



FaithLink

Connecting Faith and Life

Creativity in a Pandemic by Jill M. Johnson



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During this pandemic, people across the globe have used the time to express themselves in new and creative ways. How have people been creative during this time? How do creative expressions help us cope with difficult situations? How can we express our faith and hope through creative outlets?

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Collective Effervescence

David Émile Durkheim was a French sociologist who studied human behavior in the late 1800s and early 1900s. During his career, he coined the term *collective effervescence* to describe how communities come together from time to time and participate in the same thoughts or actions. In a 2017 article for *The Cut*, Drake Baer explains collective effervescence as “contagious euphoria” and “that glowy, giddy feeling where your sense of self slackens, yielding to a connection with your fellow, synchronized humans.”

As we adjust to social distancing guidelines made necessary by COVID-19, most of us are observing, probably to a greater extent than usual, creative demonstrations of various sorts. It may be a paradox, but our isolation is providing more opportunities for creative community. A common thread during this particular crisis has been the need to connect to our fellow human beings. Humans have always sought meaning and connection, but since interpersonal interactions are currently limited, we are finding creative ways to cope.

While essential employees continue to work overtime to provide invaluable services during the pandemic, some of us have found ourselves with extra time on our hands—time to engage our imaginations and hone our talents. Some have simply had more time to enjoy these creative expressions that others are sharing. Through social media outlets, television, and neighborly expressions, we are seeing an explosion of creativity that is helping us, either

through distraction or compassion, deal with this incredibly difficult time.

REFLECT:

- What are your thoughts on the term *collective effervescence*?
- Have you felt more or less connected to friends and family during this time? How has your sense of connection evolved over the past several weeks?
- Do you feel connected to a larger global community? Why or why not?

Creative Expressions

The explosion of creative expressions we are now seeing come in a variety of forms, including paintings, writings, videos, music, and photography, just to name a few. Many of these creative outpourings are being shared on social media, on television, and in community spaces. People who might have been hesitant to share their personal creations feel a greater freedom, and in some cases an urgency, now to share them.

You likely have your favorites, but on social media I'm enjoying the humorous videos made by individuals as well as families, the musical artists who are presenting online concerts, beautiful photographs by friends, shared cooking recipes, and moving written pieces. The Art Recreation Challenge encourages people to reenact famous paintings, using costumes and props they have around the house, and then post their photos online, side by side with the original. The results are hilarious and educational. I learned some new things about these classic paintings!

Churches are also engaging in the creative process by finding new ways to present worship services and continue small group spiritual formation. Many faith-based organizations are offering extra online content, such as daily devotionals or prayer resources. The struggle to adapt and learn to use platforms such as Zoom is real, but also an incredible learning opportunity. Technology is its own form of creativity, and we should thank software engineers for envisioning a world where people

could connect virtually, especially since it is so needed right now.

Neighborhoods are also expressing care for their fellow neighbors with front yard art galleries, sidewalk chalk art, birthday party parades, and socially distanced concerts. If you're a fan of the British comedy group Monty Python, you'll appreciate the family in Michigan who put a sign in the front yard that said, "You have now entered the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Silly Walks. Commence silly walking immediately." The family recorded some of the "silly walks" they saw and put them on social media.

On Good Friday, our neighbor set up a series of prayer stations on a prominent sidewalk near our house. Walkers could stop and look at large posters put on a fence, each containing a Scripture and an artistic representation of Christ's journey to the cross. A local TV news channel filmed the posters and aired the story as a "Stations of the Cross Display with Social Distancing in Mind."

REFLECT:

- Share some of your favorite examples of creative expressions witnessed during this time.
- If you have engaged in more creativity during this time, share what you've been doing.

Healing Euphoria

Celebrities are also finding creative ways to share their talents while also providing encouragement during the COVID-19 crisis. Stars such as Jimmy Fallon, Lady Gaga, and Paul McCartney shared performances from their homes in the televised production *One World: Together at Home* that aired April 18. This concert also paid tribute to the workers and volunteers who are on the frontlines of fighting the pandemic.

One of the most moving examples I watched of collective effervescence was also one of the most sobering. On Easter Sunday, the great Italian tenor Andrea Bocelli performed a concert from inside an empty Milan cathedral, also called the Duomo di Milano. Milano is one of the areas of Italy most

devastated by COVID-19. Bocelli ended the concert by singing a beautiful rendition of “Amazing Grace” on the front steps of this massive church. This outpouring of music, at a time when Christian churches across the globe were closed for the most sacred of holidays, provided solace and a sense of togetherness. According to a digital radio station in the United Kingdom, this concert was the biggest livestream of classical music ever, with more than 28 million views from across the globe in its first 24 hours.

Consider the balcony concerts in Italy, where people who live in nearby apartment complexes are standing outside on their balconies and singing together. They are separated by space but connected by art. Or think about the clapping, cheering, and sounding of sirens that occur each night at 7:00 p.m. in New York City when health-care workers change shifts. An emergency room doctor I follow on Instagram shared, in emotional posts, how these creative expressions of thanks

keep him going in these dark times as he cares for the sick and dying each day. Other creative expressions of solidarity and gratitude include crafters who are sewing masks to protect their friends, family, and even strangers.

All these forms of collective effervescence, these shared creative expressions, exemplify humanity at its best, even as our usual political divisions continue to rage. As Baer points out, “Humans, the hyper-social creatures that we are, love to feel a part of something.” This “part of something” is also our longing for God. Being Christ to each other—through laughter, music, and other creative outlets—makes God’s presence manifest with us, now and for eternity.

REFLECT:

- In what ways can creativity, whether serious or funny, minister to others?
- How have you experienced God’s presence the past few months?

A Creative God

According to the 2016 *Book of Discipline*, United Methodists believe, “The biblical authors, illumined by the Holy Spirit, bear witness that in Christ the world is reconciled to God.” Partnering with God’s Spirit to record God’s message to humankind was a creative act. It required an open and listening heart from the biblical authors.

Our Scriptures begin with the story of a “creative God” who takes a formless, empty, dark earth and creates a magnificent work of art, declaring everything “good” (Genesis 1:1-31). Our Scriptures end with a God who is still creating, giving us a new heaven and a new earth (Revelation 21:1).

Since we are created in God’s image (Genesis 1:27), we understand ourselves to be co-creators with this imaginative Spirit. When building of the Tabernacle, God chose Bezalel as a craftsman and filled him not only with skill and ability but also spirit and knowledge (Exodus 31:1-5). Jesus tells us not to hide our light, but to let it shine (Matthew 5:15-16).

Paul tells us we are each given a spiritual gift, “the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Corinthians 12:7, NRSV). Before we can be creative Christians, we must know and name our strengths and gifts. If you haven’t already, consider taking a spiritual gifts course. You can then use creativity in “producing fruit in every good work” (Colossians 1:10).

REFLECT:

- Share a time you felt the presence of the Holy Spirit when you were creating or producing something.
- If you know your top spiritual gifts, share what those are and how you use them to bless others.

Creative Roadblocks

“I’m just not the creative type.” You might say this about yourself, but it’s probably not really true. Being creative isn’t just about fine arts (music, dancing, theater, painting, etc.); it can also encapsulate landscaping, gardening, remodeling, woodworking, bird-watching, exercise, and many other activities. Even scientists and engineers use creative thinking to solve problems. Where would we be if Marie Currie and Thomas Edison hadn’t created new ways of thinking about old problems?

What if you do consider yourself to be a creative type normally, but you haven’t been able to focus on your craft the past few months? That’s understandable. Author Brené Brown posted the following on her Facebook page on April 24: “‘Hitting the wall’ is real. . . . There is nothing wrong with us. We’re going to be OK.” She continued, “When we hit that wall, sometimes courage looks like scaling it or breaking through it. AND, sometimes courage is building a fort against the wall and taking a nap.”

There are practical tips you can take if you have hit a creative wall. Take a walk outside, exercise, journal about your frustrations, start an inspiration file that you can access when you do feel motivated, change your work environment, or take a long sabbath. It’s been my experience that waiting, getting comfortable with not knowing, and being patient during dark times are key parts of the creative process. God “conspires,” or brings his Spirit to our Spirit, when the time is right for co-creation.

REFLECT:

- In what ways do you express creativity?
- When you are feeling creatively stuck, what do you do to get unstuck?

Visio Divina

You might already be familiar with the meditative form of Bible reading called *lectio divina* (Latin for “divine reading”) as a means of prayer. Its cousin, *visio divina* (or divine seeing), is a similar form of prayer based on the visual arts. This form of prayer utilizes the imagination and visual senses, allowing us to encounter the divine through images in a powerful way. These images can be photographs, icons, a piece of art, or something from nature.

According to the Upper Room’s website, *visio divina* can be practiced individually or with a group. The Upper Room suggests the following steps:

1. Choose an image.
2. Look at the image and let your eyes stay with the very first thing 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. Take your time and look at every part of the photograph. See it all. Reflect on the image for a minute or so.
4. Consider the following questions:
 - » What emotions does this image evoke in you?
 - » What does the image stir up in you, bring forth in you?
 - » Does this image lead you into an attitude of prayer? 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.

REFLECT:

- Engage in *visio divina*. See “Helpful Links” for suggested images.

Helpful Links

- Andrea Bocelli's full concert (Music for Hope - Live from Duomo di Milano): <https://youtu.be/huTUOek4LgU>
- The last part of the concert, with Bocelli singing "Amazing Grace": <https://youtu.be/bpXwOSHTwsY>
- A story by CBS News, about Kadir Nelson, who painted a pandemic "After the Storm" painting that portrays our shared humanity: <https://www.cbsnews.com/video/artist-kadir-nelsons-after-the-storm/>
- Apple recently released this commercial titled "Creativity Goes On" that captures home-bound connections even while separated: <https://youtu.be/Kl1NW7h7lrY>
- The website Pathways to God has several suggested biblical images for *visio divina*, or praying with art: <https://www.pathwaystogod.org/resources/praying-art>

About the Writer

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Next Week in **FaithLink**
Connecting Faith and Life

Victory Gardens and COVID-19

by Laura Brekke

In response to the uncertainty surrounding life with COVID-19, more and more Americans are planting victory gardens. What are victory gardens? How do they provide food security during a crisis? How do victory gardens embody hope for people of faith?



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Opening Prayer

Creator God, thank you for giving us so many ways to express our emotions and thoughts. We also pray for those who are suffering from COVID-19, and for all who are helping those who are suffering. We pray for all who are lonely, scared, and anxious. Open our hearts to creative expressions that grow your kingdom and share Christ's love. Amen.

Leader Helps

- Have several Bibles on hand (or encourage participants to use smartphone Bible apps) and a marker-board and markers for writing lists or responses to reflection questions.
- Open the session with the provided prayer or one of your own. Invite participants to take a moment to take a few deep breaths in and out. Spend a few moments in silence before praying.
- Remind the group that people have different perspectives and to honor these differences by treating one another with respect as you explore this topic together.
- Be prepared to play any videos listed under “Helpful Links” on a smartphone or computer if your group is interested in learning more. Also be prepared to conduct your class remotely through programs such as Google Hangouts Meet or Zoom.
- Read or review highlights of each section of this issue. Use the *REFLECT* questions in order to stimulate discussion.
- Set aside some time for spiritual reflection using the steps under the *visio divina* section. Find a piece of artwork that the entire class can use for a meditation and share it before class time, or encourage participants to find one of their own choosing.
- Close the session with the provided prayer or one of your own.

Teaching Alternatives

If your class is meeting remotely, encourage everyone to watch the news story about Kadir Nelson’s “After the Storm” painting, included under “Helpful Links.” Have a discussion about the painting and ask some of the following questions, or ones of your own:

- » How do you think humans will behave with each other once the COVID-19 crisis is over?
- » In what ways might it increase our empathy and compassion?
- » If you were to create an “After the Storm” painting, what might your art look like? What themes would you include? What message would you want to convey?

Closing Prayer

God of comfort, we need your peace as we adjust to a new normal. You are the origin of all creativity, bringing us unexpected joy in unexpected ways. Thank you for guiding us. Amen.