Creative Communication: Digital Creativity and Theology in Dialogue

by Daniella Zsupan-Jerome

The arts have played a significant and consistent role in the Church’s history of communicating faith. The catacomb frescoes of Roman antiquity, the narrative programs of stained glass windows of medieval France, and the staging of passion plays of colonial Mexico are just three examples of the myriad of ways the arts have served the evangelizing mission of the Church. More recently, Benedict XVI’s 47th World Communications Day Message echoes this relationship as it contextualizes the digital media in this artistic heritage:

The ability to employ the new languages is required, not just to keep up with the times, but precisely in order to enable the infinite richness of the Gospel to find forms of expression capable of reaching the minds and hearts of all. In the digital environment the written word is often accompanied by images and sounds. Effective communication, as in the parables of Jesus, must involve the imagination and the affectivity of those we wish to invite to an encounter with the mystery of God’s love. Besides, we know that Christian tradition has always been rich in signs and symbols: I think for example of the Cross, icons, images of the Virgin Mary, Christmas cribs, stained-glass windows and pictures in our churches. A significant part of mankind’s artistic heritage has been created by artists and musicians who sought to express the truths of the faith.¹

As the Church continues to think about the new evangelization and seeks to communicate the Gospel in ways that are new in ardor, method, and expression, the digital media merit increasing consideration for communicating faith. As Benedict XVI notes above, the digital media are highly visual and akin in this sense to visual forms of communication and visual arts. Likewise, digital creativity can be classified as artistic, and the digital arts encompass an established category of artistic expression using the medium of digital technology.

In the Church’s long tradition of engaging artistic expression for communicating faith, the digital arts and digital creativity are among its newly emerging forms. Like the arts before them and now along with them, the digital arts could serve the process of communicating faith and, more specifically, the transmission of revelation as part of the essential mission of the Church. Because of this connection, creative engagement with the arts has rich potential for religious education, catechesis, and faith formation, all of which are educational processes toward ecclesial identity and mission.

Between the arts and education abides a solid connection, one that can manifest in a variety of ways. To create art is but one way of engaging with it; one can also experience it as performer, audience, or critic. As such, creativity and creative expression are one aspect of art and one way for incorporating the arts into an educational process. While creativity is a salient topic in educational literature, it is also a contested one in the fields of theology and in digital media studies. Theology has contrasted tradition and creativity, with adherence to tradition as the opposite of the boundless creative process. Scholars in digital media studies likewise grapple with creativity: some see digital culture giving way to new creative avenues, while others question the possibility of creativity in the shallow and dispersed cognitive process engendered by the internet.

Acknowledging such contestations, this essay seeks to demonstrate the possibility of digital creativity and its potential for communicating the content of faith. Creativity as an aspect of theological education honors the Imago Dei within the learner, and the innate creative spark of the human person that reveals his or her Creator. As opposed to necessarily challenging tradition, creativity in fact enables a living sense of faith, and the translation and transmission of the tradition in a viable way. In a practical and pedagogical sense, creative work demonstrates appropriation—both understanding the content and the ability to re-propose it anew. These qualities are essential to the new evangelization which invites new ardor, new methods and new expression from the Church to proclaim the Word anew to this day and age.

Defining Creativity

The concept of creativity has evoked a spectrum of scholarly definitions. Ken Robinson approaches creativity from a historical-anthropological perspective and proposes that creativity is “the process of having original ideas that have value.” Sociologist Donald Levine offers four categories of creativity, including “creativity associated with problem solving, finding new ways of combining existing elements, spontaneous expression of energies, and invention of novel forms.” Educational pioneer Maria Montessori grounds her aesthetic approach in the imagination as “the power of creation,” a power that impels transformation and change in the learner; her definition is adopted by religious education theorists like Maria Harris and Thomas Groome. In a similar vein, curator and art historian Marcus Burke associates creativity as the act of the artist “as creator imitating the prime Creator, God,” while theologian Gordon Kaufman speaks of creativity as emergence or as bringing something into being. These last two introduce a theological connotation we will explore in more detail below.

From this small sampling of definitions, it is clear that each discipline will offer a nuance for relevance to its own field. Nonetheless, varied definitions of creativity overlap as they all describe the generative emergence of some-

---

thing novel and previously non-existent. When thinking about creativity and the creative process, this essential
generativity is a salient concept across the disciplines and remains highly relevant for religious education and for
the task of handing on the content of faith.

Creativity and the Digital Media

In his noted 2010 book, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*, Nicholas Carr presents a careful
argument for a cause for alarm: internet-mediated communication is re-wiring our brains in a way that prevents us
from deep, reflective, and creative thought. He argues that the internet encourages a scattered, distracted, and shal-
low way of gathering information, partly to cope with the information overload that we experience when browsing
the internet. We skim and skip around because there simply is too much information to take in and too little time.
While his description rings true, he concludes by taking it a step further. Because of this scattered experience of
engaging with information, deep, reflective, creative thought is less and less possible when online.

Carr’s conclusion is indeed alarming. Given the history of how media have shaped human communication and
human thought, Carr’s conclusion paints a foreboding picture of our future.9 Without the cognitive capacity for
depth, reflective, creative thought, what happens to prayer? What happens to theological reflection? What happens
to teaching and learning? If Carr is correct, then internet-mediated communication poses a threat to faith forma-
tion and theological education as we know it.

Technologist Jaron Lanier echoes this note of alarm. Like Carr, he warns that the fundamental structure of inter-
net-mediated communication narrows the possibility of what can be communicated through it. With regards to
the educational possibilities of internet-mediated communication, he states:

The problem is that students could come to conceive of themselves as relays in a transpersonal digital
structure. Their job is then to copy and transfer data around, to be a source of statistics, whether to be
processed by tests at school or by advertising schemes elsewhere. What is really lost when this happens
is the self-invention of a human brain. If students don’t learn to think, then no amount of access to
information will do them any good.10

Lanier’s critique likewise concerns creativity, or the lack thereof, in internet-mediated communication. When
students are merely copying, pasting, and sharing information along, where is the creative synthesis process that
interprets the information and becomes part of the content as it is passed along?

In his 2010 *You are Not a Gadget*, Lanier challenges the notion of digital creativity more specifically. Focusing on
music as his example of artistic expression, Lanier contests that the flatness of digital music built of MIDI bits will
never come close to real performance and real connection. For Lanier, the digital reification of creative expression
“locks it in” and diminishes its spirit. He writes:

When you come upon a video clip or picture or stretch of writing that has been made available in the
web 2.0 manner, you almost never have access to the history or locality in which it was perceived to
have meaning by the anonymous person who left it there. A song might have been tender, or brave or
redemptive in context, but those qualities will usually be lost. Even if a video of a song is seen a million
times, it becomes just one dot in a vast pointillist spew of similar songs when it is robbed of its moti-

vating context. Numerical popularity doesn't correlate with intensity of connection in the cloud…
Empathy—connection—is replaced by hive statistics.\textsuperscript{11}

Although the distinction between online and offline experience is becoming obsolete, Lanier’s manifesto intentionally revisits the difference between what is virtual and what is real and raises the philosophical questions around simulation and hyperreality previously explored by thinkers like Jean Baudrillard and Albert Borgmann.\textsuperscript{12} His critique rests on the observation that through digital media, the authentic interpersonal encounter is once-removed and limited by a medium that is essentially ones and zeros governed by algorithms. How can real creativity emerge in this limited context?

Given the challenges posed by voices like Carr and Lanier, the sheer existence of the digital arts and manifestations of digital creativity poses a quandary. If the very fabric of the internet limits the possibility of genuine creative through, how might we account for these emerging expressions of creative work? In response, other scholarly voices from the field of education instead emphasize the possibilities for creativity wrought by the digital media, including digital story telling.\textsuperscript{13} Among the broad range of creative expressions, digital story telling is the process of conveying a narrative as accompanied by an intentional collage of sound, image or video clips. Basic forms of this abound on YouTube: slideshows set to music about a specific theme are simple digital stories. Digital storytelling assumes human creativity; “technology is a powerful instrument of creativity” the Center for Digital Storytelling website asserts.

Bernard Robin’s insightful observation can perhaps offer a bridge between these divergent approaches to digital media and the possibility of digital creativity. According to Robin: “advocates of instructional technologies in schools have, for many years, been urging educational administrators and policymakers to change the focus from the technology itself to ways that technology can be used to bring out the very best in how teachers teach and how students learn.”\textsuperscript{14} Carr and Lanier’s focus centers on the technology, its inherent features and how these features may affect users who interact with it. Advocates of digital creativity and digital storytelling in education on the other hand focus on the transformative process of teaching and learning and how the digital media can play a constructive role in this. While remaining centered on persons rather than technologies, it becomes possible to glean the gift of the digital media for human creativity. This is a salient insight not only for education, but also for thinking about faith formation and evangelization in our digital age.

Digital story telling as an educational tool is one such person-centered application of technology. Digital story telling enables the use of digital media in order to enable, empower and enhance the voice of its narrator. When created by a group of people, a digital story also paves the way for collaboration and a creative harmony of voices. In sharing the story, connections are established even more widely, creating the potential for dialogue and community formation. To create and tell a story can be transformative—for the person and for those who hear and see it.

Mary Hess’ 2012 article “Mirror Neurons, the Development of Empathy and Digital Storytelling” establishes a compelling foundation for thinking about digital creativity in the form of storytelling for transformative faith for-

\textsuperscript{11} Lanier, \textit{You are Not a Gadget: A Manifesto}, 137.
\textsuperscript{14} Robin, \textit{Digital Storytelling: A Powerful Technology Tool for the 21st Century Classroom}, 221.
In contrast to Carr and Lanier, who lament our distractedness wrought by the digital media, Hess emphasizes the intentional slowing down, focus, and reflection necessary for engaging in the process of creating a digital story; it is a meaning-making process that she calls "significantly contemplative in a deep sense of that word." Her description is person-centered—the digital media serve to help the storyteller articulate and illuminate meaning. Hess and others explore the neurological aspects of making a continued case for creativity (digital or otherwise) in religious education and faith formation. Adding to this important conversation around the creative uses of digital media for religious education, this essay focuses on some of the theological approaches to exploring digital creativity.

Creativity and Theology

Media scholars may contest the creative potential of the digital media even while educators who have witnessed the power of digital story telling affirm it. In theological discourse, creativity is likewise a contested term. As Avery Dulles points out, tradition and creativity are two terms that are in seeming opposition. Tradition ensures the preservation of the content or deposit of faith as it is handed down from generation to generation. The notion of creativity hovers uneasily around this, juxtaposing new horizons with the authentic preservation of what has been handed down. Frank Burch Brown echoes this tense relationship, noting that artistic creativity has been considered an obstacle on the spiritual path, especially in the context of some ascetical traditions and practices.

The history of Christian art is well beyond the scope of this essay, but key moments therein demonstrate the theological complexity around creativity. This complexity is first inherited from the Jewish tradition, in which depictions of the Divine were considered idolatrous but worship spaces were still generally adorned, even with Scriptural scenes such as those found in the third century Dura Europos Synagogue. Christian art develops but not without resistance: the iconoclastic movements of the Byzantine East in the eighth century and of the Reformation West in the sixteenth century are two examples where creative approach and expression were questioned, challenged, destroyed, or steered in a new, more confined direction.

In light of this complex history, Avery Dulles proposes a constructive reintegration of creativity and theology. As he points out, creativity is an essential part of the authentic preservation and handing on of the content of faith. The process of handing on the faith is not like a game of “hot potato” but one of authentic appropriation. Appropriation of the Gospel message in each generation, as well as in each culture, geographical area, or new context, implies that the Gospel speaks to and transforms the lived experience of a particular community. In Thomas Groome's educational language, the story of the community encounters, is incorporated into and is transformed by the Christian Story toward the Reign of God. This implies that the telling and proclamation of the Gospel message is always to some extent inculturated, so that it resonates with the lived experience of the particular community of faith.

A significant theological question that undergirds this is revelation: how God communicates Godself to human-kind, and how this divine self-communication handed on by the Church. This essential question of fundamental

---

15 Hess, Mirror Neurons, the Development of Empathy and Digital Story Telling, 408.
16 Hess, Mirror Neurons, the Development of Empathy and Digital Story Telling, 411.
17 See also Blevins, Brain Matters: Neuroscience and Creativity, 324-338.
18 Dulles, Tradition and Creativity in Theology, 20-27.
20 See http://artgallery.yale.edu/duraeuropos/
theology is also well beyond the scope of this present essay but has been treated extensively elsewhere by Karl Rahner (1978), Rene Latourelle (1963), Avery Dulles (1983), Sandra Schneiders (1999), and others. For the present exploration of creativity and tradition, Rahner’s insight about the double mediation of Word and Spirit is particularly helpful.

According to Rahner, both Scripture and experience point to God’s self-communication as double mediation of both Word and Spirit. Within God’s singular act of self-communication, we may speak of an “origin” or “existence” as it radically expresses and utters itself, and that self-communication’s welcoming acceptance brought about by himself. The Word is that utterance or expression, and the Spirit empowers and illuminates its truth so that it may be received. Without risking an artificial separation of revelation into distinct stages, Rahner’s insight is more so rooted in the human reality of communication: in a conversation, speaking the word and receiving it go hand in hand for authentic communication and understanding to occur.

The story of Pentecost in the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles illustrates the point Rahner is making about double mediation of Word and Spirit. In a sense, the disciples gathered in the upper room “have” the Word: they have walked with, learned from, and witnessed the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. They have also received the great commission to “go and tell” (Mark 16:15; Mt 28:19), to share this Word with all the world. What they seem not to have before Pentecost day is the “ability to speak” (Acts 2:4), the ability to share the Word in a way that it can be understood and appropriated as truth. When the Spirit comes, they are empowered to do this, as attested both by the miracle of languages (Acts 2:5-13) and Peter’s long and powerfully articulate speech that compels three thousand people to be baptized (Acts 2:14-41). Word and Spirit operate together in this first public communication of the Gospel message after the departure of the Risen Lord. Along these lines, Marcus Burke offers a close association between revelation, creativity, and the work of the Spirit. He cites the arts as means of communication that convey meaning on a profound level where words fail to or cannot yet express. He points to Romans 8:26, where “the Spirit intercedes for us in sighs too deep for words” to indicate the work of the Spirit animating this non-verbal (or pre-verbal) communication. For Burke, the gift of artistic creativity is its potential to communicate before and beyond words.

The work of the Spirit is manifold, and the Spirit is also one that animates understanding. The gathering in Jerusalem of devout people from every nation (Acts 2:5) represent the diversity of context and cultures the Gospel message is destined for. It is by the work of the Spirit that the Word can resonate for each of these, that they can understand in their own language the message of “God’s deeds and power” (Acts 2:11). Within this story of the miracle of the languages are planted the seeds of interpretation and inculturation as part and parcel of proclaiming the Word of revelation. Creativity, God’s own attribute, is manifest here through the action of the Spirit that bridges the diverse experiences of people from all over the world so that all may understand and appropriate as truth the message of the Gospel. Dulles’ observation from above is worth noting here again: the transmission of revelation is not a game of hot potato but rather the process of the Word speaking authentically to generation after generation, context after context. For this breadth of audience, creativity is necessary for the process of understanding, interpretation, and authentic handing on of the content of faith in each unique context.

The theological foundations of creativity vis-à-vis tradition are but one aspect of exploring creativity for theological formation in the digital age. Another aspect stems from the image of God as Creator. As noted above, creativity is an attribute proper to God and recalls God’s fundamental work of bringing forth existence and giving life to the world. Creativity in our human hands is a way of sharing in this divine attribute, a spiritual communion between

the Divine source of all there is, and our finite attempts to honor this generativity through our own actions. Creativity can be a sacramental act, an icon that reveals the Creator and invites transformation. In this light, engaging in the creative process is both revelatory and redemptive.24

A key moment in the history of Christian art that brings this to focus is the Renaissance. As Robert L. Nelson notes, this period saw the emergence of individual artist, as well as the gradual separation of the arts from the religious sphere of society.25 Avery Dulles and Mary Ann Glendon both underscore that in classic and medieval philosophy, creativity belongs only to God, and it is not until after the Renaissance that the adjective is applied to the human person.26 Humanism, which flourished during this time and emphasized human genius, learning, and invention, creates the context for the migration of creativity from an exclusively divine attribute to the idea of the human person sharing in this attribute through one’s own artistic expressions. The creative person’s work points to the Creator, and as such, creativity is a gift, a blessing, and a sharing in God’s generative act.

Human creativity finds Scriptural support in the Genesis accounts of the creation of humankind. On the sixth day of creation, God fashions humankind in the divine image; “in his image and likeness” is emphasized three times in these two verses (Gen. 1:26-27). The parallel creation account in Genesis 2 also showcases human creativity, as God invites Adam to participate in the completion of the work by naming the wild animals and birds (Gen. 2:19-20). The close association of the Creator and the human person made in the Creator’s image is fertile soil for theological exploration and continues to generate scholarly thought.27

Theological approaches to creativity are manifold, ranging from iconoclasm on one end to imagining God as Creativity on the other. The question centers not on the legitimacy of creativity but rather on how much it serves or hinders divine-human communication and the life of faith. Rahner’s double mediation of Word and Spirit is helpful here to creating a healthy balance between divine invitation and human response and between divine origin and human commission to hand on the faith. Creativity in this light is the space where the Spirit illuminates the Word so that it can be received, be understood, and move us toward transformation. Reception, understanding, and transformation are three words that approximate the process of faith as it matures from an initial response to full conversion of mind and heart to Jesus Christ. Anchored in the Word, the creativity of the Spirit addresses us, each where we are, so that we may be one. Human expressions of creativity, if grounded in such a theological foundation, can indeed enrich the spiritual path and present moments of sacramentality for artist and audience alike.

Digital Creativity and Handing on the Faith

Traditionally, engaging with the arts has implied specific roles: artist, performer, audience, or critic.28 With the advent of postmodernism in the mid-twentieth century, the barriers between these terms have increasingly blurred. Postmodern art breaks down the barrier between the work of art and the audience—at times it deliberately inserts the audience into the work of art. As the audience finds itself in the work of art as opposed to at a respectable viewing distance from it, postmodern art invites access and a sense of participation. Digital art and creativity, emerging out of the postmodern ethos toward new artistic horizons, is likewise a medium of access, participation, and collaboration. The digital media rely on accessible tools for self-expression and have the potential for easy and

27 Matthew Fox, Original Blessing: A Primer in Creation Spirituality (Santa Fe, NM: Bear and Company, 1983); Kaufman, A Religious Interpretation of Emergence: God as Creativity, 915-928.
wide dissemination, along with direct feedback from the audience in such a way that feedback becomes part of the narrative itself. As noted above, a simple illustration of this is the digital story, a collage of image and sound that one might create with an editing software, then post on YouTube to share with the world. The social web has made such creative self-expression widely possible.

Given the persistent question of creativity in Christian theological history, coupled with the significant role of the arts in communicating faith, the potential of digital creativity for theological education merits exploration. If the digital arts fall in line with other forms of artistic expression, they likewise can have an “integrating, holistic and digesting quality” and, in the context of a curriculum, “provide an oasis where people, in peace, let their understanding, their intellect and their feeling come together without pressure, but with the firm support from within the institution where they are learning.”29 Particular to the digital media is the way they are easily sharable, are malleable, and incorporate feedback for overall meaning to emerge. In a sense, the digital work is communally created, as its sharing continues to generate its content, shaping the overall meaning. In light of this particularity, how the simultaneously public-private nature of internet-mediated communication affects the potential of the digital artwork to be a peaceful, integrative space is a salient question for further exploration elsewhere.

Another question that emerges is the challenge of honoring both Word and Spirit when engaging in digital creativity for handing on the content of faith. Digital communication is mediated; persons are separated by time, space, and the screen. Because of this mediating dynamic, the content of communication can be separated from the face-to-face presence of persons who are conveying and receiving it. This is not new; such is the case with letter-writing, voicemail, and even the telephone to some extent. With the digital media, however, the communication is both instantaneous and mediated, as the content is infinitely sharable and reproducible without necessarily carrying with it the presence of a person. Lanier critiques this reality above as he laments the decontextualized, simulated forms of digital music as compared to a live performance. For digital creativity toward handing on the faith, this separation of persons and content demands keen awareness. As Dei Verbum’s paragraph 2 reminds, Jesus Christ is both the mediator and fullness of revelation; he is both the content of faith and the Person who communicates it to the fullest. Given this ideal, digital creativity toward handing on the content of faith needs to intentionally preserve the personal and relational in its communication dynamic. How to go about this is a creative process all in itself and poses an exciting and challenging question for further exploration.

Conclusion

In his 1954 essay On a Question Concerning Technology, Martin Heidegger said, “Technology is a mode of revealing. Technology comes to presence in the realm where revealing and unconcealment take place, where aletheia, truth happens.”30 Echoing the language of Word and Spirit, Heidegger’s words are prophetic for thinking about digital creativity for handing on the content of faith. Creativity is a contested topic both in theology and in media studies, and yet, both of these critiques seek the preservation of authentically human spirit expressing itself toward greater meaning. Digital creativity has the potential to convey Word and Spirit in a relational fashion, but it also has the potential for disembodied content or communication that threatens dignity of those involved. Technology can help reveal truth, but it can also communicate falsehood. Creative communication toward handing on the content of faith is intentional communication, one that invites the Spirit to animate the digital medium according to the values and practices of the Gospel message. Rooted in the Word, digital creativity for handing on the faith discerns and follows the Spirit so that the medium can authentically connect persons, form communities, and deepen communion.

29 Harris, Teaching and the Religious Imagination, 148.