

Art and Spirit at Union Church

By Rev. Mary B. Speers

The Earth turns on its axis once a day. Even at rest, we on the surface in North America are hurtling around at speeds approaching 1,000 miles an hour. With our global economy, internet technology, and interstellar exploration, we seem to be moving faster and faster in a giant game of crack-the-whip, spinning out into space in a dance with the cosmos.

But the center of the earth is only as big as your hand, and it, too, only turns once a day. Walking at the speed of an oxcart, doing things by hand, pulls us in deep as it slows us down to the speed of the center of the earth.

Most of us know this even if we don't think we are "creative." Occupying our hands and thinking spatially, whether cooking a communal meal or making wreaths for Advent, whether setting out a garden or setting up a golf shot—all these things have a way of getting us to slow down and pay attention in the moment, of driving out even for a few minutes the worries that beset us. We find that our very absorption in the mundane has made room for a fresh viewpoint, and, almost as a bonus, for a greater sense of community, accomplishment, and self-worth. It's almost as if the Spirit uses our hands to distract our minds in order to speak to our hearts.

For centuries, people with complicated lives have sought retreat for refreshment and renewal, for a greater sense of community and communion with God. They would flock to the feet of the Desert Fathers (and a few Mothers), intent on drinking in the wisdom of the ages, and what did they find? Instead of holding forth on *The Meaning of Life*, the sages handed them a hoe, or a mop, or a kitchen knife, or a copyist's pen. Built into the Benedictine rule are several hours each day of manual labor, because all of these tasks have a spiritual and communal function as well as simply needing to be done.

What we call "art" or "creativity" is not a mysterious sixth sense like perfect pitch, given only to a few, or at any rate only to children. Scripture tells us that we are made, "formed," in the image of God, and if that is true, then we are also makers and formers. In the Book of Genesis, the Lord God forms the human creature out of clods of earth and then breathes the Spirit into it. Art in this sense is simply the act of bringing something into being that did not exist before, of giving shape to an idea and placing it in the world so that, as others interact with it, it develops a life of its own.

Art brings out the Image of God in all of us, because in creating, we are most like our Creator. In creating, we are closest to what God intended us to be. Out of nothing, something; out of nobody, somebody: art empowers, art ennobles, art transforms.

