



Into the Crazy: Creativity, Faith, and the Divine

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Invocation

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field. I'll meet you there.

When the soul lies down in that grass,
the world is too full to talk about.
Ideas, language, even the phrase each other
doesn't make any sense

From the Essential Rumi- Translated by Coleman Barks



World's largest Orchid- Photo taken at Key West Garden Club Oct 2014

Before I launch into today's message, I'd like to take a moment for us to center and commune with ourselves and one another. Feel free to participate to whatever degree you feel comfortable with.

Everyone close your eyes for a moment. Take a deep breath. Become aware of the feeling of your body breathing, your heartbeat.

Hold this awareness of your breathing body in your mind. As you do so, become aware that there are other breathing bodies surrounding you.

There are other breathing bodies. This room of breathing bodies- all of us pulling into our lungs, our hearts, our bodies the warm, moist air of the earth.

This is what our dreams are made of. You are here in this room because you have a dream. You have a vision of being part of something larger than yourself. You have a vision of sharing something that you have or know with others.

Breathe. Open your eyes. Look around. Look your neighbors in the eye and know and feel that you share a dream. You all share a vision.

And you all have a little bit of crazy that needs to be tended to, watered, and cared for like a garden if you want to harvest it's sacred fruit.

[Singing together- Hymn #194- Faith is a Forest]

[Message]



Well, you might be thinking that sacred fruit sounds tasty but you're not so sure about the crazy part. Maybe you're thinking that it depends on what I mean by crazy. I picked that word on purpose. Crazy gets people's attention. And now that I have your attention, I want to tell you some stuff about a teacher, a student, and a bird. But first I'm going to read another sufi poem, this one by Hafiz.

[Hafiz Poem]

Love wants to reach out and manhandle us
Break all our teacup talk of God.

Love sometimes gets tired of speaking sweetly
And wants to rip to shreds
All your erroneous notions of truth

That make you fight within yourself,
dear one,
And with others

Causing the world to weep
On too many fine days.

God wants to manhandle us,

Lock us inside of a tiny room with Himself
And practice His dropkick.

The Beloved sometimes wants
To do us a great favor:

Hold us upside down
And shake all the nonsense out.

But when we hear
He is in such a "playful drunken mood"
Most everyone I know
Quickly packs their bags and hightails it
Out of town.

*From: Exerpts from 'Tired of Speaking Sweetly' from The Gift
Translated by Daniel Ladinsky*

[Message]

Hello and Thank you for coming this week to hear about Creativity, faith, and the divine- to talk about going Into the Crazy.

My name is Emilie Sayward Henry-Richardson. I'm an artist and an educator. I help people to see the world differently, to trust in their own abilities, and to find and tap the deep creative wells in their own lives.

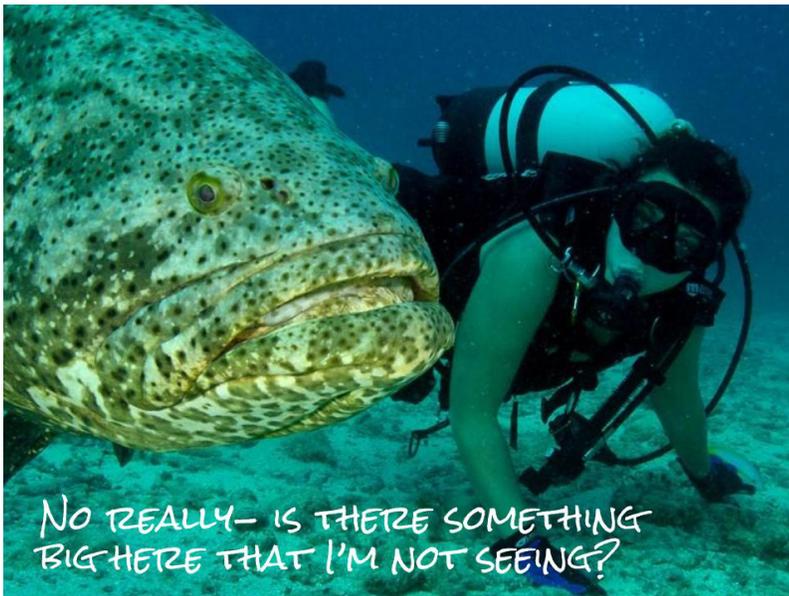
I've never wanted to be anything but an artist, and I discovered in my 20's that I had a deep connection with teaching as well. I've taught art at the university level for almost a decade, from freshman to graduate students and have had the deep pleasure of witnessing the process of self discovery in the classroom as well as watching my students grow in their endeavors beyond the classroom.

...and you know what they say about teaching- that you learn just as much from your students as you teach them. Well, it's true, and probably the biggest thing that I learned from my students is the reason that I'm hear right now.

This 'biggest thing' is what the students were taking away, and it wasn't what I thought I was teaching them. I'm kinda slow sometimes, so it took me a few years to figure it out- that it wasn't a fluke, or one person's opinion, or a particularly good

class. My students were consistently saying in evaluations that they were pushed beyond what they thought was possible for themselves. They learned more than they thought possible in the short amount of time that we had together, usually a semester/ 15 weeks, and that they learned about strengths that they didn't know that they had. Also, they were leaving the classes with a greater sense of optimism about their futures and their ability to accomplish their dreams. These reflections mean a lot to me, as a teacher- it's kind of a big deal.

I thought I was teaching them how-to's- how to carve wood, how to mix paint, how to draw, how to work with the elements and principles of visual art, how to self evaluate, how to light and photograph their artwork, how to do their professional practices. And it's not weird that I thought that because, I mean, after all those were the classes that they signed up for, right?- that was the content of the courses.



So what was I missing?

The evaluations that I was getting back kept bringing up these points that were well outside the content. Although I was moved and pleased by it, I wasn't really sure what was happening, or why.

So, I asked one of my students about it at her graduation show. Keep in mind, university evaluations are all anonymous,

so I had no idea who said what, but she was a good student who I'd had a couple of years before and wanted to see what stood out for her. She said there were several things, but the one that she still thought about often was the first day speech from my class. Which is funny- until this conversation I had no evidence whatsoever that any of my students were actually listening to me on the first day....

She remembered me saying "*if you do the work, you cannot fail*", and I added to that, as an aside, that it's true everywhere in life, not just in my class. If you do the work, you cannot fail.

I believe that I said something like that because it's still a part of my 1st day speech, although I might not say it exactly the same way.

She said that it was like a mantra for her through that semester. She used it to combat her fear of failure and her sense of not-enough-ness, and her decision to trust me, as the instructor, that if she did the work I (literally) would not fail her. She found herself saying it in other classes as well, and then outside of school. She said it every time she felt stupid, when she felt behind, when she felt that something wasn't good enough or right, when she didn't feel like working, when she was uninspired, or being pulled in multiple directions at once. She just kept repeating to herself, "if you do the work, you cannot fail."



She told me that, after taking this to heart and using it for a couple of years, that she understood that doing the work didn't always mean that she was happy with the result. But that it most definitely made her happy that there WAS a result. This commitment to show up-to being present and open- to doing the work, had led her to the experience of Flow in her

artistic practice, which in turn convinced her that she was a 'real' artist and gave her the faith to keep practicing. By practicing, I don't mean rehearsing. Practice in art speak means Action- the doing. The going-to-your-studio-and-making-art.

Another acquaintance joined us in this conversation and asked her about her plans after graduation, and you know the usual what-does-an-art- student-plan-to-do after graduation... She looked right at me and said "I'm gonna do the the work. And I will NOT fail." Wow. I felt so humbled in that moment. She had schooled me with my own words, words that I hardly remember speaking.

That conversation really stayed with me. The conversation came to the top of my mind recently when I read Matthew Fox's book about creativity.

Normally I would approach a talk about creativity by building an understanding of what creativity is and what it isn't. What the aspects of creativity are, describing the benefits and concrete methods of building your creative muscles. But today- all I want to talk about is the idea of approaching creativity from the position of absolute trust. From this position of understanding that *if you do the work, you cannot fail*.

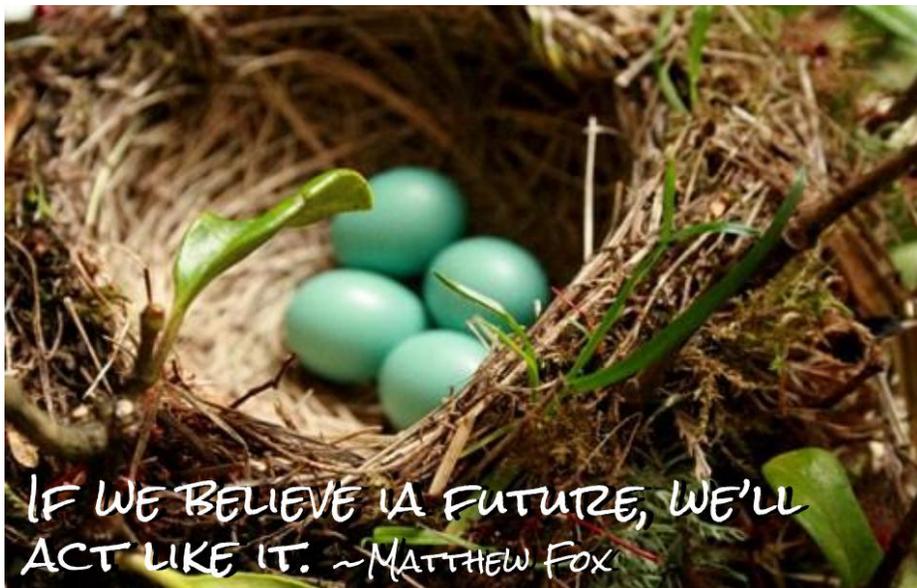
In my mind, trust is synonymous with action.



In his book, Fox talks about nest-building. He talks about nest building as an act of faith- an act of trust. Fox elaborates using this analogy- that a bird builds a nest because it has faith that *there is a future that will require a nest*. The action- or the trust- that this future exists, the reason why he's building his nest, belies a particular kind of relationship to the universe.

Nest-building is a sign of optimism. It's a work in progress, and progress requires trust.

This is a kind of trust, a kind of faith that has nothing to do with dogma and is purely rooted in action. Fox says like, like the bird, "If we believe in a future, then we'll act like it." Wow, that's a simple but profound statement.



I can't tell you how many times I've been guilty of saying I was gonna do something when such and such happened, when certain conditions were met, when I have enough money, or time, or whatever. But that statement really gets to something that I feel is true- If we believe in a future, we'll act like it. We'll build the nest. We'll do the work and we won't fail.

My university teaching practice was centered from the belief that 90% of being an artist is about discipline. Its about showing up and doing the work. Outside the university in my adult classes, the approach is more relaxed but is still centered around developing creative capacity through committed practice. Being an artist may be 90% about discipline, but that discipline is 100% about trust, and trust - faith-equals action.

Faith is defined by action and is made up of courage, commitment, and choice. when I look over all the material that I've used, in every kind of class, the content of those lessons all fall under one of these categories (of courage, commitment, and choice- which is a whole other lecture in itself) and they culminate in action- an expression of faith in our shared future.

So what does all this have to do with crazy? Or creativity? Well like I said, I used that word 'crazy' to get your attention.

For some reason, despite the stated desire to be creative in life, we often have a great aversion to *actually* being creative. Everyone struggles with this problem, even the most creative people that you know. People both fear and desire 'crazy' in their lives. So I'll clarify a little what I mean by crazy. I think there are **3 kinds of crazy.**

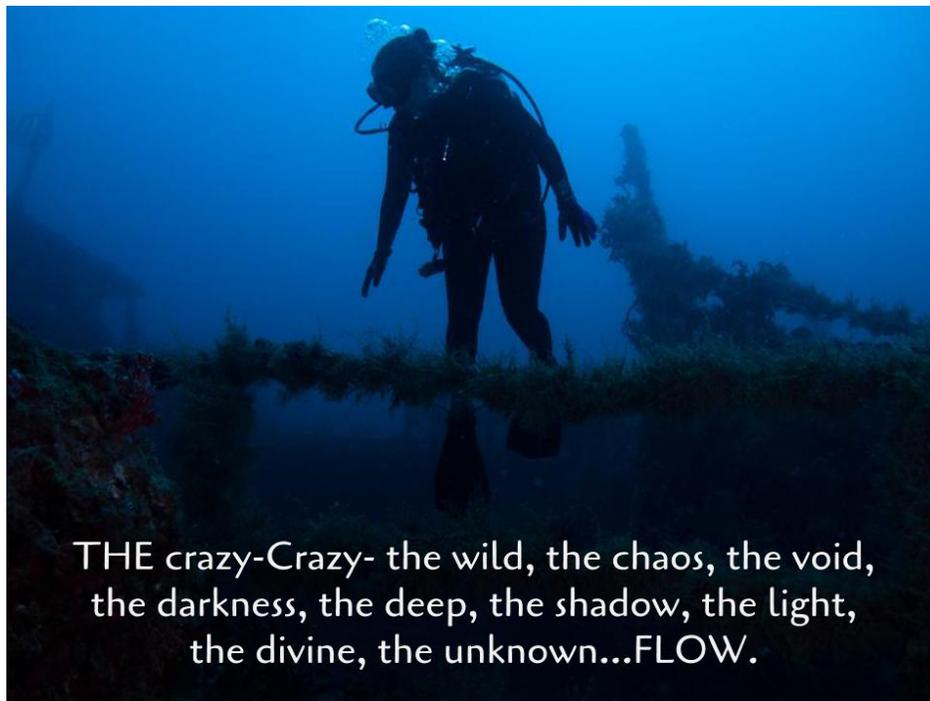
There is ha-ha crazy: People like the kind of crazy that let's you go for it on the dance floor, say anything to anyone, and do stupid, possibly illegal and likely very funny things for good friends because you love them.

There is Jerry Springer crazy: Not so beloved is the kind of crazy that begets stalkers, workplace drama kings and queens, and people who hurt kittens and puppies or start wars.

And there is THE crazy: which brings me to to something one of MY teachers said, that stays with me to this day still. I can hear him squawking it at me still when ever I feel stuck.

My grad school professor and mentor Jack Wax used the phrase "Going out into THE crazy" all the time, and it stuck with me just like my words stuck with my student. The phrase is actually the title to an essay he loved, and he used it as a prompt to guide students back to their OWN paths, rather than succumbing to the press of expectations, the ease of well-trodden paths, and facing- truly facing- something utterly unknown and unknowable.

Not haha crazy. Not Jerry Springer crazy. THE crazy. You might know it by another name or face: THE crazy, the wild, the chaos, the void, the darkness, the deep, the zone, the infinite, the unknown...FLOW, the divine. THE crazy is the kind of crazy that invites you break all your teacup talk of God.





When my student talked about the 'doing the work,' which ultimately led her to experience Flow, she was talking about tapping into THE crazy, the divine, that place where, as Bob Sima would say, everything is music. It's the place where artists and athletes, mathematicians and stock analysts go when they have the experience of being a conduit, a vessel,

through which something larger than themselves is poured through, expressed, or generated.

I think people desire to be crazy (the good or the bad kind) or creative because it represents- for whatever reason, in whatever way- freedom, choice, and courage. Less obviously, crazy/ creative behavior belies a level of self trust that brushes aside the everyday expectations of culture, and often, of ourselves.

Thomas Berry insists that "if we are to welcome creativity in ourselves and one another, we must also welcome back a sense of the wild [THE crazy], which is a sense of the sacred. The wild is that which is bigger than us. So, too, is the sacred. Creativity has something of the wild about it- and something of the sacred. "

Psychologist Otto Rank defines an artist as "one who wants to leave behind a gift" and I think the word 'artist' could be substituted with the word 'creative'. You may or may not see yourself as an artist or wish to be an artist, but everyone, in any kind of work, can benefit from intentionally being creative in whatever your calling is.

I want to leave behind a gift. I don't know what that gift will be. If it works anything like being a teacher, it will be a surprise to me, unintentional, just like the effect my teacher had on me and just like the effect I had on my student. But I really, really desire that when I leave this earth, that I will have left behind a little bit of grace . I trust that I will, whether I know it or not.

And I believe that "Faith was never meant to be an excuse for a powerless life. " [~Cole Ne Smith] So twig by twig, I build my nest.



So the next time you (or someone else) asks if you are crazy- crazy for chasing a dream, crazy for giving up security, crazy [pause] for believing in yourself. Crazy for wanting what you want. [pause]

Breathe. Look around again. Look at each others faces. And when that question comes up, give yourself one of two answers. It doesn't matter which one, and you can go back and forth if you want.

Tell yourself NO, I am not crazy. I'm not Jerry Springer material. Crazy in this case would be NOT engaging - not caring about those around me, not willing to take action to deal with problems, not responding creatively to situations with openness and positivity.

I just can't live like that. So no, I'm not that kind of crazy.



Or tell yourself YES. I am crazy. Look at my haha-crazy dance moves (I'm not gonna demonstrate that here but I will show a picture of me making a snow angel).

And if you are feeling even feistier, you can say- Baby, I'm **THE** crazy. And look at all these other THE crazy people. Smart, motivated, resourceful, creative, caring, driven people. People who are doing the work. Oh yeah, I'll claim crazy, because I want to be in THIS club, with THESE people. With YOU.

THE crazy requires you to choose action in service of the divine- to choose faith.

Songwriter Sara Groves' experience mirrors how I feel about River of Grass. I'm paraphrasing her words but she says something like -Art at its purest is not a thing or a performance, but a community...and the congregation is alive when we are problem-solving, studying and serving together, and engaging our local communities and the issues facing them together, creatively.

Like I said, it doesn't matter which one you pick, crazy- not crazy, THE crazy, whatever. Whatever gets you through your moment. Because no matter which path you choose, the chances are that you will have plenty of both sane and insane moments in your life. That's how life is.

But you do get a choice, and when you are feeling a little too Jerry Springer, turn your face or the dial in your heart towards THE crazy, towards the Divine. Towards the Flow.



Break all your teacup talk of god.

Go out into the field beyond right and wrongdoing.

Act like there is a future that needs a nest built. And then build it.

Whatever your work is- Do the work.

You won't fail.

