



**Charge to the Minister: To the Rev. Lisa Bovee-Kemper
by the Rev. Lisa Romantum Schwartz
Saturday, September 13, 2014**

Rev. Lisa, it is a joy and an honor to be in the “Rev. Lisa club” with you, and most of all to have you as a trusted, valued colleague. I celebrate this congregation’s inspired wisdom, demonstrated so clearly by their calling you into this covenantal relationship. I know this place echoes your own deep sense of ministry, you who are called to be both Activist, and Artist.

What a strange combination that seems; activism, that hard-edged, practical, concrete work, and art, that gauzy and ephemeral luxury of the few. But, we don’t have to see art and activism as separate spheres.

OK, this is the moment for the big video screen to descend, the projector to fire up ... no, seriously not PowerPoint slides, but those most exquisite images that only your brain can generate. (The pictures are so much better there, anyway.)

I invite you to picture those two words, side by side: Artist. Activist. Just move ‘em around, add and subtract a couple of letters, and you can make one into the other. Activist. Artist. Overlap them, tumble them around in the agitator cycle, you can see that these words are very close to each other.

And, Rev. Lisa, I know they’re close enough in your heart – and thus in your call to ministry – so as to be inseparable.

Which is as it should be. Because, no matter how much our society wants to divide the realms of art and activism, of beauty and politics, they belong together — they are, indeed, inseparable. Activism engages our minds, and Art brings our hearts along for the ride. Art thus lowers the barrier to activism, especially for people who say “I’m not political,” or those who have grown so cynical and despairing that they don’t/won’t/can’t get involved in social change.

Activism gets the credit for bringing about social progress, but an artistic imagination is essential for real transformation, and that is necessary for our very survival. Without the ability to imagine a better future, no one is motivated to work for the changes we so desperately need.

Art is what distinguishes truly inspired activism from the merely mundane. Steve Lambert, who cofounded the Center for Artistic Activism, tells a story about how incredible drum circles are. I mean, they are amazing, aren’t they? It’s so wonderful, hanging out with your friends in the park, creating layers on layers of rhythms together, for hours on end. Absolutely amazing!

At least, that's how the drummers in the circle describe a drum circle. Truth be told, when you're trying to hang out in the park with friends and a bunch of people are sitting around in a circle "banging on their goatskins," it can be at best an irritation, and at worst sheer torture.

Steve Lambert says,

No one else cares except [that woman] in a tie-dyed sarong who will apparently jump at any opportunity to sway with her arms in the air. Being part of a drum circle is one thing; experiencing it from the outside, quite another.

From the outside, activism can be a lot like a drum circle. "Oh, there they go again, those people in the park, and the tie-dyed-sarong dancers who love them." Activism can be so brutally unimaginative that, rather than intrigued and invited, people can feel irritated, or worse – simply bored.

This is where the artists come in. Artists can not only imagine a better future, they use symbolic language and images to draw a picture, tell a story, deepen the narrative. They fire up the ol' slide projector in our brains, and their creative expression helps the rest of us see the bold new vision, too.

Artists who are activists are creative enough, provocative enough, to intrigue and inspire and invite everyone, even the cynical and despairing, the bored, the shy, yes, even the tie-dyed-sarong dancers and the yellow shirt wearers, to participate, to creatively engage with the process, to become a part of the drum circle that is the movement for progress and for change. Activism involves the realities of our daily lives in the social and political realm; art connects that activism (that act-ivity) to our souls.

And a soul is where the soil is. Soul is that rooted place from which new things can break forth, and grow, and bear fruit. Art isn't simply an afterthought to activism, a decorative, finishing touch; nor is it an imitation of life, a weak reflection, like moonlight, that mirrors the sun. As Bertold Brecht said: "Art is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it."

Rev. Lisa, artist, activist, I charge you to integrate these essential parts, this yin and yang of your call, marry your art and your activism to each other, maintain their delicate, dynamic balance in your ministry and in your life. I charge you to help all of us imagine a world of justice and equality, and inspire us to participate in bringing it to life. I charge you to invite everyone to contribute to the vision, and to create the parameters in which it might become real. Integrate, imagine, inspire, and invite: Rev. Lisa, the world needs your art and your activism. May it ever be so.