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CREATIVE SPIRITUALITY

The Way of the Artist

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PREFACE

WHEN I WAS A CHILD, I lived in a world that many would have thought devoid of the arts. The dry Kansas prairie was an inhospitable environment for painters and poets. Yet, to an extraordinary degree, my childhood was filled with dazzling opportunities to experience the arts. From the heart-pounding hymns I learned in Sunday school to the wonder of towering cumulus clouds in an azure sky on a hot August afternoon, from the pleasures of attending community concerts featuring itinerant performers from New York and Chicago to the surprise of finding boxes of paintings in the attic—left there by a woman who had become busy being my mother—the arts were nearer than I sometimes imagined.

The world of spirituality could not so easily be overlooked. In my prairie hometown, people flocked to churches on weekends and evenings. Bibles and catechisms were everywhere. The words were to be studied and understood, to be framed in correct doctrinal interpretations, and to be applied in diligent moral practices. It was not until my father's death that I began to appreciate the connection between the arts and spirituality. Sitting in my dormitory room as a college freshman, trying to absorb the shocking news that he had died of a massive heart

attack, I turned instinctively to music and poetry for their power to heal. They were carriers of the Word as much as the doctrines themselves.

I came gradually to the idea of writing a book about spirituality and the arts. As a graduate student at Berkeley during the turmoil of the late 1960s, I was encouraged to think about alternatives to received ways of pursuing knowledge. My training in sociology ranged from learning to interpret multiple regression models to hearing lectures about Blake. While writing my dissertation on new religious movements, I encountered many people who were exploring spirituality through dance, drumming, poetry readings, literature, and avant-garde films. I have retained an interest in these creative expressions of spirituality.

In the early 1990s I began a series of investigations into questions about the changing moral and spiritual logics of contemporary life. In lengthy personal interviews I listened as people articulated their aspirations for themselves and their families. From time to time I ran across someone who was deeply interested in bringing spirituality to bear on these aspirations. As the interviews accumulated, I realized that some of the most interesting and articulate of these people were artists.

When time permitted, I went back over these interviews, took notes, listened for common themes, and tried to think of better questions. I read avidly, visited galleries and exhibits, attended lectures, and talked with colleagues who knew much more about the arts than I did. During a visit to the Grand Canyon in 1995 I was able to clear enough mental space from other projects to pull together some preliminary ideas. At a picnic table overlooking the North Rim, I entered onto my laptop some tentative sentences that were to become an outline of the themes pursued here.

Several years passed before I was able to devote attention to the project. Meanwhile, I read articles, pieced together a bibliography, did pilot interviews, and visited places where I could talk with artists and writers. Through a research grant it eventually became possible to interview one hundred artists candidly about their work, their lives, their spiritual jour-

neys, and their aspirations and hopes. I have tried to strike a balance between letting them tell their stories and offering my own interpretations.

The book is written with three audiences in mind. One is the community of artists, to which I add the parallel community of amateur artists as well as students and patrons of the arts. For these readers, I offer material for self-reflection, insight, and comparison; I suspect many within this broadly defined community of artists will find aspects of themselves in the stories I report. A wider audience consists of readers who are interested in the dilemmas of existence in contemporary society and may agree that artists' spiritual experiences have something to teach us about these dilemmas. For such readers, I hope it will be evident that there is a bit of the artist in everyone. And finally, I have tried to address the concerns of people who are especially interested in spirituality, either as religious professionals or as interested seekers in their own ways. Although I am aware of the dangers of trying to learn too much from the spiritual struggles of artists, I am also persuaded that artists offer insights into the ineffable aspects of the human condition.

I am deeply grateful to the artists, writers, and musicians who gave so generously of their time. These busy professionals were extraordinarily generous in other ways as well. Nearly all supplied copies of their résumés, most gave guided tours of their studios or work spaces, and many offered newspaper clippings and reviews as well as reprints of their paintings, CDs, videos, and chapbooks. A few gave private performances, extended invitations to concerts and book signings, and edited transcripts of their interviews.

I owe special thanks to my research assistant, Natalie Searl. She coordinated the field research and did much of the work in identifying, contacting, and interviewing respondents, as well as overseeing the transcription of interviews. Karen Myers and Sylvia Kundratz assisted with some of the interviewing. Sandy Kunz helped assemble bibliographic materials as background for the book.

The research was supported by a generous grant from the Lilly Endowment. Craig Dykstra was a valuable source of inspiration and intellectual guidance throughout the project. Sister Jeanne Knoerle, Chris Coble, and Dorothy Bass also provided instructive comments and advice.

As with all such endeavors, this project benefited from numerous opportunities for intellectual discussion, reflection, and repast. Members of the Religion and Culture Workshop contributed more than they often realized to the development of my ideas. Opportunities to learn from Karen Cerulo, Tim Dowd, Paul DiMaggio, Michèle Lamont, Wendy Griswold, Richard Peterson, and Ann Swidler were also valuable.

My greatest debt is to my intellectual and spiritual companion, Sara Wuthnow, and to my dear children, Robyn, Brooke, and Joel.

INTRODUCTION

BEHIND A RAMBLING BROWN-SHINGLED house in Boulder, Colorado, a thick hedge of Norwegian pines nearly conceals a sixteen-by-sixteen-foot work shed. Half of the space is furnished with a cot, a plain wooden table, an electric skillet, a washbasin, and a portable toilet. On the other side of a makeshift partition is a workbench, a stool, a lathe, some rough-cut logs, and a large pile of wood shavings. A young artist bends over the lathe.

The year is 1977; the artist, David Ellsworth. For more than three years he has been supporting himself by making wooden salt and pepper shakers. He has turned out nearly five thousand sets, manufacturing fifty at a time. This work occupies him from sunrise to late afternoon. Each evening, however, he stops, carefully places a plastic sheet over the salt and pepper sets, and then takes up a curved tool and experiments with a new artform, creating wooden pots on his lathe. One afternoon he receives a check in the mail. To his surprise, his pots have started to sell.

Today David Ellsworth is one of the nation's most acclaimed wood sculptors.[1] The wooden pots he began creating more than twenty years ago in Colorado have become his signature. They are extraordinarily delicate, with thin, satiny walls that rival those of an exquisite ceramic vase. Ranging from four to twenty inches in diameter, some are hemi-

spheric cups with burnished edges and brightly polished interiors; others are perfect spheres, mysteriously hollowed through minuscule openings. They exude what one critic describes as "a serenity, a natural grace and an elegant simplicity," providing what another writer summarizes as "a quiet statement about the correlation of nature and craft."[2]

David Ellsworth is one of the thousands of artists, writers, and musicians who in recent years have been struggling to express their understandings and experiences of the sacred in their work, and who in turn are creating new ways of thinking about and practicing spirituality. Some have been working quietly within religious traditions, keeping alive the skills of iconography, creating Christian music, or depicting themes rooted in Jewish experience. Others are pushing the edges of religious traditions by asking questions about language and representation, incorporating narratives of brokenness and redemption into their work, and confronting the ambiguities of teachings about God.

It is through their life stories as much as through the objects they produce that artists' insights about the life of the spirit come into view. Their position in society, as has often been true in the past, is not enviable. Although a few make fortunes, most earn only marginal incomes. Many have been drawn to artistic careers by personal trauma or by extreme disruptions in their families and communities. Such experiences necessitate personal reflection and often result in new perspectives on life.

As with most artists, David Ellsworth's life story illustrates the gifts of critical self-reflection that seem so often to connect artists' creative work with their interest in spirituality. His lanky, angular features contrast sharply with the rounded shapes that emerge from his lathe. Seated in the loft of his present-day studio in northeastern Pennsylvania, he chooses his words carefully: "I think of myself fundamentally as a maker, more than an artist or a craftsman. I turn wood on the lathe—vessels, bowls, pots. The objects that I make are hollow forms, very thin-walled, levitative, somewhat mysterious in their construction."

This emphasis on mystery occurs repeatedly in artists' accounts of their work. It arises from a principled refusal to explain their work and

thus to restrict the variety of meanings it may have for different audiences. But mystery is also one of the ways in which artists emphasize the impossibility of fully understanding God.

From the beginning, Ellsworth's art has been closely connected to his deeply personal sense of the spiritual aspects of life. His pots are neither traditional shapes nor free-form. He denies that they have any utilitarian value. Indeed, they cannot easily be defined. This is the essence that he is most intent on expressing. "Without a definition," he explains, "we're left with wonderment and in some cases with a sense of loss. When we do not have a language about an object, we reveal ourselves very quickly in our emotional response to that object. It was that emotional response as an artist, as a creative person, that I was most interested in."

There is often a close connection between an emphasis like this in artistic work and the way in which an artist thinks about the meaning of life. During those long formative months in Colorado, Ellsworth gradually realized how much his own life was without definition. Although the daily routine provided him with structure, it did not give meaning to his existence. Well educated in the fine arts but unable to find steady employment, he had recently divorced and was largely without friends, alienated. The divorce was particularly painful. "I began to question everything," he recalls. "I was disappointed in myself. I distrusted myself and I distrusted other people." Working creatively with wood provided a way to express his deep emotion.

Being without definition is the key to Ellsworth's understanding of spirituality: "I believe in God, in a higher order that is above the human species. We are not at the top of the chain. There's something bigger than us. But it cannot be defined. If we could quantify it, identify it, catalog it, it would lose its value. It would cease to be what it is." His sense of what it means to be spiritual is so encompassing that he has difficulty describing its exact place in his life: "I'm not certain I can spell it out. I don't get up in the morning and say, 'Well, how spiritual can I be today?' When I am done making an object, I give myself as *much* time as I possibly can in order to understand the spiritual connection between

me and it. Why did it come out? Where has it come from? Where is it going to lead? What influence is it going to have? And if I don't like it, can I feel free to smash it and get it out of my life and experience the smashing so I can go on?" After a moment he adds, "Spirituality is my work. The two are inseparable. When I'm doing it, I'm not thinking about it. There is a connectedness with it that is immediate and direct. I'm like a pianist. I'm not concerned about the technique as I perform. So working at the lathe is similar. It is an avenue through which spirituality can express itself."

If there is a single key to artists' perspectives on the spiritual, it is this: spirituality, like art, must be practiced to be perfected. The way of the artist involves doing, rather than only believing in the possibility of doing. It requires training, discipline, and a considerable investment of oneself.

As a child, David Ellsworth was not reared to believe firmly in the teachings of any single religious tradition. His parents were academics who put in nominal appearances at an Episcopal church but gradually found its services less compelling than their own explorations. His ideas about spirituality took form through college classes in comparative religion. For several years Ellsworth read avidly, gaining growing respect for the writers of the Bible and for the words of Jesus, Muhammad, and the Buddha, but he could not bring himself to affiliate with any congregation. He came increasingly to believe that the truths expressed in religious writings point toward something that is mysterious and ineffable. It is this mystery that he tries to evoke in his art.

"I have to put things together in my own way, move them backward and forward, mix them around," he indicates. "For some people, there is a meeting of the minds, a gathering together, 'in house' as we say, almost like a church. But I'm the one walking around it in the hills. I'm feeling the energy that's coming out of that house. I'm not disconnected from those people. I don't feel alone. And yet I also don't want to conform to their rhythms and philosophies. I think they feel my presence, too. They know I'm out there."

Creative people like David Ellsworth frequently occupy marginal positions in our culture, playing the role of the proverbial lone wolf, the alienated nonconformist, the free spirit. They prefer to do things their own way and sometimes feel genuinely uncomfortable in crowds. Yet they are, as Ellsworth says, a presence in the culture, reacting to it, contributing to its beauty, and enriching the lives of those with whom they come in contact. Ellsworth's exhibited works, not to mention the classes he teaches and the apprentices he mentors, provide lessons about life as well as about art. Like most artists he has been exposed to the teachings of organized religion and has had to search for answers to questions about the meaning and purpose of life. His views about the ineffability of spirituality are widely shared, both among artists and in the public at large. Many Americans would agree that there is something deeply spiritual in what he is trying to express through his art.

Artists and Spirituality

Art critics and reviewers of fiction, poetry, and music have come increasingly to recognize the spiritual contributions of contemporary artists. Even some religious leaders acknowledge quietly that growing segments of the public look to artists for insights about the deeper puzzles of life. Yet this contribution remains poorly understood. References to spirituality in art and music columns are frustratingly vague. Unelaborated assertions such as "this is a deeply spiritual recording" or "the artist sought to convey a spiritual vision" are not atypical. Other depictions too easily pigeonhole or sensationalize the spiritualities of particular artists: it is possible to read in tabloid newspapers about artists who exemplify strange beliefs in the occult or dabble in esoteric religious practices, but it is harder to gain insight into the lives of people such as David Ellsworth who have long been engaged in serious efforts to deepen and to express their understandings of spirituality.

Filtered through the lens of hastily written journalistic reviews, popular images of artists' spirituality are nearly always misleading. One

common image emphasizes entertainers who earn high salaries and lead dissolute lives and suggests that there is little of substance beneath the glamour. In this scenario, artists are depicted as lost souls struggling with substance abuse or greedily pursuing hedonistic pleasures, rather than showing any serious interest in the spiritual life. A different image highlights artists' participation in unconventional spiritual practices. In this view, artists are described as more confused, shallow, gullible, or muddle-headed than virtually anyone else. At worst, artists' spirituality is reduced to the commercial exploits of pop-singer Madonna or the cultic followings of the Grateful Dead; at best, it is sentimentalized in stories about esoteric spiritual quests and wild-eyed beliefs.

None of these images provides an adequate description of the ways in which contemporary artists understand and practice the relationship between their spirituality and their creative work. The popular images are driven too much by the mass media and the entertainment industry. They focus on glamorous international celebrities but fail to consider the middle-range artists whose influence is local, regional, or more specialized, affecting someone who visits an exhibit or attends a workshop. They also miss the fullness of artists' own insights about the nature of life and of God, what they have learned through years of practicing their art, and how art itself becomes an expression of their spirituality.[3]

Learning about how contemporary artists practice their spirituality is richly rewarding for anyone interested in the changing ways in which Americans are searching for the sacred. Many artists have struggled deeply with who they are and with questions about what is important in life. Personal trauma or family turmoil have jostled some artists to think hard about pain. David Ellsworth's anguish during the year he was recovering from his divorce is just one example. A folk singer tells of her estranged existence among illegal immigrants when she could not afford to live anywhere else. A wood carver describes how polio imprinted his development. A painter reveals the connection between being abused and learning to express herself through art. As they sing or carve or paint, these artists turn frequently to themes of brokenness and recov-

ery, pain and redemption, personal courage and transcendent healing. Their insights resonate with the struggles many Americans have faced in recent years with disrupted marriages, job loss, or addictions.

To a striking degree, contemporary artists speak more comfortably about spirituality than about organized religion. As David Ellsworth says, they are the sojourners who wander in the hills rather than the settlers who live easily in the valley. Spirituality seems more authentic to them because they have had to create their own ways of expressing it, whereas religion connotes the teachings of preachers and priests who may have never seriously questioned the tenets of their faith. In this respect, artists are the outsiders still capable of raising questions silenced by civilization. Living in the hills gives them a critical perspective on the settlement below. Yet, in another respect, artists exemplify an attitude toward the established dogmas of institutional religion that now characterizes many Americans. Research on the religious practices of the larger public shows that spiritual seeking often takes precedence over spiritual dwelling. Seekers borrow ideas from many traditions rather than settling comfortably into any one tradition. The typical seeker picks up the latest bestseller about spirituality, reads today's horoscope, talks to a friend raised in a different tradition, occasionally attends a church or synagogue, and periodically goes to workshops or support groups.[4] Younger Americans are especially likely to fit this profile. The eclectic spiritual practices of some artists are attractive to Americans who experiment with one religious idea after another because they have no compelling reasons to settle into a single tradition.

Artists' Lives

The social circumstances that encourage people to be spiritual seekers come into sharp relief in the lives of artists. Many were reared by parents who moved frequently from town to town or from state to state. For other artists, their parents were often busy or traveled or were emotionally distant; some were abusive, many were divorced, and many ex-

pressed doubts about the teachings of religious organizations. Artists come from a surprisingly wide variety of socioeconomic backgrounds: they are by no means the children of a privileged upper middle class. The decision to become an artist is often a costly one; many artists leave home at an early age, do not finish college (or spend long years gaining advanced education), and struggle like David Ellsworth to find the time to pursue their artistic interests. Migrating from community to community and from one relationship to another is not uncommon. All but the most successful remain heavily dependent on the consumer market, playing gigs to entertain coffee drinkers or exhibiting their wares at flea markets and craft shows. In these respects, the buffeting many artists experience is similar to the unsettled lives that many Americans lead, only more intense.

A close look at artists' spiritual practices serves the additional purpose of sorting through the current confusion about broad developments in American spirituality. The phrase "New Age" is a popular way of describing these developments. But its meaning is often ambiguous, ranging from any practice that falls outside the purview of conservative Christianity or Judaism, to beliefs in astrology, magic, or reincarnation. An artist such as David Ellsworth could be associated with New Age spirituality. He does not attend formal religious services, and he pieces together his views of spirituality from many sources. Another artist interviewed for this book believes herself to be a conduit for the teachings of angels and spirit guides. Several participate in Native American rituals, one is a wiccan, another believes in UFOs. But, despite the overlaps, artists' spirituality should not be dismissed as simply New Age. Their ideas and practices are quite diverse. If patterns can be found, they are best explained in terms of artists' religious upbringing, the crises they have faced, and the spiritual practices in which they engage, not in labels about some ill-defined spiritual movement.

Contrary to the view that they are simply dabbling in shallow spiritual practices, many artists design spaces that permit them to work creatively and in a way that resembles meditation. Their best work em-

anates from trying to capture some partly understood mood or experience. Creativity requires drawing connections among aspects of artists' experience that have previously remained separate. Ideas about spiritual connectedness and spiritual wholeness acquire special meaning in these contexts. Indeed, one of the important contributions of artists in any period is creating narratives and images of wholeness in the face of undeniable brokenness.

Contemporary artists follow a tradition of intellectual nonconformity that has strong roots in American history. Like previous generations of amateur philosophers and religious dissenters, they question the received wisdom of their time. David Ellsworth prides himself on having questioned the sturdy Victorian style of wood-turning that dominated the field when he began working in it. Having been trained in ceramics, he was able to bring fresh insights to his work. He continues to be an iconoclast, shattering people's expectations about his pots, shattering the pots themselves when they fail to inspire him. The nonconformity that artists express in their work frequently characterizes their spirituality as well. They are sometimes at the leading edge of creative developments in the world of religion: challenging ideas of male deities through feminist art, encouraging a rethinking of liturgical practices through performance art, or demonstrating new ideas about the relationship of body and spirit, connecting visualization to healing. In this way, artists keep alive the nonconformity that has been so important in the history of American religion. It is not assuming too much to suggest that artists are sometimes revered because they give others the opportunity to say, "Yes, I also question the established doctrines and I, too, think the mysteries of life are too great to be captured fully in any religious community."

Yet the perfection of art always involves discipline, and the practice of art thus becomes a model for understanding spiritual discipline as well. David Ellsworth's years making salt and pepper sets are like the apprenticeships that monks and other people of deep spiritual inclinations undergo. As he gradually perfected his skills as a wood sculptor, he was shaping himself, gaining self-understanding, and learning to be at peace

with himself. Many artists speak of their work as a form of meditation. For some, the sheer rhythm of the daily routine brings them closer to the essence of their being. Writing all morning or practicing for the next musical performance requires mental and emotional toughness. For others, art is so much an expression of who they are that its quality depends on introspection, prayer, reading, listening, or finding other ways to reflect about life. Many artists emphasize the importance of staying with a single routine in order to learn it well. For spiritual dabblers, the insight these artists provide is that persistence and hard work may still be the best way to attain spiritual growth.

It is for all these reasons that many Americans are now turning to artists for spiritual guidance. Public opinion polls give little indication of this turning, suggesting that people find inspiration only in popular television preachers or the pope or that they hold their local clergy as exemplars of the spiritual life. Yet in personal interviews people speak more candidly. They mention Maya Angelou or Toni Morrison as writers who inspire them to think more deeply about spirituality. When their lives become difficult, they turn more often to the music of Aretha Franklin or Jessye Norman than they do to theologians. Their spirits are uplifted as much by the concert on Saturday night as by the sermon on Sunday morning.

This is not to say that artists believe their approach to spirituality is better than other people's. Most artists, like most other Americans, are reluctant to impose their ideas about spirituality on others. They are for the most part private people who prefer to let their art speak for itself, rather than providing it with too much personal interpretation. Many are by training and personality disposed to think that spirituality should not be reduced too readily to doctrines or creeds.

Many artists have nevertheless focused a great deal of their attention on the trials and failures of contemporary life. Those who work to capture the beauty of nature frequently decry the ways in which the environment is being damaged. Others express strong views about the value

of families and social relationships—often because of relationships in their own lives that proved difficult. Most are keenly aware of the passage of time and voice concern about social problems that may endanger the future. As innovators, they pay attention to the ways in which new ideas, new technologies, and new circumstances are changing our lives. As practitioners of well-established traditions, they also value continuity with the past. As David Ellsworth says, "An artist of any salt will tell you that nothing is new, that it has all been done at some time by someone in some form prior to that."

Artists reveal clearly that any practice, whether spiritual or artistic, requires a balance of dedication and creativity. The secret is internalizing the rules so well that it becomes possible to move beyond them. In their spirituality, as in their art, few artists stay strictly within the bounds of convention. They improvise, believing themselves to be capable—indeed, regarding themselves as having a mandate—to create. They are dedicated to challenging the rules, not in the interest of self-expression alone, but for the purpose of pushing out the frontiers of human possibility. The way their spirituality and their art come together holds the key to a broader understanding of the creative life. They are the visionaries who challenge received opinions, the disciplined seekers who reveal the way of the artist.

1

LEARNING FROM ARTISTS

DAVID ELLSWORTH'S STUDIO serves in its quiet way as a place where ideas about spirituality take shape and are disseminated to others. He often has five apprentices working with him. As they learn his techniques of lathing and burnishing, they absorb his introspective philosophy about the deeper mysteries of life. Although it is possible to appreciate the beauty of his creations without understanding that they are an expression of his spirituality, people who know him realize the connection. He and his wife participate in a loosely knit community of artists that also includes several self-employed businesspeople, professionals, farmers, and neighbors who enjoy sharing what they have been learning from their reading and who support one another in their explorations of meditation or other personal religious practices. The questions that Ellsworth and his friends discuss are similar to those that artists in other locations have been raising in public ways, through installations, lyrics, and poems that deal explicitly with spirituality. How, they wonder, can we understand and relate to God given all the conflicting religious beliefs and the way all religious traditions tend to be skeptically regarded in the mass media and higher education? Their ques-

tioning arises from a personal desire to have a relationship with God or to experience the sacred. It emerges even more forcefully from personal issues that cause them to wonder about the meaning of their lives and to seek strength for the challenges that confront them.

Nancy Chinn is one painter who has been experimenting with new ways of incorporating her ideas about spirituality into her art. Her studio is located in Oakland, California, where spring comes early after the winter rain. Down the street the oleanders are in full bloom and in the distance, half shrouded in late morning fog, one tower of the Golden Gate bridge looms majestically. In many ways, it is also springtime in Chinn's personal life. Although she is in her late fifties, she bubbles with the excitement of someone who is just discovering herself. She speaks enthusiastically of her explorations in feminist spirituality, her teaching, and her art. The tiny, cream-colored, blue-trimmed bungalow in which she lives and works fairly teems with her creations.

Many of Nancy Chinn's watercolors focus on religious themes.[1] Some are abstractions inspired by the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible and are painted in muted pastel tones, while others represent distinctly religious images, such as stained glass windows, lilies, and angels. Her interest in these themes reflects a long spiritual pilgrimage, some aspects of which she is still struggling to understand. Although she lived with both parents as a child, she says she was effectively left to raise herself. Her father was a salesman whose work required him to travel extensively, as well as moving the family from state to state at random intervals. Her mother was clinically depressed, on medication much of the time and periodically institutionalized. As a child, Chinn attended whatever church happened to be within walking distance, finding friends and learning about God, but also feeling that she could not quite believe the way other people did.

During high school and college she continued to question and to seek companionship. She married young, devoted herself to raising three children, followed her husband from one town to another, and took an occasional art class. Before the youngest two children were through high

school, she was moving away from her husband intellectually and emotionally. After they divorced, Chinn turned to her work as an artist and to pursuing her interests in spirituality. Slowly, she started to feel that she was coming alive, but the process has been filled with pain as well as joy. She has expressed it in a series of paintings about wolves. One is a garish image of a wolf split open, revealing its inside, with nails holding down the skin. Another is a crucified wolf wearing a crown of thorns. The one she cherishes most, though, is of a huge she-wolf, a four- by six-foot painting that dominates her living room. "I can lean against her and she protects me from behind," Chinn explains. "But as soon as I've rested enough, she nips me and moves me on."

A different perspective on spirituality emerges from a Cuban restaurant in a rustic Pennsylvania river town where motorcycle gangs and astrology buffs congregate on weekends with antique hunters and theatergoers from New York City. At the back of the restaurant is a low stage. A tall woman with curly blond hair and a billowing denim dress tunes a Taylor jumbo maple guitar. Her name is Jennie Avila. Soon she is joined by her singing partner of seven years, Amy Torchia. The two folk singers accompany themselves with acoustic guitars, conga drums, and Appalachian lap dulcimers.[2]

Tonight they perform a selection of original compositions, singing of mermaids and water spirits, of loves lost, and of journeys taken. Several songs focus on homelessness, domestic violence, and poverty. The music is not simply entertaining; it evokes a deeper, reflective mood as well. Avila tells the audience that a song about the richness of life was composed for the recent funeral of her best friend in high school. Another song lamenting a wounded (three-legged) deer was written by Torchia in recognition of the ecological costs of suburban development. Still another combines childhood memories of making snow angels with drumming reminiscent of American Indian cadences. The audience's response is electrifying. The performers' energy, the rhythm, and the lyrics blend to achieve what Avila later describes as a "spiritual connection."

A related, but different, spiritual connection can be seen in the work

of Jamel Gaines, a choreographer and artistic director of the Creative Outlet Dance Theater in Brooklyn. Since 1992 he has created liturgical dance events at the five-thousand-member St. Paul Community Baptist Church in Brooklyn for the Reverend Johnny Ray Youngblood. "Youngblood's jazzy, eloquent sermons aren't the only reason thousands flock to his three-hour services," a writer for the *Village Voice* observes. "They also come for the rapturous gospel choir, and for the dancers who whirl about the altar to the rhythm of African drums."[3]

Jamel Gaines is a strikingly handsome man of African, Italian, and Native American ancestry. Seated in his living room, which has been turned into a dance studio, he explains that he began dancing when he was in elementary school and continued to be involved in performances throughout high school. The oldest of six children in a working-class family, he was encouraged to work hard and go to college. By the time he graduated, he was a member of the Jubilation Dance Company and for the next six years toured internationally, as well as performing in Brooklyn and Off-Broadway. Gaines says that the group he founded, Creative Outlet Dance Theater, is "a reflection of the community." It stages productions that bring dancers, actors, vocalists, and visual artists together, and it works with local schools and churches to provide training in the arts for children.

His work with Reverend Youngblood began inauspiciously as a men's exercise class but quickly became what the *New York Daily News* described as the only "formal, full-time dance ministry" in New York City.[4] "We do theater as a means of ministering, healing, saving, embracing, capturing, and teaching," Gaines explains. "Most people think, 'Oh, it's a church production. You're going to have kids standing around singing, you know, "Silent Night" and so forth.' But we bring in sets and strive for the highest professional level. It's like a Broadway production." It has also been an opportunity for Gaines to develop his understanding of the spiritual aspects of dance. At first, he remembers, there were criticisms because people in the church associated dancing with immorality and sensuality. But Gaines has become convinced that dancing can be an

act of praise. He is one of a growing number of dancers seeking to incorporate this form of praise into the worship services of their churches.

Yet another interpretation of spirituality can be seen in a small village south of Santa Fe, where a quiet man hides from the world as often as he can to think and write. Jon Davis's poetry speaks often of the tragedies of life and of the quest to make sense of these tragedies.[5] Much of it is autobiographical. Davis was four when his father deserted his mother and his three brothers. For a time he was sent to live with relatives. At one point his father, an alcoholic who succumbed periodically to fits of violence, kidnapped him and his brothers and threatened to kill them. His mother took him regularly to the Catholic church, hoping it would somehow provide comfort. Instead, it filled him with fear. "I found the whole thing terrifying," he recalls. The priests' stories of divine punishment gave him nightmares. He became more and more withdrawn, feeling secure only when he could escape into the dense Connecticut woods to be alone.

By the time he was in high school, Davis was writing nature journals as a way to communicate with himself. A seventh-grade teacher had exposed him to Ralph Waldo Emerson's idea of the poet as priest. He remembers being attracted by James Joyce's idea of epiphanal breakthroughs and of eventually turning to Martin Heidegger, whose work taught him that though the gods have fled it is still possible to explore the truth hidden beneath the surface appearances of ordinary life. For a number of years, Davis's poetry served mainly as his personal window into the deeper mysteries of life. He worked as a day laborer, digging trenches and laying foundations, went back to school in his late twenties, earned a Ph.D., and found himself still digging trenches while he searched for part-time employment on campus after campus. Now in his mid-forties, he considers himself lucky to have steady employment. His poetry has ripened over the years. The death of a brother in a motorcycle accident, his own divorce, living in so many different places, and having time to reflect on his upbringing—all have forced him to think deeply about spirituality. On many occasions, he still feels that the gods

have fled. But he also believes that the essence of spirituality is present in the mystery of life. Sometimes his poetry gives him a connection with that mystery.

Spirituality in the Arts

The artists' experiences just described are not isolated examples. Across the nation, evidence points conclusively to a resurgence of interest in spirituality, not only in the scattered quests of individual artists but also in the organized activities of galleries and concert halls, churches and museums, and professional associations. Artists' current interest in spirituality has been particularly evident in a number of prominent exhibitions. One was "Negotiating Rapture" at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, featuring work by Joseph Beuys, Lucio Fontana, Shirzeh Houshiary, Agnes Martin, Ad Reinhardt, and Bill Viola. Another was "Reaffirming Spirituality," sponsored by El Museo del Barrio in New York City as part of its twenty-fifth anniversary celebration and featuring more than three dozen prominent Latin American and Latino artists, including Pablo Yglesias, Miriam Hernández, Antonio Martorell, and Andres Serrano.[6]

Some of this interest in spirituality is rooted in efforts to embrace greater racial, ethnic, gender, and lifestyle diversity. As Susana Torruella Leval, the curator of "Reaffirming Spirituality," explains: "Many Latin American and Latino artists deplore the modern isolation from, and discomfort with, dimensions of experience that involve the spiritual, the sacred, the supernatural, and the magical. Thus an important part of their work involves recovering these spiritual traditions and values and restoring them to a place of familiarity and importance in contemporary life."[7] Feminist spirituality has also been influential. At Cleveland's "Inner Light" exhibition, feminist artists Nancy Azara, Heejung Kim, and Martha Posner displayed works that included representations of the maternal aspects of the divine and drew on traditional Christian and Buddhist themes. Diversity in contemporary art has also revived inter-

est in aboriginal, druid, and other pre-Christian forms of spirituality. At the Dreamtime Gallery in Santa Fe one exhibition focused on the connections between lost aboriginal worlds and psychic loss in the contemporary world.

Religious organizations also foster current connections between spirituality and the arts. According to one national study, 38 percent of religious congregations sponsor some kind of choral singing (other than at regular religious services), and 24 percent offer other performing arts activities (such as dance, instrumental groups, or theater).[8] Another, nonsystematic survey, comprising responses from approximately 300 congregations, revealed more than 2,200 instances of dance being used in worship settings.[9]

Beyond the worship experience, congregations have become locations for a wide variety of spiritual expressions through the arts. At St. Gregory's Episcopal Church in San Francisco, sixty mural-sized icons commissioned over the past two decades include a flowing interpretation of the creation by a Maori artist, an Ethiopian calendar, and large portraits of Malcolm X, Anne Frank, and John Muir. In Jackson, Mississippi, several congregations have helped to launch the Ballet Magnificat, a full-time professional Christian ballet company that gives more than a hundred performances annually. At St. John's Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, the Metropolitan Boys Choir, whose members practice twice weekly in the church's facilities, has grown to the point that more than a dozen separate ensembles are sent on national and international tours each year.

Convents, monasteries, and retreat centers have become another popular venue for workshops and exhibitions. Visitors at the Pendle Hill Center near Philadelphia take classes in pottery-making that emphasize the similarities between art and spiritual development or enroll in weekend workshops on the spiritual aspects of Toni Morrison's novels. At the Kirkridge Center in rural Pennsylvania, sizable gatherings sign up months in advance to hear lectures by writer Madeleine L'Engle or participate in workshops on sacred dance, while those at another site in

Pennsylvania, the Temenos Retreat Center, participate in seminars such as "The Creative Process as Spiritual Pathway."

Colleges and universities have been instrumental in encouraging interest in spirituality within the arts. Outside Boston, at Brandeis University's Rose Art Museum, the multimedia "God Project" attempts to engage students and visitors in issues of art and individual beliefs about spirituality.[10] At Wheaton College in Illinois, the Billy Graham Center Museum sponsors an annual "Sacred Arts All-Media Art Exhibit," based on a juried competition in each major category of the visual arts. At the Villanova University Gallery, events have included a jazz combo–led worship service, an exhibition of works by contemporary artists called "Celebrations of the Spirit," and an exhibition entitled "The Language of Art," co-sponsored with neighboring churches.

The mass media have also played an important role in popularizing the ways in which artists conceive of spirituality. One example is Bill Moyers's popular 1995 PBS series and best-selling book, *The Language of Life*, featuring poets Robert Hass, Daisy Zamora, Marilyn Chin, and others who have written about spirituality. Other examples include double–Grammy winner Kathy Mattea's album *Love Travels*, widely publicized as having been inspired by the singer's spiritual journey, and such motion pictures as Disney's *Lion King* and George Lucas's *Star Wars*, which contain lyrics and images that critics have associated with spirituality.

Seeking Guidance

Most Americans still look to the churches for their primary cues about spirituality, rather than seeking guidance from the arts. In national surveys approximately seven of ten Americans claim to be members of a church or synagogue.[11] Only 8 percent of the public indicate they have no religious *preference*, while 58 percent identify with Protestant denominations, 25 percent with Catholic churches, and the remainder divide themselves among such traditions as Greek or Russian Orthodoxy, Judaism, and Islam. The number who participate regularly at their

places of worship is harder to determine, but some studies indicate that between 35 and 40 percent of Americans may be present at religious services in any given week, while more skeptical appraisals suggest that only a quarter of the population attends.[12]

With some 340,000 congregations, the religious establishment is well positioned to shape the spiritual leanings of most Americans. Organized religion takes in approximately $57 billion annually from charitable contributions, amassing more than half of all individual contributions to nonprofit organizations, more than three times the amount donated to educational causes, and more than five times the sum given to health-related organizations.[13] This income, together with that from the sale of goods and services (such as fees for weddings and funerals, seminars, and music lessons), pays for the employment of approximately 371,000 full-time clergy.[14] In addition, each year volunteers contribute approximately $12 billion in time to religious organizations.[15]

Yet there has been a great deal of ferment in American religion during the past half century. The 1950s were in many ways a high-water mark in the strength of organized religion. Fueled by Cold War fears and nurtured by the child-rearing concerns of millions of young families, the nation's churches and synagogues boasted record attendance and membership rates. The civil rights movement and antiwar protests of the 1960s were reinforced by activist congregations and clergy. But the 1960s brought about cultural changes that undermined the authority of established religion as well. College students turned to other sources of inspiration, including social and political movements, science, psychology, humanistic philosophies, and Eastern religions. Despite a resurgence of evangelical and fundamentalist piety in the 1980s, the religious establishment has continued to be a venue for contested truths more than a place of quiet consensus. Theologians debate the very possibility of creedal truth, while feminist spirituality, New Age practices, reports of near-death experiences, books and television programs about angels, and psychological treatises on the inner self dominate popular discussions of spirituality.

Americans' response to this ferment has been to emphasize the complex *experiential* aspects of religion instead of traditional dogmas and creeds. Most Americans insist that individuals should arrive at their views of spirituality by themselves rather than being guided too strongly by theologians or clergy. Although they may attend faithfully at a local house of worship, few Americans understand—or care much about—the nuances of particular confessional or denominational orthodoxies. A majority of churchgoers routinely engage in practices that theologians of the past would have branded heretical, such as consulting horoscopes, reading Tarot cards, or expressing belief in reincarnation. Encounters with angels and reports of near-death experiences are popular because they are grounded firmly in personal life: skeptics who may be able to dispute philosophical proofs of the existence of God cannot touch these experiences because they are beyond observation or scientific description.

This experiential emphasis takes a variety of forms. Although it may be especially evident in emotional, firsthand reports of mysterious encounters with God, it is by no means limited to fringe or heterodox religious expressions. Millions of Americans have been drawn to charismatic and Pentecostal churches in recent decades because they can experience the mysterious workings of the Holy Spirit in their personal lives. Participants in liturgical worship services speak of the meaningfulness of these experiences, even though they may deny understanding the creeds they recite. In small groups, discussions of biblical texts quickly move from theological interpretations to the personal experiences that validate or invalidate these texts. Faced with friends and co-workers who have been reared in different denominations or even in different religions, Americans emphasize the religious beliefs and experiences that stem from their own personal journeys. Religious leaders themselves reinforce the view that faith is more important to spiritual life than abstract knowledge, and they encourage followers to recognize the full range of emotions with which their spiritual yearnings may be associated.

Artistic expressions of spirituality correspond especially well with this current interest in the experiential aspects of spirituality. On the one

hand, art is capable of bringing into sharper relief emotions associated with the most profound experiences of human existence. The music of Jennie Avila and Amy Torchia evokes a spiritual connection because it reminds people of their own experiences of grieving or the questions about God that have troubled them; as Torchia says, "My songwriting has been like therapy to me, hopefully in a universal way." On the other hand, art points to the mysterious dimensions of life—the "undefined," as David Ellsworth calls it. The poignant lines of a poem, the rhythm of a song, or the images expressed in a painting can connect our spirituality and our sense of the multiple dimensions on which life is experienced.

Defining Spirituality

But what messages about spirituality are artists communicating? Although the term "spirituality" refers to an aspect of life that is concerned with transcendence, wholeness, or ultimacy, it carries many connotations and is often used to suggest a realm of personal experience or being that cannot easily be communicated to others. Like David Ellsworth, many people seem to believe that the essence of spirituality lacks definition. Yet artists are often able to describe their understandings and experiences of spirituality with eloquence.

Nancy Chinn has been searching for satisfactory ways to fulfill her desire for spirituality for as long as she can remember. "I think the first adult experience I had of spirituality was walking into my house one day when I was about sixteen," she recalls. "I felt the cool on my face of the ocean breeze and the phrase 'God is a spirit' flowed into me and I understood in a kinesthetic way what that meant." This experience became emblematic of her understanding of spirituality because it brought together two aspects of her religious upbringing that she had previously been unable to integrate. The first was a vivid, yet often wavering, conviction in the existence of God. From third grade, she went every Sunday to a church within walking distance of her home. Chinn learned the biblical stories and came to think of herself as a Christian. Yet "the

faith," as she terms it, was largely a system of beliefs external to herself. It belonged to "other people," from whom she often felt alienated. Although she never completely doubted the reality of God, this God remained in a remote corner of her universe. The other unintegrated aspect of her upbringing was an intuitive sense of the supernatural. She sometimes saw "auras on people" and had "waking dreams" in which she heard internal voices telling her what to do. "I never talked about any of that with anyone," she remembers. But Chinn's experience at age sixteen drew a connection between her belief in God and her inner sense of the supernatural. The ocean breeze was a tangible sensation, while the idea that "God is a spirit" gave religious meaning to this sensation.

When Chinn talks about spirituality now, it is this image of a direct experiential connection with God that is uppermost in her thoughts. She describes herself as a "questioner" who finds it difficult to believe the teachings at the Catholic, Episcopal, and Presbyterian churches she attends most frequently. She finds it necessary to replicate the "kinesthetic" experience of God's spirit in order to feel that she is truly relating to God. She means this quite literally. Spirituality, she believes, should be sensual; relating to God should be so emotionally fulfilling that it generates bodily movement. It should border on the erotic.

In contrast to Nancy Chinn's emphasis on an inward, personal sense of being connected with God, Jennie Avila focuses more on an indirect sense of transcendence experienced through her connections with other people. It is significant that she stresses the "spiritual connection" she experiences between herself and her audience when she sings. As a teenager, she tried to establish a direct relationship with God. For several months, as a born-again Christian, she read the Bible a lot, prayed repeatedly, simplified her wardrobe, and entreated God daily to cleanse her of immoral and impure thoughts. Later, she went through a "nature worship phase," which included taking long walks in the woods and lying on the grass at night while closely observing the moon and stars. She has retained her affinity with nature, but her relationships with people have been her most enduring way of relating to the sacred.

Avila's awareness that transcendence could be attained through interpersonal relationships started to blossom when she left home at eighteen to become a folk singer. For the next four years she lived among migrant farm workers in California, earning a subsistence living from her performances and pouring most of her energy into César Chávez's United Farm Workers movement. She was touched by simple acts of kindness among people in the movement and found that her singing was often the best way to overcome cultural barriers. Yet many of her closest social relationships over the years have been broken, causing her to emphasize the psychological and spiritual ties among people more than someone's physical presence or absence. Over the years she has tried to cultivate this sense of spirituality through meditation and prayer while remaining active in efforts to promote peace and to help the needy. Although Avila finds it difficult to summarize her ideas about spirituality, she is convinced that there is some "spiritual force" that unifies everything. Getting in touch with that unity and "living more in tune" with it is her goal. The unity that emerges through her singing is one of the clearest ways in which she is able to realize this goal. "Sometimes while I'm singing," she explains, "I'll get physical sensations of tingling. I know that I'm actually really touching somebody and there're energy exchanges that happen. It's an exchange of some kind of spiritual encouragement."

Jamel Gaines draws a distinction between spirituality and religion and then emphasizes the value of relating the two. As a child, he attended Sunday school and worship services regularly at an all-black Baptist church. He knew the church's teachings and practices, but during college and while he was traveling with the Jubilation Dance Company he became less interested in religion and more accustomed to talking about spirituality. Rather than mentioning God or Jesus, his fellow dancers referred to the Creator, and their idea of spirituality focused on the energy or spirit that might be evident in dance itself. Gaines himself now emphasizes the holistic aspect of spirituality—the idea that spirituality pervades everything and yet is more encompassing than any

of its specific manifestations. In contrast, for him, religion connotes formal teachings and a particular place of worship. He regards religion as a way to focus the diffuse power inherent in spirituality; places of worship permit people an opportunity to think about God, to minister to one another's needs, and to be healed. This is why he enjoys his work at St. Paul Community Baptist Church.

Jon Davis is less sure than Jamel Gaines about the existence of God; indeed, he sees himself as living in a world from which the gods have fled. It is thus impossible for him to conceive of spirituality as a direct connection between himself and a divine being. He also has difficulty with the idea that transcendence emerges from the relationships people forge with one another. That idea seems to place too much emphasis on the heightened emotions that sometimes derive from human interaction. His understanding of spirituality is more philosophical. Davis believes that some form of Truth or Reality is present in the universe, but this Truth or Reality is hidden from us by the language, symbols, and material artifacts that make up our culture and influence our perceptions. All that can be hoped for, he believes, is an occasional breakthrough. Momentary glimpses of the sacred can be attained by reflecting on our perceptions and by manipulating the symbolic world in which we live in ways that bring about new perceptions.

Davis's view of spirituality brings him repeatedly to an awareness of how little we know—and can ever know—about the deepest mysteries of life: "I'm deeply disturbed when people think they have spiritual knowledge. Two things can happen. One is that it eliminates the possibility of belief. If something is true and we've seen it, well then, where is faith? The other is that people who think they have the Truth start to torment and torture the rest of us." He thinks the Spanish poet Federico García Lorca captured the idea when he wrote that only mystery makes us live. And yet Davis continues to believe that the struggle for spirituality is worthwhile because the search itself heightens our awareness of mystery. In one of his poems he writes: "The sacred is not found in the sudden whorl of fingerprints, the/spider's web, the oyster drill waving

its tiny trunk,/the trumpet worm sunk in silt, its pink fronds/scything the waves' repetitions—though each/quickens our longing."[16]

Unifying Elements

Despite the differing emphases, these artists' remarks on spirituality contain unifying elements. At the core is a strong conviction that some reality, being, force, or spirit exists which cannot be fully comprehended or experienced. Nancy Chinn refers often to the mysteriousness of God. She does not believe that God is entirely unknowable but that God's attributes are continuously being revealed as people strive to experience God's spirit. This is why the kinesthetic experience of feeling the wind or capturing beauty in a painting has spiritual meaning. Jennie Avila finds it more difficult to describe her beliefs in god-language. Despite going to church regularly as a child, she recalls having questions that never seem to have been answered, and during her years with the United Farm Workers, the Catholicism to which she was exposed emphasized doing good rather than discussing theology. She nevertheless feels that her upbringing left her with a deep desire for transcendence: "I want to find some kind of unity or meaning in life." Jamel Gaines tends more than either Chinn or Avila to believe that God can be known if people have the time to spend studying the Bible and other religious teachings, but at this point in his life, God remains largely unknown. Indeed, Gaines says the best way to live is to try to be "Christ-like" by serving others and remembering that the Creator is beyond our comprehension. Jon Davis's conviction that another, mysterious plane of reality exists originated in an intense Catholic upbringing that led him to consider becoming a priest and at the same time generated nightmares about God's wrath. As he matured, he never stopped believing in the existence of this other reality, even though he questioned religious teachings. He was especially influenced by the writings of philosopher Alan Watts. Like many of his generation, Davis learned from Watts that the rational mind is often a barrier to being open to the deepest mysteries of life.

If the spiritual dimension is ultimately a mystery, these artists nevertheless insist that it can be experienced partially and momentarily. Its reality is most evident when an individual feels transported beyond the realm of ordinary sense perceptions. For Nancy Chinn, the nearly audible voices she heard as a child have been replaced by powerful dreams in which she feels that God is communicating to her—"There's a guiding spirit somehow. I don't know how to say it any other way." Jennie Avila and Amy Torchia believe the spiritual connections they experience with their audiences point to the existence of some spiritual force in the universe. Jamel Gaines does not recall any experiences either as a child or as an adult when he felt a direct connection with God, but he does feel that some divine spirit empowers him from time to time when he dances. Jon Davis is still attracted to the idea of epiphanies, and he sometimes experiences them when he is in nature or while he is writing.

Although the experiences reinforcing their conviction of the reality of the sacred are largely unanticipated, these experiences become more memorable, gain added meaning, and are even stimulated by the words, music, and visual images of these artists. Nancy Chinn says one of her most moving experiences came when a pastor opened the worship service by asking the congregation to walk around, examine the paintings hanging on the walls, and then stand in front of their favorite "until they heard a name for God." During the invocation, each person called out the name he or she had heard. The paintings, Chinn feels, encouraged people to think about God in new ways.

Jennie Avila, who started practicing meditation several years ago, has become interested in the uses of aural and visual images during meditation. In addition to chanting and listening to music, she has learned—through a course on "Visionary Art"—to quiet her thoughts and draw the images that come to mind during this subdued state of consciousness. This method reminds her of how the music in Sunday school moved her to a closer relationship with God as a child or how playing the piano and painting pictures helped express her spiritual yearnings as a teenager. It has given her new insights about herself as well. From ex-