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Creativity

A Gift for the Gifted

THE SILENT CALL

It's not easy to hear a silent call, especially in a lively classroom where everyone is learning at different levels. Often, the gifted students, sprinkled willy-nilly throughout the school, sit quiet and studious, rarely letting on that something is missing. Many couldn't put their fingers on it if we asked them to. The creative world they lived in during their earliest years of learning as they touched, tasted, performed, molded, constructed, expressed, and explored their surroundings has lost its validity. They had to let it go in order to ply the more serious waters of skill acquisition and content mastery. The "sense of wonder" so eloquently expressed by Rachel Carson as the most precious element of learning begins to fade. The child's world becomes subjects in a curriculum rather than a world to discover, and learning requires less of the inner life and more of the ability to comply with prescribed steps and sequences.

Gifted learners who come into the world with an abundance of curiosity and inspiration can become particularly disheartened by this process. Creativity in whatever form—from an open questioning technique in a science class to an imaginative exercise in a drama workshop to an interdisciplinary discovery process in a social studies class—revives unused talents and interests and extends their learning in significant ways. In

programs across the country, gifted children compose poems and stories, write compelling speeches for simulated trials, develop unique formulas for difficult math problems, and design complex, multimedia compositions in art and film. Families report that their children are more engaged and alive in their learning than they have been for years.

WHY CREATIVITY MATTERS

The importance of creativity becomes apparent when we examine the situations in which gifted students really thrive. Obviously, a more challenging program of study than exists in the regular classroom responds to their advanced learning abilities in many subjects. But what about creativity? A child in an advanced reading group may be delighted to tackle difficult books, especially poetry and historical novels, and enjoys the guided class discussions debating and analyzing the various texts. But what about her own writing? Her own imaginary endings to stories she's read? Or her etchings of characters in her favorite novel? Or poems she thought of writing after her teacher exposed the group to the nature poems of Mary Oliver?

In our school system, there is an unfortunate tendency to place academics and creativity on separate poles—for example, an intensive, accelerated program of advanced mathematics on one side and, on the other, a less academically rigorous “enrichment” activity. Meanwhile, the students, when left to their own devices, do both—that is, they pursue learning on their own at an advanced level *and* explore its creative edge. In history, they imagine living in the world they're exploring. They wonder what motivated certain actions and what might have happened had historical figures made other choices. In science, they study the discoveries of naturalists and start nature journals with watercolors and sketches. They convert a problem involving fractions into a humorous short story and then solve it in a new way.

Pasteur wisely said, “Chance favors the prepared mind.” Possessing an advanced understanding of a field with an openness to the unconventional is the best way to discover something new. Through an education that embraces both academic mastery *and* creativity, gifted learners can move beyond the limits of their knowledge and skill and step out into the unknown. The likelihood of this happening in our current educational system is slim, however, because services for gifted students (when they exist at all) tend to focus more on advancing to higher levels of difficulty than on a challenging creative endeavor.

Contrary to what we might suppose, surprisingly few gifted children become creative adults (Winner, 1996). A high level of intelligence does not, in and of itself, ensure a future of creative productivity. Research has proved that the classroom environment—particularly in its influence on motivation and creative expression—plays a central role in the degree to

which high-ability students can become independent, innovative, imaginative thinkers (see Amabile, 1996; Hennessey, 2004). Increased creativity among gifted students depends as much on learning situations that support it as on talent (see Feldhusen, 1995; Torrance & Sisk, 1997). The challenge is that the learning environment of the average American school includes pressures that routinely discourage creativity (Amabile, 1996). The culture of evaluation and testing, the enticements of external reward (e.g., high grade, praise, recognition), competition between students, the tendency toward perfectionism, and the imposition of time constraints all work against the creative process. Over time, sensitive gifted students tend to approach their education as a means to an end, undermining both creativity and self-determination (Hennessey, 2004).

Even so, they need times in the classroom when they can step back from these coercive forces and gain experience *making their own contribution* to the subjects they're learning. This can happen only if the climate of the classroom nurtures the *intrinsic motivations* of children—the inner curiosity, imagination, passion. Integrating creativity into the curriculum awakens this inner spirit—the inventor, the mad scientist, the storyteller, the artist.

BENEFITS OF CREATIVITY FOR THE GIFTED

Though many of us think of gifted children as highly motivated people, this is not always the case. In fact, many struggle with motivation (Reis & McCoach, 2000) in our schools. This is understandable given that high-ability students tend to perform better in situations where they have some power over their own learning rather than in ones where they must always respond to external demands, whether from a teacher, a parent, or the curriculum (Hennessey, 2004).

The creative process—structured within the limits and demands of the classroom—offers gifted students just the sort of environment that enables them to become motivated again. A common thread among all the contributors to this book is the conviction that the creative process is of value to both the emotional well-being and the intellectual growth of gifted learners. The high motivation, engagement, and initiative it generates are often the most immediate effects. Beyond that, teachers notice that creative work stimulates higher-level thinking in a wide range of ways: analysis of problems; awareness of new questions; flexible thinking across disciplines; sensitivity to pattern, color, gesture, nuance; heightened sensory awareness; discovery of connections; probing of new mysteries. It also fosters a richer, more nuanced understanding of an issue or subject rarely achieved in ordinary ways.

In this book, teacher-authors reveal how academics and creativity can be naturally woven together. In many of their activities, the process begins with research. Gifted students first delve into the material. Being gifted,

they do it with zest, examining a wide range of sources, posing questions, and gathering the data they require. “Individuals need knowledge in order to be creative; finding problems of increasing sophistication demands increased understanding of the domains in which the problems are found” (Starko, 1995, p. 126). With the knowledge they need, they launch out into the depths, seeking a path of their own—through a new insight or realization, an artistic response or novel proposition. Often, they discover areas where their understanding or skill falls short, and so they return to their teacher with new questions and new problems. This process goes on—with the creative process testing the limits of knowledge and knowledge feeding and expanding the creative process.

Among the many benefits of creativity for high-ability students are these:

- **Personal connections with content areas.** Because of its demand on *individual* thinking, imagining, and analyzing, gifted students immediately become more engaged. Their feelings, interests, and intuitions play a more central role in the learning process. In the Literacy chapter (Chapter 3), for example, Yolanda Toni explores the use of visual art sources as catalysts to inspire individual responses in the form of free verse poems (p. 65). In the Social Studies chapter (Chapter 4), Jerry Flack demonstrates the value of helping gifted learners make creative and personal connections with geography through the creation of what he calls “autobiography maps” (p. 83).
- **Originality and individuality.** The importance of self-expression for gifted students—discovering their own unique abilities, views, interests, tastes and so forth—can never be overestimated. Gifted children need time and opportunities to explore their individual talent, style, and vision. Frances Collins in the Literacy chapter uses what she calls “mentor texts”—examples of writing by professional authors as catalysts for her students to explore and test out their own unique writer voices and styles (p. 56). In the Arts chapter (Chapter 7), Scott Barsotti discusses strategies in acting workshops that can free the creative self of each child and enable students to work freely together as an ensemble (p. 279).
- **Greater exploration of interdisciplinary connections and sources.** Because of the wide range of processes and materials employed, creativity can more effectively accommodate differences in learning styles as well as socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. Combining media (e.g., text, art, graphs, drama, design, photography, tools) and subjects (math, art, geography, architecture) provides a far richer, more interconnected world for gifted students to make creative leaps. In the Literacy chapter, Courtland Funke shares his program that involved gifted students creating a monthly podcast about their school—an endeavor that draws on their writing ability, musical talents, technical skills, and many other gifts. Lois Guderian,

in the Social Studies chapter, finds rich and meaningful connections for gifted students in an interdisciplinary music–social studies project that focuses on the songs of African American spirituals (p. 104).

- **Discovery.** Discovery can happen in any subject and almost always emerges when children have more choices in how they approach an assignment. Even concepts in math or science units can be learned through a process of exploration and inductive reasoning. The children act on situations that, by experimenting, probing, reasoning, imagining, and so forth enable them to *discover* concepts and ideas that might ordinarily be learned more abstractly. For example, in the Mathematics chapter (Chapter 6), Christopher M. Freeman devises a number of gamelike activities that involve students in discovering useful insights about factorization, fraction, and stars (p. 205). In the Science chapter (Chapter 5), Carol Howe stimulates curiosity and wonder as students embark on creative explorations of the solar system (p. 170).
- **Higher-level thinking and depth of learning.** Creative processes stimulate higher-level thinking naturally. Children have to inquire into a question or issue, explore various approaches, analyze needs, examine sources, test options, evaluate information, apply principles, and so forth. Creating cannot take place unless they make what they have learned their own and then take it to the next level—that is, bring out another interpretation, invent a new option, diverge from a convention, and so forth. In the Social Studies chapter, for example, Carol Horn shares how in giving students the role of actual historians they develop new mastery in both cognitive and skill areas as they wrestle with the challenges of gathering data, sifting through sources and interpreting findings (p. 100). In the Mathematics chapter, Carol Fisher explores strategies for stimulating more creative thinking in mathematics, enabling gifted students to create their own equations, using fractions, exponents, and any operation they choose.
- **Artistry and depth of feeling.** Integrating the arts and the creative process into the daily life of the classroom awakens the keen sensibilities of gifted children. They revel in such phenomena as the beauty of numbers, the dazzling array of intricate patterns in nature, or the richness of imagery and meaning in stories or poems. Many gifted learners who qualify for and participate in accelerated learning programs miss the creative dimension, though they may not know this. Joyce Hammer in the Mathematics chapter, for example, shows how important it is for gifted children to appreciate the beauty of mathematics and explores ways teachers can use art to explore geometry (p. 216). In Chapter 8 (the conclusion), Susan Scheibel shares a range of strategies involving song, dance, music, and art that preserve the vital connections we all need to a sensory world that is rich, stimulating, and inspiring (p. 305).

What the authors in this book bring to the subject of creativity in the classroom is a wider spectrum of creative domains than we often see applied to the curriculum. As Clark (2002) has pointed out, the “cognitive, rational view of creativity” has become the most researched in the literature (p. 78). Certainly, much is lost if we limit our classrooms to this one domain and omit, for example, the role of the arts as a catalyst for learning. The chart below is a visual display of this wider spectrum of creativity and the different paths gifted children can take within and across subject areas. We have separated these domains for the purpose of clarifying distinctions; clearly, they overlap and interrelate in actual creative work.

Creative Paths to the Curriculum

Cognitive Creativity	Intuition & the Senses	Imagination	Artistry
Questioning the conventional Divergent reasoning Flexible thinking Fluency Perceiving connections and relations Testing and experimentation	Heightened sensibilities Depth of feeling Intuiting Creative hunches Observation and discrimination Responsiveness to sound, touch, sights, texture, atmosphere, etc.	Vivid imagery Rich, detailed creation of fictional people, places, things Daydreaming Projection of alternate realities, designs, solutions Invention Otherworldliness	Sensitivity and responsiveness to the arts Unique observation and vision of natural world Individualistic views and ideas Whimsy and humor Kinetic awareness Deep connections to rhythms, patterns, colors, shades, etc.
Examples Discovering math formulas Uncovering mysteries of science Analyzing literary themes Addressing obstacles to cleaning up a local river	Examples Imaginative processes using arts Intense observation and responses to natural phenomena (e.g., sketching, constructing, writing, analyzing) Embodying roles in literature	Examples Lush artistic creations Composition of stories and poems Dramatizations Divergent production (e.g., fractured fairytales)	Examples Painting and drawing in natural science Dramatizations of literature and history Multimedia work combining visual or performing arts with text Arts as catalysts for creative writing Literature as catalyst for visual/performing arts compositions

E. Paul Torrance (1995), the great pathfinder in creative teaching and learning, wrote a book called *Why Fly?* that has become a guiding light for many educators who, like the teachers in this book, want to steer their students to the higher realms of the imagination. The list below combines

many of his ideas with those of the compilers as well as those shared by the teacher-authors in this book.*

Preparing the Soil

- Openly share your own creative passions with your students.
- Fill the classroom with art, music, and a rich variety of enticing supplies.
- Design work spaces that beckon the creative muse in your students.
- Applaud originality whenever and wherever expressed.
- Protect students from saboteurs: criticism, censure, premature judgment.
- Celebrate risk taking and bold endeavor.

Planting the Seeds

- Awaken imagination and artistic sensibilities through example and exposure to creative people and their works.
- Create open time for creative exploration.
- Share jewels of wisdom about the creative process.
- Point out the hidden, less traveled paths; warn against set patterns.
- Celebrate the beginning steps of children's own creative process.

Watering and Feeding

- Design activities that engage the whole child: touching, feeling, imagining, listening, sensing, composing, combining, writing, improvising, constructing, molding, shaping.
- Provide for advanced learning in a variety of fields.
- Assign work that requires creative and imaginative thinking.
- Nurture boldness in vision and endeavor.

Weeding and Growing

- Teach strategies for *constructive* criticism and evaluation.
- Impart coping skills to deal with peer judgment, crippling perfectionism, and frustration with the creative process.
- Support students' trust in their own creative power.
- Give them opportunities to correct errors, refine visions, rewrite, re-create, improve, elaborate.
- Find venues for students to show/demonstrate/perform/exhibit for real audiences in the community.

Reviewing this list, we can clearly see the weight Torrance placed on nurturing the tender spirit of our students. Creativity is not merely a matter of following prescribed steps or a structured program. It requires

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continuous tending, coaxing, and encouragement. We are to applaud originality, teach coping skills, protect from harsh criticism, instill trust in the creative process, and fill our classrooms with art and music. Bolstering the tentative first steps in creative work enables children to become more rooted in the soil, less vulnerable to wind and frost, and more resilient and steady in their growth as creative beings.

Feeding the Heart and Soul . . .

This leads us to one of the most significant benefits that creativity brings to gifted students: the freedom to be one's self and, just as important, the experience of being accepted by like-minded peers. These "peers" can be other gifted students in a class, or they can be people a child does projects with through a Web site. Creative learning environments tend to make gifted students feel freer as individuals, a little less weird among peers. When they find each other, as they often do in special programs or services, the relief is palpable.

Coming to grips with one's self is not an easy task for gifted children whose sensibilities and feelings seem like an endlessly restless sea. For such children, *creativity is the harbor* they need to discover their worth; to find an accepting, receptive hand to guide them; to gather strength for bolder endeavors in the future.

We conclude this chapter with the experience of an outstanding and intrepid music teacher whose gentle guidance helped a gifted "outsider" discover his worth.

A Sense of Belonging: Music as Connection and Community Through Creativity

By Jane Artabasy

Music's tag as the universal language is true enough, if a tad trite. Organized sound translates to every clime, country, and culture. Youth also embraces its own, if less celebrated, universality—especially during the preteen and teen years. It involves belonging and acceptance as one of the "tribe." To an ubersensitive adolescent, the cruelest cut is to be implicitly "voted off the island," whether by verbal harassment, physical bullying, or the worst slap of all: being ignored. Although low status is searingly painful, invisibility still trumps it.

However, a good school confronts this adolescent fear of "uncoolness" if it consciously partners cognition with community in its methods and mission. And as a curricular area, music bends effortlessly to this duality of purpose. Its practice inherently nurtures the bonds of

sound and psyche. Invariably, when a fine arts curriculum connects the innately communal nature of music to the primal needs of young people for like-minded companionship, the results are, in the adolescent vernacular, downright awesome.

Pedagogues regularly tout group interaction as a viable method of learning. But we rarely claim *interpersonal connection as learning itself*. As the culture of testing has saturated education, we've also come to accept the code of the test, which quantifies or numbers almost every aspect of achievement. This effectively, if inadvertently, isolates both individual and intellect from the social context of life. Once we've surrendered to the expediency of percentiles, to that degree have we unwittingly trivialized the act of thinking itself.

A test-centered school model reflexively restricts thought to the act of interacting with data, whereas the true essence is in the forming and forging of a life, with all the adventure and experience therein implied. When perceived through our most creative impulses, the fabric of learning is a seamless garment, woven from the cloth of our whole selves. Segmenting and measuring the garment does nothing to add either beauty or strength to its design. In truth, an individual's thoughtful evolution in life unfolds as an art as much as a science, and music fills us with the sound of that art, the aural imperatives of soul.

Not all, but many, children struggle with rites of connection during their school experience, straining to conform themselves to the daunting strictures of the intensely social hothouse of contemporary school life. The paradigms of popularity, like the proverbial 800-pound gorilla in the room, are silent but deadly. They are frighteningly arbitrary and cruelly Darwinian for even the sturdiest of students.

But gifted children may face the most difficult challenge of all, and most glaringly so at the middle school age. Their heightened sensitivity frequently becomes an Achilles heel. Young people who shine brighter or more intensely than many of their peers, immediately defy the norm and stand out as the dreaded "different." While this status may secretly torture and embarrass them, the temptation among adults is to assume that their inner lives, full of sparkling ideas and speed-of-light reasoning, must be the ultimate and only fulfillment they need or crave. It is a myth both ill conceived and wrongheaded.

The stereotype of the brilliant loner persists as fertile ground for novels or movies, but it fails the test of real life, which cries out for unbroken bonds of human affection. Even as solitude is our friend, breathing the restorative atmosphere of reflection into life, isolation is a very different animal. If left unattended for too long, it quickly slides into alienation, a dangerous, destructive emotion for any young person, brilliant or otherwise.

We all need, to varying degrees, the secret place of our own minds—that private universe of comfort and unfettered thought at the core of our being. But lines of family, friends, mentors, acquaintances, and even beloved pets must radiate outward from that core of self in a grand panoply

of connection. These ties, broadening and deepening our cognition as we interact with other perspectives and modes of consciousness, give our lives meaning and purpose. Whether young or old, brilliant or not so much, the need to belong and to feel the touch of external affirmation is no less compelling, no less important a quest, than the desire to expand and nurture the inner reaches of our imagination and creativity. Whether at home, school, or play, our basic longings exert strong, if elusive, power over our thoughts, actions, and relationships.

That brings us again to music. Consider the dynamics of a fine symphony orchestra. In the best ensembles, the musicians are individually talented, disciplined, devoted disciples of their instruments. Most of them perform regularly in solo settings. But not even the most brilliant virtuoso would claim solo work as the only and ultimate apogee of musicianship. At all levels of accomplishment, performers experience deep and spiritual connections to music while in ensemble with others. The concert of human beings, in focused togetherness, is as central to the magic of an aesthetic moment as is the concert of notes. In that sense, Yo-Yo Ma and the last-chair cellist of the symphony orchestra have more in common than not. This dynamic is no less true for the musical activities of young people in school environments.

It is wise, in teaching vocal music, to take at least as many views of the forest as of the trees. Attention to detail and a slavish devotion to perfection is the musician's stock in trade, the source of our practice and performance. Middle school children—and especially gifted students—respond enthusiastically to exciting challenges and to the demands of excellence. Yet, they need more. They yearn not just to be taught, but to be seen, to be the object of someone's respectful attention. First, they want affirmation as a valued person, and only then, as scholars, singers, dancers, and so on. A good teacher will strive to enhance musical abilities. A great one will mentor and encourage the spiritual arc of those abilities.

The particulars of this approach are simple enough, but they do require patience and commitment. When sculpting the outlines of a middle school vocal performance, include student choice, ownership, and community from the beginning stages. This sharing of power ensures a learning experience not just of excellence but also of depth and reflection. Use theme and point of view as unifying devices, and don't be afraid to let the students, together, help form the vision. From the first moments as a class, involve students in repertoire choices, solo and ensemble possibilities, choreography, and original script. Don't be afraid of discussion and disagreement, but always hold their feet to the fire in terms of reaching eventual consensus.

For example, begin by choosing a title for the show, such as "High Energy," "Shed a Little Light," or "Lighten Up!" Then, solicit song titles and ideas correlative in some way with the theme. Discuss the value and appropriateness of the suggestions and bring them to a vote. Find the

scores and arrange and/or transpose them to fit your voices. Teach the music, hone the vocalism, and, later in the process, if appropriate, add student-generated choreography and script (connecting each song to the theme). As the program comes together, assign myriad solo parts—perhaps one verse of a song per person—dance segments, speaking parts, and/or walk-ons.

This philosophy works best when many students have short solos, instead of a few assigned long ones. Of course, some voices are better than others. So what? Comparisons are inevitable but shouldn't be restrictive. This is school, not Broadway. Everyone should use the voice he or she has now. It's the only way to get better.

And never fear spontaneity. It's the spice that livens the stew. When that arm shoots up, in the middle of rehearsal, and you hear, "Ooh, ooh, can we try this?" well, try it. Your rehearsal plan should never preclude the possibility of spontaneous delight and serendipity. In classroom priorities, ideas should always outrank schedules. Discipline, in its highest sense, is important as the glue of forward motion. But in education, our business is thought, not control.

Your students have by now personally invested in the process, because you began by appealing to their musical instincts, aesthetic sense, work ethic, and their awakening sense of music-as-community and community-as-music. And what of the gifted students in the class? Throughout the project, they've exercised their considerable abilities but in tandem with others. Their special talents have been affirmed, but so have the talents of everyone else, without artificially imposed hierarchies injecting jealousy and resentment into the mix. (Fine arts classes are usually scheduled from the broadest forms of inclusion, with the entire spectrum of abilities represented in each class. In this community-based model of teaching, everyone can find a niche, a talent to share, from singing solos, to dancing, to writing, to short speaking parts.)

Of course, this "bottom-up" model of music methodology doesn't preclude moments of frustration or conflict. In fact, it practically invites them. After all, we are speaking of middle school. But even tension and anger can offer gifts of blessed, if unintended, consequences. The salvation, however, is to stay focused on the harmony of both music and oneself, in concert with others. Case in point:

My job of teaching middle school vocal music spanned several decades, and a long career spawns many memories. I especially recall one steamy day of rehearsal in June, a few days before our final show of the year. A cruel taunt, whispered during a dance sequence, ignited a temper tantrum from one of my more volatile eighth-grade boys. (Let's call him Tim, a very gifted and talented "loner.") Extended and foul-mouthed shouting ensued but, fortunately, no physical fallout. It was the end of the period, so I kept Tim after class. He had retreated to a corner of the room and hunched down over a desk. He glared my way, raised his palm, and yelled, "Save it!

Whatever you want, Mrs. A., just forget it. I've heard it all, and I'm not interested. Everybody in this #@%^& place hates me, and I hate them. And this stupid school too. So just leave me alone."

One of my stronger suits as a teacher was a hefty head of steam in a tight pinch and plenty of hot air. But this time, I resisted my preachy tendencies. The moment needed silence. Suddenly, the glare softened, and tears started streaming down Tim's face. He began sobbing uncontrollably. A wrenching sadness welled in his eyes, pouring out of him from that place in all of us where we bury our most secret pain. The hurt of many years, the anguish of being on the outside looking in, came rushing out of that boy in torrents of anger, frustration, and hopelessness.

It was not a moment for platitudes or tiresome bromides, and frankly, it didn't matter. A broken heart craves compassion, not expertise or technique. I spoke as quietly and gently as I could:

"Tim, all that may be true. I wouldn't claim to know what you've been going through. But I do know I don't hate you. In fact, I like you . . . very much. You're an incredibly good and sensitive person, and I'm so grateful to know you and to have you in my class." I paused. "You do belong here, on this earth and in this room, you know, or you wouldn't be here. You just have to learn how not to be so hard on yourself."

Our discussion took a few more moments and a few more turns. Then, at some point, he allowed himself a sort of half smile.

"You aren't lying are you, just to make me feel better? You really like me?"

I nodded enthusiastically. "Of course, doofus!"

"Well," he grinned, "that's not what I really want, but it's better than nothing."

We middle school teachers and students know to interpret those words as more than faint praise. Such a charming and disarming specimen is the American teenager!

Soon after, events moved differently, both musically and emotionally. Tim and I worked out the more glaring behavioral issues with the offending student and generated a cathartic "heart-to-heart" with the class the next day. Our rehearsal dynamic quickly recovered a more generous enthusiasm. The music brought us together, as did the exercise of forgiveness. As we entered the last days of preparation, the students found a flow—in the music, in themselves, and with each other—even as the excitement of "game day" escalated. While we sang, danced, and laughed together, the sounds healed and restored us, as did our collective resolve. The performance itself—ironically entitled, "Get Over It!"—resonated with inspiration and joy. The students had earned a oneness of mind that was central to their learning, not ancillary to it or an afterthought.

This isn't to suggest that Tim's problems disappeared or that his popularity took a dramatic turn upward. If music isn't so simple, neither are the imperatives of metacognition. But undeniably, we had felt the exhilaration of love, incremental, yet irresistible. And a ripple of that love touched our audience, too. It was all so sublime.

And aren't those heavenly moments of surety in who we are and what we are doing the purest echoes of the fine art of learning?

"Blessed be the ties that bind" us—to ourselves, to others, and to music as creativity in action.

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