

Art as prayer:

Hello and welcome to another installment of our “Pray then in this way” series. When we began the series, I think we envisioned a small group, gathered in the parlour, around a candle. A bit of information from the leader, and lots of time for reflection by the participants.

How things can change in a couple of days. Now our simple intimate little setting is based in technology and a lot of computer work, and not much dialogue. But I hope you will take it in and it will help to deepen some of the time we are spending apart.

So let us pray:

O God, we call you creator – we play with the image of your holy hands shaping us like clay, or knitting our joints and muscles together. We imagine the choice of colour and brushstroke that makes us as individuals unique. Yet, being created in your image, surely you made us co-creators as well. Help us to settle into that well of creativity instilled in our hearts, and hands, and minds, and spirits. Whatever our talents, O God, bless us with the courage to use and to grow them in faith. Amen

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So, how would you answer this question:

“Are you artistic?” – sit with that for a moment

Think back to something – anything – you have created that you feel proud of...

Maybe it’s working with wood, or with crayons. Maybe it’s baking or sewing, maybe it’s a story you tell really well, spoken or written. Perhaps it is the perfectly set holiday supper table, or an awesome flowchart or a flawless financial statement.

Some of us believe we are not artistic – since grade school we have compared ourselves to the kids in the class who could REALLY draw – and decided that was not what we were. And then we probably went on to create a perfect story or solve a math problem or play the perfect ball game.

Luckily, when we talk about prayer through art: There are two main approaches, which make it very inclusive: First of all, there is meditating on art as a starting point for prayer; and secondly, there is actually creating art as an expression of prayer.

Historically – art has been very important in Christian faith, at least until the 16th century – when the church felt the impact of the Reformation. With a population with low literacy, the church used picture as a way of teaching bible stories and theology. From the puzzle paintings in the catacombs, to stained glass and statues, to sacred music and illuminated bibles, artists were employed to teach faith through art. With the Reformation came greater emphasis on

learning to read – the bible was translated into first languages, and many great artworks were unfortunately destroyed as being either distracting or even idolatrous.

I believe that art, whether it is sacred or secular, inspires a reaction from us. Whether you are creating it, enjoying it, or being challenged by it, it mirrors God's own creativity and touches some spirit story deep within us.

I want to begin with the art we experience – a spiritual practice sometimes called “Visio Divina”
– literally seeing the Holy.

Visio Divina usually follows five simple steps: (1) preparation and clearing your mind, (2) looking at an image, (3) a time of meditation, (4) contemplation or response – either by journaling or creating your own art, and (5) prayer. The Upper Room describes *Visio Divina* in the following steps:

1. Pick out an image from a website, a photograph, painting, or icon. You can use an art book if you have one – a favourite painting in your home. You can go to Google images or the National Gallery of Canada website and look up their collection. You could even listen to a piece of music or something tactile. Just find an image, object or music that intrigues you ... (pause the powerpoint if you want to look now – cause I'm not waiting for you!)
2. When you have that image, look at the image and let your senses stay with the very first thing that you see. Keep your attention on that one part of the image that first catches your eye. Try to keep your eyes from wandering to other parts of the picture. Breathe deeply and let yourself gaze at that part of the image for a minute or so.
3. Now, let your eyes gaze at the whole image, where does your eye go next? Take your time and look or listen or hold every part of the artwork. experience it all. Reflect on the image for a minute or so.
4. Then consider the following questions:
 - What emotions does this evoke in you?
 - What does it stir up in you, bring forth in you?
 - Does this image lead you into prayer? Does it help you identify something you long for?
 - Something or someone you are concerned about? Something you are grateful for?
 - If so, let these prayers take form in you. Write them down if you desire.
5. Now, offer your prayers to God in a final time of silence.

The second way of praying with art is by **creating art**—

I'm talking about a full spectrum: from the greatest masterpieces to a casual doodle—
The act of creating can express things which cannot be expressed in words. It can also be a meditative tool to help focus your mind. (If you sit beside me at a meeting, you may have noticed that I have a tendency to doodle all over agendas as minutes. It's not because I am bored, actually it is to keep my mind from wandering – like our knitters in church who love to keep their hands busy.)

The best thing is you do not need to be a “good” artist to engage in artistic prayer. One of the wonderful things about art is that it is so accessible—regardless of age, ability, training or background.

Vinita Hampton Wright, is someone who shares her reflection on praying with art through mandalas – those big, circular intricate creations, full of colour and shape. She writes:

I've learned that sometimes the best prayers are not built out of words but out of textures or colors or aromas or tones. ... When I began coloring mandala patterns several years ago, that practice opened up a sacred space in which I did not have to think or form arguments or explanations. I simply had to be there. I have no training in the visual arts, so I would begin with one color and then go to the next and the next—it was a gradual, open-ended process that gave me the freedom to explore and experience without judging or worrying.

I had hoped we might do some kind of art project at the end of our presentation – for those who felt comfortable crafting and creating with others around. Instead I invite you to go ahead and be artistic – with a clean sheet of paper, or a ball of playdough, or a recipe or by writing or whatever inspires you. The blessing of doing this alone – there’s no one to compare yourself to! Just go ahead and be an artist -your way.

If you want to comment on the process, or even share the image you meditated on or the creation that came out of this time on our Facebook group – go for it!

Let us close with a prayer:

O God of infinite love, and holy inspiration. Today we pray for all who are challenged to find peace in this troubled place and time. Grant us the wisdom to slow down, holy One, and look around at the world you have made. Help us to find beauty wherever we are, to take it as a blessing for this moment, and share it with others, that they too might find that moment of peace and inspiration and joy. O God, like Jesus we find ourselves turning our hearts towards every difficulty ahead – help us to move forward into holy week with courage, and compassion, and ultimately with Hope. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.