

## The Creator in You

Today I want to talk about the creator in you. It's your superpower, and it will alter the world going forward, for good or ill. Amid all the turmoil and upheaval going on in the world these days, there is a remarkable worldwide change in thought under way. Some say it's a new spiritual consciousness. It's not really new, for it's expressed in all the major spiritual advances in the Bible. But, like all new ideas that threaten the way things have been done before, it clashes with long established habits, and not everybody is on board. But, it's the most exciting thing I know about. You don't have to be a Christian to be a part of it, but today I want to point out some resources from within Christianity for understanding this change in consciousness that crucially involves the creator in you.

If I were to ask those of you who identify as Christians, *why* you are a Christian, I suppose most of you would say something like: I think being a Christian is the pathway to my ultimate good. Christ, Christians say, is "the way the truth and the life" (John 14:6). The term for being on this path is "faith". Now whatever Christian faith is, Christians agree that it's whatever properly relates us to God, who is the ultimate good and in relation to whom our ultimate good is secured. The traditional language for this is sanctification, salvation, deification, or communion with God. These terms speak to what is supposed to be of ultimate importance for human beings: full, complete, perfected, harmonious flourishing.

Think about that for a moment. What would life be like if you were to obtain your ultimate good? What would you *think*? What would you *feel*? What would you *do*? And don't forget all the other people. What would full, complete, perfected, harmonious flourishing for all really amount to? What it would look and feel like for billions of individual people with their particular interests and diverse talents to flourish together? I wouldn't blame you if you shrugged and said, "I don't know. I just don't know what

living in an ultimately good community with all its diversity would be like.”

And yet, we tell ourselves stories that not only assume answers to my question; they determine the particular path we take toward what we assume will lead to our ultimate good. I’m going to tell two very different stories about ultimate human flourishing from a broadly Christian perspective. I invite you to consider which resonates with you.

According to one influential Christian story, there is something we humans are supposed to be. God has prescribed a set of regulations for proper social behavior, a set of rules that delimit the boundaries of proper human life. The way we behave and think either corresponds to and manifests that way humans are supposed to be, or it doesn’t. Our most ancient ancestors started out doing it right, but then they screwed it all up and passed their disease down through the generations to us. Our disordered nature prevents us from living within the correct boundaries. The ultimate goal is to get ourselves with God’s help into that heavenly zone of righteousness and then to stay there permanently preserved forever.

Many Christians tell this story or something like it. But, there is a *different* story about our ultimate flourishing. According to the second story, we humans have limitless potential. We are made in the image of God, which is to say that we are fundamentally *creative*. There is no fixed boundary of human flourishing. There is no zone of proper human existence to which we are to seek permanent preservation. Our ultimate good is satisfied in the infinite diversification of which we are capable. Our nature is expressed in terms such as emergence, supersession, reordering, reshaping, transfiguration, and renewal. There is literally no limit to the levels or forms of satisfaction and goodness for which we are made. We are everlasting coworkers with an infinite God, and together we

will make the world become what it will become, going forward forever and ever.

The first story—the story of preservation and permanence—has long held sway among Christians. It isn't hard to understand why. In a world with so much change and uncertainty, it makes sense to strive for some stability and security, which can promote goods such as calmness, peace, quiet, contentment, rest, tranquility, composure, repose. I'm not here to suggest that we don't, or that we shouldn't, value them.

What I'm here to say is that telling the first story is doing more than anything I know in preventing us from the good life. And it is out of line with the history of the world and our lived experience.

According to our best evidence, the universe is about 14 billion years old. For Christians and other theists, this means that God's creation happened at least 14 billion years ago and it has been developing for 14 billion years. The pattern has been constant change. Space itself has been expanding since creation and continues to expand. All the galaxies are moving away from each other. The universe has no center and apparently no edge. And we're on the move: The earth whizzes around the sun at 67,000 miles an hour. Our solar system speeds around our galaxy at 500,000 miles per hour. If you are 16 years old, then since you were born you have traveled about 10 billion miles.

All of this movement and expansion implies *change*. God's creation is the history of mind-boggling progress over an unimaginable span of time. Change, not stability, is the pattern. Humans arrived on the scene only 200,000 years ago, but consider how we've changed since then, from mere family groups to tribes, to federations, cities, states, countries, farms, industries, the space age, the computer age and the communication revolution.

Change is the pattern.

We are learning that physical objects are composed of energy, interrelated energy that can be expressed in variations beyond our imagination. And, most amazing of all, we humans have powers that enable us intentionally and self-consciously to arrange and rearrange the energy of the universe. In short, we're *creative beings*.<sup>1</sup> You and I, all of us, whether we are aware of it or not, are constantly using our creative powers in ways that affect how reality will be.

How you will use your creative powers will depend on the story you tell about the nature of human beings and their flourishing. If you tell the first story, the story according to which there is a fixed, delimited boundary of proper human living, and if you then *add* to that story that only those on board with this program will have everlasting life in heaven with God, then you are naturally going to use your creative powers to try to get other people to accept what you think are the rules for human behavior and to live according to them. You will naturally see the world as divided among those who are with the program, and therefore good, blessed, saved, and those who are not with the program, and therefore cut off from God.

When that first story fires the imagination, it often motivates people to use their creative powers to demonize those who don't fit in with long established views of what a human being is supposed to be: the first story has prompted defenses of slavery, subjugation of women and minorities, and detest of LGBTQ people. When you think you *already* know what are *all* the kinds of lives and social structures that can promote human flourishing and which cannot, when you're not open to discovering new ways in which God's creation can promote human flourishing, you can easily spend your time and creative powers doing things like fighting culture wars, because that's what makes sense.

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<sup>1</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien said we are "sub-creators", because our creative power is derived from God's fundamental creative power.

But, if you tell the second story, the story that says our ultimate good is to be realized in infinitely diverse ways for the flourishing of all, you'll more naturally identify yourself as part of the whole human race, you'll think of your own good as depending on the welfare of everybody else; you'll more naturally see us as all in this together. You'll see your own good as something to be worked out in tandem with all the other people who have the same God-given creative power that you have. And you'll more naturally see your own creative powers as a tool for cooperatively transforming a world into one where all flourish.

The second story is awesome, and so much more *interesting* than the first. Indeed, I think it's what the Hebrew prophets, Jesus, and the Apostle Paul were all pointing us to. Note that Jesus is pretty constantly welcoming in those that the religious leaders were attempting to keep out. Jesus is pretty constantly saying to the religious leaders: look, you've deified the rules and regulations and thus missed out on what they were there to promote: justice for all. Suppose we take seriously Paul's claim that we are God's coworkers in building the kingdom of God. Suppose we take seriously the New Testament claim that we are all parts of the body of Christ, in whom all things hold together and through whom all things are being reconciled. As the writer of Colossians puts it, the mystery now being disclosed is Christ within you, the hope of glory, in whom every human being is to be perfected in wisdom and power. (And, yes, that is precisely what Colossians says: every human being is to be perfected in wisdom and power).

How do we use our creative power to promote the perfecting of every human being in wisdom and power? This is a tough question for many reasons. At this point in our development, we humans are a pretty scared, selfish, foolish lot who stand in need of substantial moral transformation. How do we decide what to throw ourselves into?

There are at least 4 tough facts here:

1. We have to decide under uncertainty what to create without knowing what the effects of our creative work will be or how we will be transformed in the process.
2. We need to guard against taking any new moral growth we achieve and then solidifying it into a new set of rules and regulations for human flourishing.
3. We need to do our work in a way that integrates with the needs and proper creative powers of all the other people.
4. We need to resist actual evil in the world when it is often not so clear whether something is evil or how we can resist it without making things worse.

These are hard tasks. The creative life is a messy one. We're going to fail and have to learn from our mistakes. We're going to hurt other people in the process. We're going to need to ask for forgiveness and to accept forgiveness from others. It won't be easy, as anyone who's tried creative pursuits knows. You're not going to nail it on your first try, and maybe not on your fiftieth. Some people are not going to get what you're doing. Some people will say you're part of the problem. You will face frustration and hardship. Yes, all of this is true. But that is just how the creative process *works*. And this is what we are: we're creators. With our creative powers we rearrange the energy of the world, whether it's a meal, a painting, a friendship, a law, a work schedule, a podcast, a prayer, a vaccine. Whatever it is you do, your creative powers will alter the world going forward, for good or ill.

We need guidance. One important reason that I am religious, and specifically Christian, is that I find guidance there. In our reading today from the ancient prophet Jeremiah, we hear that God's will is to be written on human hearts, an idea echoed in Ezekiel's amazing prophetic utterance:

“I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you” (Ezekiel 36:26). Now the heart in biblical terms is the deep seat of human desire and motivation, and the spirit is that through which we receive divine guidance. This guidance rarely comes in flashy signs and wonders.<sup>2</sup> Guidance usually comes as “a still, small voice” via one’s spirit to the heart. As Paul says, God’s love has been poured out in our *hearts* through the Holy Spirit given to us. Feeling this love, getting this direction, requires digging deep into our depths, getting past our petty selfishness, moving below our fear, and drowning out our culture’s constant lure to see our success and flourishing in terms of youthful personal glory.

I know of no better guide than Jesus, who frequently spent time alone to do this deep soul work, and then, renewed and empowered, came back into society to engage his creative powers to heal sick people, to welcome the dispossessed, to feed hungry people, to embrace outcasts, to celebrate the diversity of life, and to invite everyone to the dinner party. As today’s readings from Hebrews and John both attest, this is a way that necessarily requires suffering and even a kind of dying to self, but its fruit is eternal life. This, this is the way of a creative life.

Do not shun the creative impulse in yourself. There is a creator in you, and you have gifts for the world that only you can deliver in your particular way. Do you know what they are? Have you searched the deepest depths of your desire? That is where I think you will find what you need: the creator in you.

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<sup>2</sup> Today’s gospel reading (John 12:20-33) includes a description of people hearing a voice from heaven. Note, though, that the crowd just thought it was thunder. A few thought it was an angel speaking to Jesus, but there is no indication that anyone other than Jesus that day got any clear guidance from the flashy sound.