

Chariot of Fire, Field of Grace

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Spirituality and creativity flow from the same source. While one can argue that consciousness itself is by definition creative and of the spirit, we all know the difference between taking out the trash and writing a sonnet. In the eyes of some Zen master somewhere perhaps they are the same. For most of us in our everyday reality, they are not.

In the film *Chariots of Fire*, Reverend Eric Liddell (played by Ian Charleson), the Scottish Olympic medal winner, is chided by his sister for running, because she believes it takes him away from his religious work. He replies that when he runs, he feels God's pleasure. The non-religious may use different words : inspiration, following your bliss, being in the zone or going with the flow, getting outside yourself or connecting more deeply to your own center; magic. Whatever it's called, it feels right. It uplifts and expands and gives meaning to our lives in ways few other things do. It can also make us profoundly miserable.

For most of us, the magic and misery of creation are inherent to only a few of our endeavors, perhaps only one—something that drew us, and then we were compelled to work hard at. As with spiritual work, creative work needs preparation. It is a rare meditator who gets enlightened the first time she sits on a cushion, just as it is a rare artist who takes brush to canvas or pen to paper and creates a masterpiece without study and practice. Ninety-nine percent perspiration and 1 percent inspiration is no lie. The natural talent, the training, the practice, the technique . . . together these fashion the launch pad. Our chariots won't get far without one.

Once launched, where is it that we go? I believe in Rumi's field "out beyond ideas of right doing and wrong doing." Mystics (no matter what faith path they may travel) all seem to end up in the same place: beyond language. In trying to express the inexpressible, they resort to words and metaphors that end up sounding similar: light, flowing rivers, a place of peace passing understanding, samadhi, nirvana. Creative artists and, often, interpretive artists, tap into the same place, because there is only one such place. There is only THAT: a place, or state greater than the synapses in our individual brains, a field beyond ideas, a field of grace. Is it outside or in? Our Zen master would tell us that there is no difference between the outside and the inside, but we won't discover this until we are there.

But what of the misery? The Chariot of Fire is an apt image of the artist's inspiration. Before it takes flight, a chariot ride is bumpy. Fire burns. Like mystics and spiritual seekers, few artists are spared their dark night of the soul. A chariot is a small craft. There is usually only room for one. Both mystics and artists, until they reach that heaven, that place of peace, are alone.

The threshold when craft becomes art, when the chariot finally lifts off, that's where the magic is, when the gate opens to the field of grace. An artist must have

technique, skill, and talent—and then must forget them all and step forward. Any athlete or actor will tell you this. You do your homework, and then, when you step out on the court or the stage, you forget it and stay in the moment (on the cushion, it's called staying present). If you don't, you might fall on your face. The same is true for creative artists, although some artists, like writers, for example, have an advantage . . . we can go back and revise. As our art and craft couple in the dance of creation, our inspiration and perspiration mingle. Our demons revisit us.

The differences between a spiritual and artistic quest are sharp. While issuing from the same headwaters, the streams often take divergent paths. The mystic seldom seeks recognition. She may get it through the students she attracts, but a true mystic is usually content with and prefers solitude. An artist usually burns for recognition. Part of this desire is the craving of the ego, part of it is due to the need to make a living, but mostly, perhaps, it is the longing to connect. Mystics are often connected by a tradition or lineage and supported by a religious institution, or, as in many Near Eastern and Asian countries, by the general population for whom giving alms is meritorious. No such luck for artists. If they can't sell what they make, they live in poverty or take other work that, at worst, does not suit them, and at best, takes them away from their art. If no one sees or appreciates their art, they often feel half alive.

Another difference between the endeavor of the artist and that of the mystic lies in its fruit. An artist creates the tangible, the material. A spiritual seeker re-creates her self. A refinement of the soul, or the mind stream, or one's portion of the collective consciousness goes with you at the end of your physical life. It is the only thing that does. The material does not. An artist may consider that her art has given her a kind of immortality in the public consciousness, but she must leave it behind. Her labors to refine her art have not necessarily led to her own refinement. Artists can be selfish, childish, and cruel. I wish I had a nickel for every time I have heard a person who has been obnoxious, or just plain nasty, being let off the hook because of her "artistic temperament." It is possible for the two streams to flow in one bed. The sixteenth-century Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross, for example, wrote poems deemed the greatest lyric poetry in Spanish literature.

At the last, both spirituality and creativity are characterized by faith. By *faith*, I do not mean *belief* in a deity or dogma. (This kind of belief can limit as much as it can inform and enrich a person's spiritual and creative life; belief is not the same as faith, just as religion is not the same as spirituality.) I mean a faith in oneself as containing seeds of possibility, a faith in a future where these seeds might eventually blossom. In the meditation tradition that I practice, emphasis is placed on NOW: there is no past . . . it is gone; there is no future . . . it doesn't exist . . . it might not happen and we can't live there. All we have is this moment. But, the paradox is that—even so—whether on our cushions or in front of our easels or a blank sheet of paper, we exist right now in a shimmer of possibility, a field of grace that is ripe with the future *and* rests outside of time, and without faith in that possibility, we would not meditate, not create, not do anything. Maybe not even take out the trash.