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Crafting a spirituality of family creativity

Heidi Schlumpf | May. 26, 2012

(Dreamstime)

A veritable rainbow of paint drips decorates the top of our dining room table. On the floor beneath it are hundreds of tiny scraps of paper and the blunt-nosed scissors that snipped them. A nearby bin collects other tools of the toddler art trade: crayons and markers, glue sticks, pipe cleaners and empty toilet paper rolls.

Taped to the window are our children?s masterpieces: paper snowflakes, a construction paper owl, and an igloo made of mini-marshmallows, though someone seems to have removed, and most likely consumed, most of the marshmallows.

While I would prefer my home to be mistaken for a Pottery Barn catalog shoot, I accept this colorful mess because it fosters creativity, an important developmental skill for children -- and a spiritual practice for adults.

Granted, I have a crafty thumb. When we go camping with friends, I?m the one who brings the balls of yarn to make God?s eyes. At Christmas, I organize gingerbread-house-making parties. While Daddy loves to play outside with our 3- and 4-year-old, I?m more apt to haul out the Play-Doh, paints or cookie recipe.

It runs in our family. My own creativity was nurtured by a mother, aunts and grandmothers who painted their own ceramics, tatted the edges of their own pillowcases and canned their own handpicked blueberries. I was taught to knit, embroider and sew at a young age. And my mother retaught me in adulthood when I wanted to pick up those hobbies again.

So when my own children get restless, we paint rocks gathered at the beach or iron crayon shavings between wax paper to make ?stained glass windows.? I abhor packaged craft projects that come with pre-cut pieces that only need to be assembled. Where?s the imagination in that?

The whole point of crafting is to make something entirely new that no one else has ever made or could have made. To do that, we have to let our minds empty so we can see what ideas percolate when faced with a blank sheet of paper.

Sometimes the creative process can help with the mind-emptying. At the university where I teach, ?meditative

coloring? is offered as a stress reliever during finals week. Similarly, the repetition of knitting or hand-sewing can result in what some call ?flow? and Christians call joy.

The childlike wonder at having brought something new into being persists as we age, whether it?s witnessing bread rising in the oven, scraps of fabric becoming a quilt, or the birth of a new human being. People of faith can see the creative process as a spiritual practice, a chance to participate, ever so slightly, in the work of the first Creator.

Creativity requires imagination, and, like any other spiritual muscle, imagination must be exercised. Children do it naturally, whether making up songs, ascribing personalities to their stuffed animals or creating imaginary friends. To my son, everything is a potential craft material: the Styrofoam cup and coffee stirrer, the empty beer can box, the branches downed in a windstorm.

Once children enter formal education, unfortunately, creativity is too often seen as an ?extracurricular,? something that?s nice to have but not as important as knowing how to do calculus or even kick a soccer ball. Yet imagination and creativity is so important in our world, especially for people of faith.

We need creative, active imaginations to grapple with concepts like the Trinity, the afterlife and even God. And Lord knows we need imaginative people to lead, represent and fill our churches. In addition to teaching our children the Ten Commandments, Catholics would do well to encourage their creativity (which is why I?ve never had a problem with religious education that includes making felt-and-burlap banners).

Creativity not only aids spiritual formation, it encourages generosity and goes hand-in-hand with a lifestyle that tries to discourage excessive consumption. If we need a birthday card in our house, the kids color one. Growing our own raspberries not only teaches our children where food comes from, it reinforces that ?store-bought? is not always better. There?s a pioneer-like satisfaction in knowing that you can make a pair of socks if you need to -- or even if you just want to.

I often handmake gifts, and the children have followed my lead. The recipient of the two-by-four covered in marker scribbles with a comb taped to it may not appreciate such a unique ?gift,? but I love that the kids? first instinct is to give away their creations, which is, after all, a way of giving of themselves.

So stock up on colored pencils, modeling clay and finger paint. And not just for the kids. I believe God calls us all to be creative, so that, as Carl Jung said, ?if you have nothing at all to create, then perhaps you create yourself.?

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