

“Witness” September 21, 2025 Old Meetinghouse Church  
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Because today's service has been organized by the arts ministry committee, anything I say should start with stating the obvious: the arts at OMH are alive and well and represented by creative people in more mediums and styles than I could enumerate within my ten minutes here. In fact, most components of our lives in this community are accomplished with sparks of thoughtfulness and creativity which Rona referenced in her words of welcome two weeks ago when she said *“we lovingly embrace the rich and unique dimensions within each of us, in grateful celebration of creation.”*

Creativity, in my mind, intersects with wonder and awe.

Here's a quote by Albert Einstein, who spoke to this in his own way:

*The most beautiful and deepest experience a man can have is the sense of the mysterious. It is the underlying principle of religion as well as all serious endeavor in art and science. To sense that behind anything that can be experienced there is something that our mind cannot grasp and whose beauty and sublimity reaches us only indirectly and as a feeble reflection, this is religiousness. To me it suffices to wonder at these secrets and to attempt humbly to grasp with my mind a mere image of the lofty structure of all that is there.*

I appreciate what he meant when he wrote that art and religion -- and science, too, at its best— requires an appreciation of what we don't know, and even more so in the case of religion, for what we can't ever know but only respond to through faith and love.

There are lots of ways to respond to what mystery can inspire. Here, as I experience the rituals we follow in our church, I look for the bedrock beneath various interpretations and vantage points of scripture. And when I paint, I am similarly inspired to represent the essence of what I try to represent. That process, as anyone who draws or paints knows, is utterly engaging.

I would never presume to talk generally about Art today – too vast a subject. Easier to talk about my personal experience of what I paint and why. The why is hard to answer. Exactly where does such desire come from? I really don't know. But I think the writer Anais Nin had a point about what the arts do for us when she wrote:

**“We write (or paint) to taste life twice: in the moment and in retrospect”.**

What exactly is it I'm hanging onto by painting it? Pretty simply, I'm extending the initial experience of delight – savoring the moment, learning, exploring why it was so interesting, and committing it to memory as well. The great naturalists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries did a lot of drawing for that reason.

It's largely a private experience for me, though. I focus on birds, plants, landscapes. I enjoy painting portraits of people too but unless I know someone really well, it feels invasive to closely study a person in real time. Also, if I get a plant or a bird a little bit wrong, I don't get any pushback!

Some subjects are so wondrous for me so that I revisit them annually, such as how I am moved to paint the first flowers to arrive in the spring: snowdrops. We all know how how interminable the last few weeks of cold weather are – April really *is* the cruelest month– and when we can't bear waiting any longer, the parade of spring flowers finally begins. It's a great moment in the year, bringing to mind the poetry of this quote **“Deep in their roots, flowers keep the light”**. I celebrate with painting those green shoots pushing up through snow and old leaves, the snowdrops themselves with their tiny inner petals hanging like green-trimmed curtains between three outer petals.

Another theme I keep returning to is the one-lane section of Center Road, just north of here, where the old maples lining the road create a cathedral that filters morning and late afternoon light with a dappled beauty. Even the dirt road itself becomes something special, with shades of plummy violet produced by the ambient light. I've stood and painted there many times over the years, and a new version is on my

easel right now. What's the attraction? The light, of course, but something about roads disappearing around a bend is a metaphor that has always resonated with me as I peer into an unknown future.

I've painted or drawn since I was old enough to hold a crayon, and one of my earliest memories is of registering how I felt when I picked up a blue crayon and scribbled the sky into a coloring book. Although at the time I couldn't put words to it, I recognize now that I was experiencing alchemy – artistic alchemy— because in my mind, that blue crayon had truly turned into sky. That moment was literally wonderful.

When I turned 40 and the call to paint full time had become too insistent to ignore, it was wonder that guided me to make the leap into a profession for which I had no training and which is well known to be economically challenging. My husband was fully encouraging because being a musician, he too had been bitten by an art form. He'd known how much I wanted to paint ever since we met 48 years ago – and how little time was available between work and our home life of raising our daughters. I also took to heart how a friend of mine responded when I told her of my anxiety about launching into a different kind of life. She said: **“God wouldn't give you a desire that intense unless there was a way to make it work”**.

Where desire comes from I have no idea, but I hope it lasts because it's part of what gets me out of bed in the morning.

Something like 30 years ago, during that time when I wasn't sure that the career change was wise, I had the chance to spend some time the National Gallery of Art in Washington. I recall looking at lots of perfectly nice work but at one point as I wandered around in the section devoted to largely old paintings of the American landscape, I turned a corner into a little room, and there, practically shouting at me, was an painting by Martin Johnson Heade. He's not all that well known by the general public, and the painting was nothing fancy, really – just a valley filled with blooming apple trees, but something about the light stunned me. That was it for the museum that day. I couldn't absorb anything more.

A few years later, I found myself again deeply moved as I stood in front of painting in Scotland's national gallery of art, a landscape, again, of dappled light over a hillside filled with heather and gorse. In memory, it was four feet high, with a treatment of light representing everything about the primal play of sun and shadow that is visual catnip for me. Last week as I was thinking about what to say today, I went online to see if I could locate the painting again to check memory against reality and find out if would it still move me. Seeing it on a laptop screen was nothing like seeing it in a beautifully lit gallery, of course, so this time I wasn't moved to tears. Unsurprisingly, it was smaller than I remembered it. But, still, as I looked at that painting, larger mountains rising behind the hillside and a small brooklet tumbling out of the lower right corner of the canvas, I recognized a direct lineage between that moment of wonder 25 years ago and a painting I finished last week. Not a Scottish hillside this time, but a view of Plymouth, Vermont, with cloud shadows playing across the hills as they receded into blue distance.

Perhaps I've been predisposed to an affection for hills since I grew up listening to the first lines of Psalm 121 **"I will lift up mine eyes to the hills, from whence cometh my help."** Words wear grooves in the heart and mind.

In the process of drawing or painting with pure undivided attention, my study of even the simplest things feels holy. When I paint a plant, I'm still surprised, even now, that I forget at how the longer I look the more there is to marvel at. The initial basic gesture yields to leaf or petal shape which then leads to ever-refined curves— which in turn reveal minute detail of venation, texture and the tiniest structures. I get drawn into the plant itself, and then there's light, which I like to think of as the master designer that confers unity upon all the parts.

So, painting is then, for me, visualized religion. It's prayer of gratitude and amazement. Whether tiny or large, I paint to explore the magnificence of my subjects. Or Frederick Franck, a painter who was especially interested in spirituality put it, drawing is an **"awakening of empathy, wonder, and reverence for the simplest things of nature."**

Surely there is a parallel process of inquiry in anything worth exploring, including the great theological tradition we share here at Old Meetinghouse. Old stories absorb new interpretations with each iteration in much the same way I mentioned that I can paint the tunnel on Center road twenty times without once repeating myself.

Other sources of awe, of wonder in our lives? Most of all, of course, the beginning and end of our lives. Then there's knowing people who possess great moral beauty. Music. Big ideas. Doing something in community. Nature. If it had been warmer today, I'd have worn a T-shirt that incorporated three of those sources of awe: nature, community, and big ideas: it was designed in honor of last year's solar eclipse. The eclipse itself was exciting, but there was also the delight of knowing how the experience was shared by the 44 million people across North America who were in the path of totality that day – and how great it was that we all could agree on something that was worth celebrating. I observed the eclipse from the edge of little pond right up the road from here, where I had a further moment of wonder: at the precise moment totality began, the neighborhood coyotes started to sing.

I am grateful for participation in the Arts here, including singing, of course – I highly recommend the experience of being in our church choir—and with the group of us on the arts ministry committee that takes care of the nuts and bolts of exhibits, concerts, and a miscellany of associated events. I enjoy having a way to share with others all those good things: love, caring and connection with each other.