

How to Get Unstuck in Your Creativity and Grow in Christ

Man was made in the image of God, but man was formed from the dirt of the earth. In one of the oldest books of the Bible, a despairing man by the name of Job reminded God that He had fashioned Job from a lump of clay (Job 10:9). Though Job went through loss of children, property and health, the final results of his life show that God knew what He was doing with that so-called lump of clay, even if Job had doubted it for a period of time (see Job 42:12–17).

So it is with you and everyone else in this world. No one's life is so far gone that it cannot be reengineered. We see this re-creation at work in both everyday life and in the Bible.

Hope for the Impossible

Growing up in Pittsburgh, Bill Strickland watched his Manchester neighborhood go from trees and neat homes in the 1950s to a ghetto with the highest crime rate in the city in the 1960s. As a 16-year-old boy, he was almost flunking out of school and was looking for a way out. It's hard to believe any young black man raised in poverty would consider art as a ticket to a better life, but that's exactly what happened.

One day Strickland looked inside a sunlit classroom of his high school and saw a mound of clay on a potter's wheel, being shaped into a pot. Strickland interrupted the teacher, introduced himself and asked to learn how to do ceramics. The potter's wheel turning was like magic to him.

"I saw a radiant and hopeful image of how the world ought to be," Strickland says. "It opened up a portal for me that suggested that there might be a whole range of possibilities and experiences that I had not explored."

The art teacher agreed to teach Strickland about ceramics—and much more. He told Strickland he had “the talent and the resources to take control of his life and do something with it.” Having had no mentors or models of successful people before this, nor encouragement from others around him, it was a miracle young Strickland chose to believe him. The teacher invited Strickland into his home and poured food and encouragement into that young man when others saw nothing in him.

Strickland received a scholarship to the University of Pittsburgh, starting the year on probation and ending up on the dean’s list. But his old neighborhood that he had come to care deeply about continued to suffer, as the riots of the late ’60s plundered it.

While still in college, Strickland decided to open an after-school program to bring hope back to the streets. He called it Manchester Craftsmen’s Guild (MGC), and he taught the kids about pottery. It had changed his life, and he had every reason to believe it would do the same for other kids as well. Three years later, he was asked to take over Bidwell Training Center, a church-run program that provided vocational training for adults. Accepting this challenge gave him his vision for saving troubled kids before they were lost and reclaiming adults who had been left behind by the system. By 1983, Strickland had amassed a network of business and community leaders whom he parlayed into the next grand adventure of social change. With \$112 in the bank, Strickland set out walking the streets to raise \$8 million to construct a building on an abandoned industrial park site.

“The worst thing about being poor is what it does to your spirit, not just your wallet,” Strickland says. “I wanted to build something that would give the people who come here a vision of what life could be, to create an environment that says that life is good.”

Three years later, the building was completed. Today, MCG educates hundreds of kids in ceramics, painting, photography and drawing—without charge. The goal is not to produce artists but to engage and redirect troubled young people and point them toward a better future. It must be working, because 80% of the kids who go through MCG's doors go on to attend college. As of 2016, Strickland's youth program has been "franchised" in 10 other cities, including Akko, Israel, "which serves Palestinian and Israeli kids together under one roof. Strickland hopes the Akko center will, in his words, 'possibly alter a conflict that has lasted for centuries.'"

The adult training center has been equally successful. Strickland has partnered with area corporations to train a much-needed skilled workforce. These adults are being trained in the fields of horticultural technology, medical coding and the culinary arts, among many others. Over 500 adults graduate from the program each year, 90% of whom find full-time employment.

Strickland still lives not far from his old neighborhood in a modest home. He has turned down numerous offers by Fortune 500 companies and even requests that he run for political office. Instead, he uses his time to do things like speak to young MBA students about how he is changing the world.

Strickland's message is about "common sense and decency, about the dictate that our best hopes must always be acted upon, that all people everywhere possess an innate hunger for and right to the sustaining, the good and the beautiful."

Your country, city and neighborhood are not without hope. Maybe that's why God planted you there. Esther was planted in Persia in a region where the king passed a decree to exterminate the Jewish people.

But God's plan was greater than his. To manifest His plan on earth, God used a young woman from a rural village. She did

not have a degree in political science. She was not trained in constitutional law, hostage negotiation or geopolitical conciliation and arbitration. But what she did have was faith in God.

I've discovered that God does not call the qualified, but He does qualify the called. The risks may be high, but the anticipated results and rewards far outweigh the risks. Ask God to use you to make a difference in your country, city and neighborhood. Ask Him to show you, if necessary, how to create something out of nothing.

The Law of Creativity

God created. This we know from the first chapter of Genesis. You have the agency and the God-given creativity to create whatever tomorrow you desire.

When God said in Genesis 1:26b, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness," He had a prototype in mind. Likewise, when you set out to create the life you've dreamed of, you must also keep in mind the likeness after which you want to create it. God gives us the kingdom of heaven as the prototype after which we are to fashion our lives.

The origins of the word "create" are rooted in the Latin *creātus*, which is the past participle of *creāre*, which means "to bring into being, beget, give birth to, cause to grow." If you look into the etymology of the word "create," you will find it is related to *crēscere*, meaning to "to come into existence, increase in size or numbers, grow."

So what does this tell us about the law of creativity? I believe it speaks to the necessity of proactively making what we desire for ourselves and our families grow. We must tend the gardens of our lives by cultivating and creating what we hope to see grow there. It is incumbent upon us to sow and till and plant whatever we want to produce; we are the stewards of the gardens of our lives. Let me ask you: What are

you growing in your day-to-day life? What are you creating?

To create is to grow—and to grow is to be a good and faithful steward. Meditate for a moment on the Parable of the Talents in Matthew 25:14-30.

God has already given you whatever you need to produce, grow and increase whatever He has entrusted you to do in this life. If you feel stuck, as perhaps Queen Esther did, then pray. Lean in and listen. He will give you the insight and inspiration you need to cultivate the beautiful thing He has put you in His garden to create—whether that be a conversation, a campaign or a canvas you are to paint.

Trust Him to enable you through His Spirit to do something new—to grow, produce and increase whatever brings you joy. This is the law of creativity, as active and real as the law of gravity. And just like everything else in the kingdom, it requires faith. {eo}

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