

## A form of grace: experiencing my inner self

by JANET CAMPBELL

DESCRIBING THE LINK BETWEEN MY WORK AS AN ARTIST AND MY SPIRITUALITY rests first on my understanding that our Creator has gifted each of us with a creative impulse. We also each have abilities and experiences that delight our God. I believe that God instilled these abilities and experiences within us to fulfill God's own purpose in our world. These gifts are part of our individual light and God never intended they be hidden from others. They are as surely from God as is my faith and my life. Whether our talents and abilities are innate or the result of education and hard work is irrelevant; they are a part of us: part of the things that work together for the good of those who are called by God for God's purposes.

I create as a visual artist. I use paint, canvas and fabric, yet I believe that the artistic medium is irrelevant when we are in creative mode. It does not matter if you write a business proposal, arrange a piano sonata, or prepare a delicious meal. Seeking to resolve one of life's mundane problems or searching for a way to express deep feelings and insights through poetry both require us to tap into our inner wisdom and love that which comes from God. Once I embrace my creativity I find myself in another realm. I go from day-to-day concerns to a place where I am wholly focused on the task at hand, whether it is painting an image on canvas or designing a fabric banner. I have learned that when I stick with a project, for better or worse, through moments of divine insight or periods of intense frustration, the creation is my guide.

When I am totally immersed in the creative process, I access an especially powerful and magical form of my inner self. I have observed that, whether I am painting, dying fabric or sewing a quilt, my body is the only place to go to; there are no words. My body seems to move effortlessly as if my hands, arms and even my whole body are guided from somewhere else. My movements take on a lightness and grace that belie my generally clumsy self. I experience myself at these moments as fully alive. The more time I spend in this state, the more I want to be in it.

As young children we all create naturally and live in a powerful, intuitive state. But as we move toward adulthood, the creative source seems to become blocked off to us. Our minds take over and our bodies get lost. It becomes harder to sit down to paint or play or engage in other spontaneous activities. Even though my parents encouraged my artistic interests while I was growing up, I find that I still have to work hard to get into creative mode.

The possibility of reconnecting with our childlike, spontaneous selves is always present. Nevertheless, I recognize that sometimes the road back to alignment with my natural, creative body is rocky. Indeed, unresolved conflicts or unaccepted aspects of myself will naturally surface as I bring myself to face a blank canvas. It is particularly difficult when I have been away from my studio for extended periods or if there is a crisis in my life. It seems that after a long split from my inner wisdom's flow, pleasure is resisted as much as pain.

It is at those times that I need the direction, witnessing and support of a teacher/guide or perhaps a group of kindred spirits who will encourage me to stay in the process. One of my close friends, a journalist and creative writer, is often my guide. She loves to express herself visually and she demands "play time" in my studio with me. Sometimes her sister or another friend will join us. Even though I often end up in the art teacher role at these times, I come out of these sessions feeling more balanced,



Detail from banner by  
Janet Campbell.

resolved and alive.

Meinrad Craighead, transformative artist and former Catholic nun, has said, “The Mother has but one law; ‘Create; make as I do make.’ Obedience in this law is the deepest obedience and the worthiest worship of Her.”

When I have engaged in the creative process, I have experienced a force or a presence that comes from outside myself. I describe this force as Divine or the Holy Spirit. I sense this force within me, acting through me to produce whatever I am working on. It is a powerful yet rare sensation to be caught up in this creative partnership. Time seems to stand still. Upon finishing the work, I stand back and I can only ask myself, “Where did that image come from?”

Robyn Sarah, quoted by K. D. Miller in her book *Holy Writ: A Writer Reflects on Creation and Inspiration*, describes engaging in the creative process as “an act of will and an act of faith ... I say an act of faith because I never really know whether anything is going to happen. Sometimes so much seems to be staked on it and so little seems to be in my conscious control.” She writes:

Yes, inspiration is terribly necessary. I can't define it but I know when it's absent. I'm inclined to consider it a form of grace. No, I am not in control of it. (I wish I were.) All I seem to be able to do is keep myself *open to it*, which seems to mean *paying attention* – a kind of listening, but not just with the ear: with the whole being. When my writing is going well, I feel as though actual words come from a source outside of me. They are ‘given’ to me. I become a conduit. (This seems to be particularly true for beginnings and endings.)

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### The prayer vests that

I make show an obvious and direct link between my work and my spirituality, unlike much of my other work. Prayer vests are designed for individuals and particular prayers are written on the inside lining.

I began making prayer vests five years ago when a dear friend told me she had been diagnosed with Hodgkin's Disease, a form of cancer. I was upset at her news. Looking for some solace, I opened a book of prayers from my library. Likely because it is a favorite prayer, and one I read often, the book fell open to the prayer known as St. Patrick's Breastplate. I remember thinking, “I wish I could think of something to do to protect her from the disease....” Then I had such an inspiration as I read the words of the prayer: I would make her a vest, sort of a breastplate, that would have prayers for her wellbeing inscribed on the lining. The vest, a patchwork garment with images and mementos from her life – applied stars for each of her children and one for her husband, an image of an angel on the back and a few embellishments of heirloom laces and buttons – was of great comfort to my friend. She wore the vest for each of her appointments and treatments.

Since then I have made many other prayer vests as gifts or as commissions. Some were for people experiencing an illness, or as gifts to individuals who had recovered from illness. Some have been gifts in celebration of an ordination or a special birthday. A particularly heart-rending one I made for the mother of a murdered son; her friend commissioned me to do a prayer vest for this mother who she knew was going to sit through the trial of the man who had murdered her son.



In order to be a creative person, I need to feel God's presence in my life. I need to have faith that God is with me when I enter this unknown territory called artmaking. Once committed to the creative process, my devotion enables me to merge with my creative self. I develop inner strength and fresh vision and my life becomes the unique work of art it was meant to be. I have to commit to it first with attentive awareness. But then to be successful I have to commend myself to the Holy Spirit; forgetting myself in the process in order to come out whole.

There is an ancient Chinese story that tells of an old master potter developing a new glaze for his vases. Each day he carefully regulated the heat in his kiln, worked painstakingly with the chemistry of the glazes, and experimented with them repeatedly. He laboured devotedly day after day, yet the perfect glaze he envisioned eluded him. Having exhausted his vast knowledge and human power, he concluded that his life was over. He climbed into the kiln to be fired along with his last batch of vases. When his helpers opened the kiln, they beheld a magnificent sight. All the glazes were sheer perfection, like nothing their master had ever achieved. He had become one with his creation.

The metaphor of the potter seeking the perfect glaze reminds me of Jesus' words to the disciples in Matthew 16:25-26: "For those who want to save their life for my sake will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?"

To me, that is the mystery and paradox of creativity. In order to express myself and to produce my art, I must have enough faith in the Creator to lose myself in the process.



This banner is one of a series of four seasonal banners that I was commissioned to create last year for the Interfaith Chapel at the Foothills Hospital in Calgary. The one shown above depicts summer: the Rocky Mountains are at the top looking down on the foothills and a typical farm scene where the foothills meet the prairies.

The banner is 1.5 metre wide and 2.5 metres in length. I dyed the fabric and used fabric paint and applique for the images and finished with machine quilting.

Janet Campbell is an artist who works in several mediums: acrylic and oil paint on canvas, mixed media on paper and fabric. She studied at The Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design and teaches and leads workshops that explore creativity and spirituality. Her artworks are found in private collections, churches and hospitals.

This summer, Janet will be leading a one-week course at the Sorrento Centre, an Anglican retreat and education centre on Shuswap Lake in British Columbia.