space constantly. Some 'leading thinkers' were asked "What scientific concept would improve everybody's cognitive toolkit?" Their answer, submitted as part of an annual exercise by the web magazine Edge was: 'Being comfortable with uncertainty, knowing the limits of what science can tell us, and understanding the worth of failure are all valuable tools that would improve people's lives.'⁹

So to return to the thought I started with, God created us in his own image: 'In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them'¹⁰. The dominant word, for me, in this verse is 'created'. This should speak to us about what it means to be made in God's image. We are created to be like God, who is creative. So if we are to represent him, then being creative will be one of the signs of this.

That's not to say that we should all become artists. That would be a rather narrow view of creativity, because each of us will have ways in which we connect with and express our creativity in the different spheres of our lives – such as the workplace, church life, at home and in our communities. 'I define creativity as the process of having original ideas that have value.'¹¹ This definition expands the horizon for creativity and hopefully draws us back into the space that many have stepped away from. Either because it was not perceived as cool, or they were told they would never get a job doing that, or simply made to look foolish in front of others as their creations (usually paintings or drawings) were compared with those of others or didn't meet the teachers' or parents' expectations.

I have seen the evidence of this loss of creativity and experienced first hand the very real sense of healing and restoration that can be achieved as people are encouraged to venture into a creative space once again. This often needs just gentle steps and a guiding hand. The following story from our pottery studio highlights what this looked like in one such case:

I share a pottery studio with a friend called Gill. We began to notice how reluctant some people were to come in to our little pottery room, loitering on the threshold looking sheepish. On more than one occasion there have been tears as people battle with what wells up inside them as they contemplate giving themselves permission to step inside. One lady told us she was not creative or in any way artistic as the tears rolled down her cheeks. Gill in her inimitable way took her hand and led her in to sit and watch and have a cup of tea (an essential ingredient in the pottery), telling her that she could just paint spots on a mug, and so it began. You might say it was a form of therapy or recovery. The tears were dried, the paints came out and an adventure began. A long dormant gift began to surface as this lady became a regular visitor. What she created was truly amazing and she loved doing it - working with different colours, experimenting with patterns, sensing the shape of the pot and producing something that flowed so effortlessly. Before long pots and assorted glazes were being taken home and would return the following week decorated by the person

who by her own confession just a few weeks before was not artistic or in any way creative!

It is a travesty that so much excitement and energy so eagerly displayed by junior school children is buried so deep, never to surface again. The intentions of our creator God to enjoy being made in his image as fellow creators is stolen from so many. It does not have to be this way: as people of faith we need to demonstrate through our creativity the God who we believe in - revealing to our world the moved, moving, mover, who dynamically interacts with us and the whole of creation. What a privilege, what joy is ours. Let us not delay, let us find ways to reconnect with the hidden, often repressed creative gift that is ours to enjoy and share.

(see next page for the footnotes)

- 1 Genesis 1 v 26a
- 2 Ken Robinson, Finding Your Element, (Penguin 2010)
- 3 Ken Robinson, Finding Your Element, (Penguin 2010)
- 4 Hebrews 13 v 5
- 5 R. Forster, Trinity, Authentic Media (Aug. 2004)
6. Hebrews 11 v 1
- 6
- 7 R. Forster, Trinity, Authentic Media (Aug. 2004)
- 8 On line article by Dr.C. Matthew McMahon (www.apuritansmind.com/the-christian-walk/the-doctrine-of-continuous-creation-by-dr-c-matthew-mcmahon)
- 9 [Alok Jha Science Correspondent, Guardian](#), Saturday 15 January 2011
- 10 Genesis 1 v 27
- 11 TED talk, Do Schools Kill Creativity? (2006)
https://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativit