

Creativity

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Today I want to explore the topic of creativity and the spiritual connection it can help us have with our Heavenly Father. While creativity is an attribute we often associate with the arts, it is an important tool for finding our inner artist in every discipline at the university. The scriptures teach us that Heavenly Father is a profoundly creative Being, and He has made us to be that way too. Creativity helps us bring light to the world and our relationships and to find deep and satisfying joy.

At general conference in 2008 President Dieter F. Uchtdorf encouraged us to be creative:

The desire to create is one of the deepest yearnings of the human soul. No matter our talents, education, backgrounds, or abilities, we each have an inherent wish to create something that did not exist before.

Everyone can create. You don't need money, position, or influence in order to create something of substance or beauty.

Creation brings deep satisfaction and fulfillment. We develop ourselves and others when we take unorganized matter into our hands and mold it into something of beauty. . . .

You might say, "I'm not the creative type. . . ."

If that is how you feel, think again, and remember that you are spirit [children] of the most creative

Being in the universe. Isn't it remarkable to think that your very spirits are fashioned by an endlessly creative and eternally compassionate God? Think about it—your spirit body is a masterpiece, created with a beauty, function, and capacity beyond imagination.

But to what end were we created? We were created with the express purpose and potential of experiencing a fulness of joy. Our birthright—and the purpose of our great voyage on this earth—is to seek and experience eternal happiness. One of the ways we find this is by creating things. . . .

You may think you don't have talents, but that is a false assumption, for we all have talents and gifts, every one of us. The bounds of creativity extend far beyond the limits of a canvas or a sheet of paper and do not require a brush, a pen, or the keys of a piano. Creation means bringing into existence something that did not exist before. . . .

What you create doesn't have to be perfect. . . . Don't let fear of failure discourage you. Don't let the voice of critics paralyze you—whether that voice comes from the outside or the inside. . . .

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*The more you trust and rely upon the Spirit, the greater your capacity to create. That is your opportunity in this life and your destiny in the life to come. . . . As you take the normal opportunities of your daily life and create something of beauty and helpfulness, you improve not only the world around you but also the world within you.*¹

Creativity is an essential part of my life—something I study and inspire others to find. It is a trait I hear a large number of people claim they don't have, but in my work I have grown to believe that every human being is capable of cultivating it. I have seen it bloom and develop in countless people who thought they would never find it. I have also needed creativity in parenting and in strengthening family life. Bringing imagination to every experience makes life fun.

Our Creative Birthright

What is creativity exactly and how do we find it, especially if we feel we don't have it? I like President Uchtdorf's definition: "Creation means bringing into existence something that did not exist before." I would like to take a broad view of creativity here. What kinds of creativity are you best at? Are you a maker, a thinker, an innovator, or a problem solver? Does your creativity shine most with your hands, your mind, or your heart?

We learn of Heavenly Father's creativity in Genesis, in the Pearl of Great Price, and at the temple.

The book of Abraham says:

Thus I, Abraham, talked with the Lord, face to face, as one man talketh with another; and he told me of the works which his hands had made;

*And he said unto me: My son, my son (and his hand was stretched out), behold I will show you all these. And he put his hand upon mine eyes, and I saw those things which his hands had made, which were many; and they multiplied before mine eyes, and I could not see the end thereof.*²

The second chapter of the book of Moses should sound familiar:

And it came to pass that the Lord spake unto Moses, saying: Behold, I reveal unto you concerning this heaven, and this earth; write the words which I speak. I am the Beginning and the End, the Almighty God; by mine Only Begotten I created these things; yea, in the beginning I created the heaven, and the earth upon which thou standest.

And the earth was without form, and void; and I caused darkness to come up upon the face of the deep; and my Spirit moved upon the face of the water; for I am God.

And I, God, said: Let there be light; and there was light.

And I, God, saw the light; and that light was good. And I, God, divided the light from the darkness.

*And I, God, called the light Day; and the darkness, I called Night; and this I did by the word of my power, and it was done as I spake; and the evening and the morning were the first day.*³

And so the story of the great Creation unfolds. The story I have just read includes the spiritual creation of the earth, sun, and stars as well as the plants, trees, vines, and herbs. God made whales of the deep, fish, and fowl of the air. He made cattle, beasts, and creeping things.

This great event concludes with the creation of human beings. We read of the physical creation of Adam and Eve in the book of Abraham:

And the Gods took counsel among themselves and said: Let us go down and form man in our image, after our likeness; and we will give them dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.

So the Gods went down to organize man in their own image, in the image of the Gods to form they him, male and female to form they them.

*And the Gods said: We will bless them. And the Gods said: We will cause them to be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth. . . . We will give them life.*⁴

The story of the Creation informs us that our Heavenly Father and His Beloved Son are deeply creative beings. We are taught in these verses that we are made in the image of our heavenly parents and also in Their likeness. In other words, *we are also deeply creative beings*. We are meant to create, and this capacity is eternal. We were creative in the premortal existence and are meant to be so here on earth. From everything we learn about the hereafter through the scriptures and the temple, we know we will continue to live intensely creative lives.

Think about what we can take with us to the next life. All we get to bring are our talents, knowledge, experience, relationships, and creativity. Creativity is therefore enormously important to cultivate.

The plan of salvation teaches us that the premortal existence was a time when we were thinking, creating, and problem solving. We know that we had to make choices; one of the most important was that we chose to follow the Savior in the Council in Heaven.

What other evidence do we have of our creativity before we came here to earth? If we look closely at the scriptures we find radiant bursts of creativity from angels in important moments through time. A good example of this is the birth of our Savior. Luke tells us: “And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.”⁵

I don’t think it is far-fetched to assume that this praise was heavenly music. I believe with all my heart that the heavenly host included all those who love the Savior and whose hearts resonate with Him. What I am trying to say is, I think we would have been included. If you could have been there, would you have?

I wouldn’t have missed it. The veil is thin for me on that experience. I can almost touch it in my memory every Christmas when we raise our voices in song. Our joy must have been abundant in that moment; the heavens overflowed.

I have had the blessing of living a creative life at home and in my work. One of my jobs here at BYU is to cultivate creativity in others—to find and nurture their inner spark. What does a person need to be creative? Some of the markers I see are curiosity, eagerness to learn, courage to be innovative, willingness to work hard, a desire to be a problem solver, and the ability to learn from mistakes. These are the same tools required to excel in just about any discipline at the university.

Creative Problem Solving and Collaboration

Problem solving is a legitimate form of creativity and a tremendous skill. Ingenuity has been required of the prophets and their families. Noah, Nephi, the brother of Jared, and their families all had to build boats for epic trips that challenged their survival. They had to build unique vessels, unlike anything they had needed before. It is safe to assume that none of them was a professional boat builder. It is possible they felt inadequate for the job at first. But these families placed their confidence in the Lord and went to work.

We know that Noah was particularly challenged to make his vessel able to fit all the varied animals of the earth. I have often wondered about the curious logistics this would require. How did he collect and store food? How did he keep prey safe from predators? How was the vessel compartmentalized to fit everything it needed to? Noah’s creativity was constantly informed by his willingness to be reliant on the Lord.

In Nephi’s case, the task would have seemed nearly impossible. When he was asked to build a ship, his first concern was that he didn’t have tools or even know of a source for metal ore from which he could form some. But Nephi

persevered by seeking inspiration and guidance every step of the way, and he got the task done.⁶

The brother of Jared's story of creating vessels is touching to me because of his great desire to have light in them. He knew this was not only a practical desire for his people but also something that would help them have the psychological stamina to survive the trip. The book of Ether tells the account:

And he cried again unto the Lord saying: O Lord, behold I have done even as thou hast commanded me; and I have prepared the vessels for my people, and behold there is no light in them. Behold, O Lord, wilt thou suffer that we shall cross this great water in darkness?

And the Lord said unto the brother of Jared: What will ye that I should do that ye may have light in your vessels? For behold, ye cannot have windows, for they will be dashed in pieces; neither shall ye take fire with you, for ye shall not go by the light of fire.⁷

The brother of Jared went to work. The next chapter of Ether continues the story:

And it came to pass that the brother of Jared, (now the number of the vessels which had been prepared was eight) went forth unto the mount, which they called the mount Shelem, because of its exceeding height, and did molten out of a rock sixteen small stones; and they were white and clear, even as transparent glass; and he did carry them in his hands upon the top of the mount, and cried again unto the Lord, saying:

O Lord, thou hast said that we must be encompassed about by the floods. . . . O Lord, thou hast given us a commandment that we must call upon thee, that from thee we may receive according to our desires.

. . . Behold these things which I have molten out of the rock.

And I know, O Lord, that thou hast all power, and can do whatsoever thou wilt for the benefit of

man; therefore touch these stones, O Lord, with thy finger, and prepare them that they may shine forth in darkness; and they shall shine forth unto us in the vessels which we have prepared, that we may have light while we shall cross the sea.

Behold, O Lord, thou canst do this. We know that thou art able to show forth great power, which looks small unto the understanding of men.

And it came to pass that when the brother of Jared had said these words, behold, the Lord stretched forth his hand and touched the stones one by one with his finger. And the veil was taken from off the eyes of the brother of Jared, and he saw the finger of the Lord.⁸

This remarkable passage reveals a number of things: The brother of Jared had a direct conversation with God; additionally, there was a creative collaboration on display. The brother of Jared found a solution for his problem and collaborated closely with the Lord to make it work. The Lord helped the brother of Jared because of his tremendous faith. This collaborative problem-solving experience helped the brother of Jared to know the Lord more completely. The verses later in the chapter teach us that the level of faith the brother of Jared demonstrated was so extraordinary that the Lord could not withhold anything from him.

Interesting patterns I have observed in our time are that modern studies frequently prove principles of the gospel to be true, and this particular topic is no exception. Current studies in popular culture teach us that collaboration is one of the most fruitful ways to inspire creativity. I won't belabor those references right now, but just remember this: we are stronger when we work together. We are even stronger when we invite the Lord to be a part of what we do.

The Connecting Power of Creativity

Studying the many cultures of the earth inspires my own creativity. One of the great privileges of my life has been to take my

family to New Zealand for six months in 2012. What a great adventure we had! While there I learned about the customs, language, and art of the indigenous people, the Māori. Te Papa Tongarewa Museum of New Zealand in Wellington had a remarkable exhibition while I was there called *Kahu Ora*, or *Living Cloaks*. It focused on *te kākahu Māori*, which, translated, means “Māori cloaks.” It was one of the most beautiful commentaries on creativity I had ever seen. You can still see the supplemental material for the exhibit online, even though it is no longer on display. With a keyword search using the word *kākahu*, you will be able to find the website dedicated to the exhibition and learn more of what I speak.⁹

Making Māori cloaks is a labor-intensive craft. Think of the story of the Little Red Hen, who plants the wheat, grows the wheat, harvests the wheat, grinds the wheat, and then makes bread. The art of making cloaks is a harder job. It takes about two years to make one that is a masterpiece. The work is all done by hand. The weaver needs to grow and prepare the *harekeke*, or plant, into fine strands. Then the weaver will braid, weave, and twine it into a fabric, usually a large rectangle to drape around the body. The weavers frequently add feathers, such as from the kiwi, to every stitch. This can mean thousands and thousands of feathers. It also means the weavers have to track down the birds to get the feathers! They don’t kill the protected birds; they search for the fluff the birds shed in the course of normal life. It is a long and drawn-out venture.

The cloaks are admired for their design and beauty, and weavers are considered great artists and are highly valued. I was personally most interested in hearing the weavers speak about how they see more than the physical creation of the cloak in their work but a kind of spirituality as well. The weaver primarily sees *aho*, or connection. She sees how the fibers come from *harekeke*, a plant from the earth.

She sees how she has coaxed the fibers of the plants to connect together to make the cloak with warp and weft. She sees the significant time of her life dedicated and connected to the cloak. She remembers the *whakapapa* (or genealogy) of generations of weavers who kept the art alive to teach her how to make the cloak. She sees the connection of these weavers to *Hine-te-iwa-iwa*, the spiritual guardian of weaving, childbirth, and the cycles of the moon. She sees the love of her ancestors paired with her own love, woven into every stitch of the cloak. It is no surprise that Māori weavers believe all of this will connect with the person the cloak was made for and offer protection to the wearer.

To give you some background about why I am so touched by cloaks, you need to know that I am crazy about handwork. All textiles interest me. I am an avid knitter, embroiderer, and quilter. I love to work with my hands. I am a maker. It is hard to explain why I am good at it, but it is almost like I have a genetic connection on a cellular level with all of the generations of grandparents who have had these same gifts before me. My fingers just know what to do. I feel *aho*, or a connection to the Māori way of thinking about creativity. I feel warmth, comfort, and connection to my ancestors who had these same talents and to God, who gave them to me. I feel at peace with handwork because I am doing what I was created to do. There are moments it feels sacred.

It is hard to explain to others how I feel about my creativity, but I found it expressed in a painting. The artist, Brian Kershnik, calls it *She Will Find What Is Lost*.¹⁰ For me, this painting is a wonderful expression of how we can receive inspiration. It resonates with how I feel when I am being creative.

Discovering and Developing Your Own Creativity

Another key to finding creativity is to seek diverse experiences that are enriching and will

fill you with light. Doctrine and Covenants 88:11 reads: “And the light which shineth, which giveth you light, is through him who enlighteneth your eyes, which is the same light that quickeneth your understandings.”

What practical applications can creativity have for you right now in this moment? What can you do to turn on the switch for creativity? I have a bit of advice.

Study the creative thinkers, doers, makers, innovators, and problem solvers through time. It is impossible to study everyone, but pick a few you are drawn to, such as those in your field of study. Heavenly Father has sent astonishingly gifted spirits to be beacons of light for our world. There are aspects of their work that can always teach us and transform us. Albert Einstein, Mother Teresa, Galileo Galilei, Mary Cassatt, Michelangelo, Anne Frank, Ludwig van Beethoven, Marie Curie, Dmitri Shostakovich, Jane Goodall, Madeleine L’Engle, Copernicus, Florence Nightingale, Gregor Mendel, Jane Austen, and Leonardo da Vinci. I could go on and on. If we tried to collectively make a better list than this, which I am sure we could, we would find the list to be almost endless. So much light has been sent to the world for our benefit and learning. The great Creator blesses us in so many ways. He creates magnificent and diverse spirits.

Find your sphere, your niche, and your specialty. “Trailing clouds of glory do we come”¹¹ is how William Wordsworth described our journey here to earth. We all come with particular gifts. Your time here at the university is a tremendous opportunity to discover, study, and develop those personal gifts. Study at your desk but also seek lively conversations with your peers and professors about the questions you have and the things you want to know. Ask them about the questions that burn inside of them. Have the courage to get to the bottom of the questions in your field. Bore deep to find what still needs to be studied. Have the fire in your belly to see

things through, even when you are tired of the experiment. You will excel in your field when you are truly passionate and articulate about it. Be an artist in your discipline.

Beware of paralysis from criticism. Creativity and learning need freedom. Allow for time to get in the groove and to learn muscle memory. Sometimes it is our inner critic that is the greatest enemy to our own growth. Sticking with the critic doesn’t get us past the stop sign. It is difficult to move forward with that negativity. Learn from your mistakes. It is okay to make mistakes. Instead of chastising your mistakes, study them. Be curious. My students will laugh when I tell you this, but I teach them to say often, “Thank you, mistakes.” I make them say it out loud and smile when they say it! Turn off the critic and turn on the teacher inside of you. When you study your mistakes with patience and love, you can identify what needs to change and how. Patience will bring the malleability you need so that you can improve and move forward. This will also be the moment when you are magnified.

Parenting has taught me that mistakes are fine and are part of the process of learning. They help us learn better than any other experience. We would never scold a five-year-old for falling when learning to ride a bike. We cheer for the movement forward. We help the child get up, dust off, and try again—and again. Every person deserves that same courtesy, even you.

Get out of your comfort zone. The university is a rich environment in which to learn about things outside your discipline. In my experience, these are the crucial places that may stimulate your creativity most of all. Be hungry to learn your discipline. And when you are done studying for the day, learn about other things in your free time. Never stop reading, listening, and looking for evidence of divine light. To enrich your experiences, connect and collaborate with others who have different

talents. This light will help you see your discipline with new eyes.

Here are some scenarios to get you started: If you are a painter, Provo is the perfect place to take up hiking, and don't forget to take a friend passionate about geology or botany with you so that you can learn more about the stunning landscape as you cover it. If you are a chemist, make friends with the people in your ward who love to cook to deepen your understanding of how and why things work in your kitchen. Your knowledge and a dose of chemistry can help them too. Cook together and share your creations with someone who is in need of good cheer. If you are an engineer, make sure you visit the BYU Museum of Art regularly and, for fun conversation, take a date who has artistic sensibility. Engineering and art are a perfect pairing, as demonstrated in the recent MOA exhibit *Folding Paper: The Infinite Possibilities of Origami*.

If the only symphony you have ever listened to in your life is one you heard when an orchestra visited your grade school, then you really need to expand your horizons. Take the time this Sunday to listen to something you are pretty sure is a masterpiece, such as Beethoven's Symphony no. 9. The music and dance library in the Harold B. Lee Library will have one for you to check out. Avoid earbuds and find a good stereo and a private place, and turn the stereo up a little louder than you think you should. Lie down on the floor so that you are not only listening with your ears but so that you can also feel the floorboards shake. That is what it feels like to be in the middle of the viola section. Not only will it resonate strongly in your heart that way but it will have the potential to be a spiritual experience. Become a concertgoer if that experience inspires you. If you don't like it, it doesn't mean it is bad music; it means you don't understand it yet. Campus has hundreds of concert opportunities for you to choose from. Seek to understand.

For musicians, I have a different assignment. Get to the physics lab and learn about the amazing sound room. If you are studying nursing, try going to the theater to study matters of the heart and to fill your mind with beautiful words, ideas, and conversations. It will help you interact with your patients. If you are studying law, have a party on Martin Luther King Jr. Day with history buffs, and celebrate by having a few speakers talk about the civil rights movement. The list is endless. Think outside the box. Find a discipline on campus you are curious about, and your creativity can lead you to know what it is that you need to do.

University life can be challenging. If your mind hurts from studying and your heart hurts because your mind is stuck and you don't have time for any of the above, then just step outside. Mount Timpanogos will always be there to greet you. A small break to smell the roses will clear the air and remind you of the great Creator. There will always be something in nature to stimulate creativity in your heart and mind if you look for it.

Creativity has an almost magical property that I found best stated by the poet Maya Angelou: "You can't use up creativity. The more you use, the more you have."¹² The Doctrine and Covenants teaches us that this is truth: "That which is of God is light; and he that receiveth light, and continueth in God, receiveth more light; and that light groweth brighter and brighter until the perfect day."¹³

If you don't feel you have an ounce of creativity, then go to the Lord and petition Him. Creativity is your birthright. He will help you find the ore to make the tools. He can magnify you beyond what you ever thought was possible. He will help you to meet the full measure of your creation because it is everything He made you for. He will not only show you your gifts, but we learn from the story of the brother of Jared that He will be able to reveal Himself to you if you come to Him in

faith and invite Him to be a part of the collaboration. Inviting creativity into your professional and private lives is worth searching and striving for; don't ever give up.

I have a strong testimony that being creative is one of the most important things we have come to this life to practice. We are here to have familial relationships, make good choices, and gain a body but also to find our soul, or what Wordsworth calls "our life's star."¹⁴ May you be illuminated to find your internal angelic being who courageously chooses the Savior and chose to come to this world. By discovering and illuminating your celestial self, may you in turn illuminate others to find their own light. May the Lord bless you as you discover your creativity and spiritual gifts and as you strive to become who you were always meant to be. You will know it is the right path when the journey brings you closer to Him.

I have an abiding love for my Heavenly Father, the great Creator, and for His Son. Their love, artistry, and creativity are endless—as I hope ours someday will also be.

I say these things in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "Happiness, Your Heritage," *Ensign*, November 2008, 118–19.
2. Abraham 3:11–12.
3. Moses 2:1–5.
4. Abraham 4:26–28, 30.
5. Luke 2:13–14.
6. See 1 Nephi 17:8–16.
7. Ether 2:22–23.
8. Ether 3:1–6.
9. See "Kākahu: Māori Cloaks," Te Papa Tongarewa Museum of New Zealand, tepapa.govt.nz/collectionsandresearch/taongamaori/maoricloaks/Pages/default.aspx.
10. Brian Kershisnik, *She Will Find What Is Lost*, oil on canvas, 136 x 96 in., 2012.
11. William Wordsworth, "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" (1807), stanza 5.
12. Maya Angelou, quoted in Jeffrey M. Elliot, ed., *Conversations with Maya Angelou* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1989), x.
13. D&C 50:24.
14. Wordsworth, "Intimations of Immortality," stanza 5.