Jackson Browne says that anything that helps with the creative process is something worth incorporating into your lifestyle. I think what Jackson is telling us is that there is way to build creativity and inspiration into your everyday. Living a creative life means that you carry your gifts with you all the time, be it music, art, engineering or decorating. Your creativity is not separate from you but IS you! You see the world through receptive and creative lenses. In preparing for this sermon, and thinking of my own experience, I asked what my practice of songwriting requires of me and I came up with five things: **commitment, receptiveness, focus, honesty and self-love.** This morning, I would like to talk about my own spiritual practice by touching on each of these topics. My work over the years has been in lyric driven folk music so that is my musical perspective. We have some fine instrumental music being performed in the service today as well. Whether there are words or not, it is all inspired creation. The artist builds something beautiful through their very own spiritual practice of songwriting.

**Commitment**

Commitment is nothing more than dedication to an activity. Even if you have a burning desire to write great songs, without commitment to the process of writing, nothing gets done. There is a bit of doubt in the process for me, and I sometimes wonder why I want to do this songwriting thing. With patience, I wait until I come up with an answer something like “I have a vision for a song, and I want to craft it into reality”. Commitment to this type of activity is not easy as I am sure many of you know. There are a million things that can get in the way and we sometimes question our motives for writing and doubt our abilities. During the commitment stage, it is a good idea to just start. Don’t ask too many questions about why. Just do. Take that idea and lay it out on paper, or in a recording without judgement. For me, it is important to have a task at hand, a line in a verse, a two or three chord progression, a new tuning I want to experiment with. This is where I start. The songwriting sea is too big to focus on everything at once. Spiritual practices can be viewed as the gift we give ourselves, in the form of time and place, to dive into the unknown. We are holding ideas together, not losing them to oblivion, giving them shape, much like the sculptor who makes the first mark in the clay. We work to giving our songs shape. Even with a fully committed heart and mind, things just don’t happen every time. You need to be in a state of receptiveness to hear what is knocking at your door.

**Receptiveness**

How many songwriters have had good ideas come to them while driving, or in bed or in the bathroom? A lot of us get inspired in the strangest of places and times. Living an inspired life means that this happens a lot because we are receptive to the world around us. We try and capture these ideas and look at them later. I often find that a lot of these “fly by ideas” are not that great. But every once in a while, one is worth closer examination. This is where I start looking for the truth in the song idea. Musician Rodney Crowell says that “County music is telling the absolute truth, even if it’s a big fat lie”. I like this quote because it means that reality, is not the same as honesty when it comes to songwriting. This
opens up a whole new opportunity for endless material made up of good honest truth, just perhaps not
your own lived truth. In looking for the truth in a song, I like to remain laid back, eyes half closed, and
peel away the barriers to find the essence at the heart of the song. Just like in meditation, breath is
important. I let both the critic and the muse talk at once without really listening to either. The
similarities to meditation are several. In meditation we’ve learned to let thoughts go by without
judgement, being aware of them but not holding on to even one. If you use a mantra, this focuses the
mind and becomes a source of inner balance and well-being. In songwriting, you might say the mantra is
our vision of the song, the truth of it, the heart of it. We are letting words and melodies float by, noting
down the parts we will use later and trying to keep the flow going. William Stafford in *Writing the
Australian Crawl* says: “...receptive, careless of failure, I spin out things on the page. And a wonderful
freedom comes. If something occurs to me, it is all right to accept it. It has one justification: It occurs to
me... I must follow my own weak, wandering, diffident impulses.” Stafford’s use of the words “careless of
failure” is profound. We have to remain accepting of what comes and allow each idea it’s time. This is
the best part of songwriting but what comes from this is not always a song. It takes a bit of work to put
into form, this is craft of songwriting, and it takes focus.

**Focus**

I sometimes struggle to enter the crafting phase of songwriting. It is much more fun to dwell in the
receptiveness stage, where all ideas are valued and no judgement is needed, but as Jackson Browne said,
we are not gifted with a “big old high voltage switch” to songwriting. Songwriting requires attention to
detail and a commitment to honesty. You have to focus on these things. But you don’t have to tell the
whole story. A really good song leaves a lot for the listener to fill in. Essentially, the listener is finding the
truth on their own. The songwriter’s job is to arrange the stage and dress the characters. But what do
you focus on? In meditation, it is the breath, the mantra, or the beads in your hand. In songwriting it
can be the truth, the melody, your musicianship or the story. Each of us goes at it differently. It is easy
to get into a rut. Like the meditator who meditates on meditation, you end up the songwriter who
writes the same song in 20 different ways. You can get bored with your own stuff and this has happened
to me. Joni Mitchell says that in songwriting, “you are constantly pulling the rug out from under
yourself, so you don’t get a chance to settle into any kind of formula”. This is the multi-dimensional
aspect of songwriting. You are doing the nuts and bolts writing (3 verses and a chorus) about a thing you
think is meaningful and you get a song, right? But without focus on the big picture, the truth, the heart,
the thing that make this song unique, you will end up with the same old same old. When I start a new
song, I put the parts that I *really like* up top on the page and everything else goes down on the bottom. I
will pull in those bottom dwelling words IF they help tell the truth. They may very well have value, but at
this point of the process, I don’t know. There are a lot of moving pieces in songwriting. In all of the
craziness it is easy to lose track of your purpose. Your spiritual practice is a way to keep you connected
to your vision. Over time, you will build patterns and habits that will carry you the next time you sit
down to write. In this way you become a more creative soul.

**Honesty**

In folk songwriting, honesty with yourself and with your story is essential. This may be what Seth calls
his “authentic voice”. I have written quite a few songs for lots of reasons, to impress others or to show
how great I am. When I look at those songs today, I feel slightly embarrassed, but it is possible that
these songs **needed** to be written before I could start writing songs from a place of honesty. Today, once I
have a song idea pretty well framed up, I do a personal test and ask, “do I believe it?” If I don’t believe what is in the song, if it is pretentious or has no heart at all, this is where it stops. Finding the truth in the song requires receptiveness and focus and sometimes your feel totally alone, searching through the dark. But songwriter Joshua Davis tells us to “share the burden of writing the song with your characters”. What that means to me is that you try to see the world through your characters eyes and tell the story through their experience. Your characters will not lie, it is their world, you are just the one bringing it to life. A negative reaction to something on the page is often a good sign. The negative voice can be a “heads up” that you have drifted away from the honest heart of the song. This is the critic working for you. Remembering that all ideas are important to inspired thinking and that each word has merit because I thought of them, I plow on through letting the song unfold. When I get stuck on a song and can’t seem to make any progress, I have to look at it from a totally different angle. Rather than start over, I change my perspective. The American spiritual teacher, Ram Das, once took me (and about a thousand other people) on a visualization trip from our seats in an auditorium, to the furthest point in the universe and back again. It was an amazing “drug free” trip. Sometimes writing a song requires zooming in and zooming out like this to get to the honesty at its core. It can give you a totally new perspective and direction. Finally, regarding honesty, when you try to make music that pleases the world and aligns with your perceived self-image, honesty takes a backseat, and that’s not a good thing. I have noticed that the more writers try to do what the world expects of them, the less interesting their music becomes. Think of all the bands out there who couldn’t follow up their first album with anything worth remembering. If music is always safe, if there’s no meaning or purpose behind it other than to please the masses, it lacks something. To find real meaning, a songwriter has to make honesty the center of their process.

Self-Love

I believe that Self-love is a core feeling that needs to be nurtured in order to open the door to creativity. When we’re being too hard on ourselves, it is often because we’re driven by a desire to excel and do everything right, all the time. This entails a lot of self-criticism, and that inner voice that constantly tells us how we could’ve done things better. This inner voice is the critic in songwriting. When the critic gets out of line, you get stuck. When this happens to me, I strip the song down to its bare necessities. When I take all the fluff away, it gives the critic less to work on, to complain about, and it brings me back to what I was doing in the first place. Writing an honest song. When I remember to love myself, and detach from outcomes, I am more accepting of the stuff that comes up in songwriting. I can put the critic to work, but with me in charge. In last week’s reading we heard Fredric and Mary Ann Brussat, tell us that “Spiritual practices are specific activities you do to deepen your relationships with the sacred and the world around you”. This has proved true for me and I am beginning to see that my songwriting practice is spilling over to my whole life. I am striving to pay attention to what is around me and to remain receptive to everything. Songwriting material is everywhere, and you never know when something might move you to write. As one songwriter friend told me, “It is not so important what you look at, just what you see”.

In my years of songwriting classes, retreats and workshops I have been inspired by musicians at all levels. Creativity knows no age or musical ability and we all have it. These gatherings, and the love and support I feel at them are my way of putting the wind back in my sails when I am floundering, and they remind me that I have permission sing and to write songs. But for me, the act of songwriting remains a solitary act. It is between me, my critic and the truth.
Bringing It Home

Songwriting is a spiritual practice. because you must bring your whole self to the table. All of your judging, fearful, self-doubting, skeptical self. All of it. But, when you walk away from the table, you are changed in some small way. It is a “practice” because it requires commitment, which is a way of saying no song comes easy, there is work required. Songwriting calls for us to take off our lenses and be open to new ideas and perspectives, to focus on truth. And it requires that we take care of ourselves and be accepting of what comes up in the process. Joni Mitchell’s song Both Sides Now is a beautiful example of truthful, honest songwriting. Having grown up in the 70’s, I would listen to this album over and over again. (music starts here) Her lyrics tell us that each of us looks at the world in different ways and that our view of the world evolves and changes.

Rows and flows of angel hair, And ice cream castles in the air
And feather canyons every-where, I’ve Looked at clouds that way
But now they only block the sun, They rain and snow on everyone
So many things I would have done, But clouds got in my way

As Seth reminds us, songwriting is never really finished, and the journey is more important than the destination. Through commitment, receptiveness, focus, honesty and self-love we work to give shape to the world around us through music. May we all find that creative center that we know we have inside and bring it into our awareness as a part of our every-day life. May it be so.