

**“Lessons from Matisse”**  
**A sermon by Rev. Leah Hart-Landsberg**  
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[www.fvuuf.org](http://www.fvuuf.org)

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Life requires a lot of creative adaptation and, sometimes, it's not always the fancy stuff that makes it all worthwhile. The little adjustments and experiments we make along the way can add a lot to existence. Fellowship members Connie and Peter Roop, who write children's books, are working on one about happy accidents. Here's an (edited) excerpt from Connie:

Do you like chocolate chip cookies? Until 1930, no one ever tasted one. Ruth Wakefield was making dark brown chocolate-flavored cookies for guests at her hotel but discovered she was missing powdered baker's chocolate. What could she use instead? Ruth did have semi-sweet chocolate in a block. She tossed chunks into the cookie dough. After all, the pieces were chocolate. Ruth thought the chunks of semi-sweet chocolate would melt and turn the cookies a nice brown color and give them an even chocolate flavor, just like baker's chocolate would. The chunks of chocolate melted but did not blend into the dough. Oops! Chocolate chip cookies were created by accident.<sup>1</sup>

Sounds like a fun book!

I thought about this great story (which is considered urban legend by some and cold hard fact by others) when I went to see the *Matisse as Printmaker* exhibit at the Paine Art Center in Oshkosh. His prints weren't created by accident, exactly, but so many of them were the result of experimenting boldly and seeing what resulted. Like Ruth Wakefield, he was wise enough to recognize when he had created something wonderful, whether or not it was precisely what had been originally intended as the final product.

One of the most famous artists of the twentieth century, Henri Matisse (who lived from 1869-1954) was a painter, sculptor, draftsman and printmaker. The collection that's now visiting the Paine brings Matisse's prints out of the shadow of his more celebrated paintings and sculptures by highlighting the full range of his printmaking techniques. There are more than 60 pieces of artwork on display, including etchings, monotypes, aquatints, lithographs, and linocuts. It is truly amazing to see how deeply engaged he was in so many creative vehicles, even working on them simultaneously, understanding that each medium offered unique artistic possibilities and challenges.<sup>2</sup> His practice of drawing with scissors, as we learned about in the story earlier in the service<sup>3</sup>, is an example of one of the forms he explored more towards the end of his life, but the exhibit is far more comprehensive.

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<sup>1</sup> Unpublished draft *Happy Accidents* from Connie Roop 2014

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.thepaine.org/events/matisse-printmaker/>

<sup>3</sup> *Henri's Scissors* by Jeannette Winters, available at <http://www.powells.com/biblio/2-9781442464841-0>

The Great Room of the Paine is arranged to tell a story about his life and work, starting with some of his very first prints and taking visitors through all his productive years. I was there with about fifteen people from the Fellowship and we had a great docent.

Christine stopped in particular at a series of images about half way around the room and we all crowded around. "Even if you haven't seen these exact prints," she said, "they might look familiar" because these were sort of a set of fanciful blueprints for another project that he did later. In fact, Matisse often used prints and other two dimensional media to work through ideas for sculpture. Marble and other sculpting materials didn't come cheap and demanded a slower work process, and so he found this other way to hone his ideas and develop pleasing shapes and lines.

We all looked at the images. We couldn't believe it. How could these be mere doodles? They were so wonderful.

<Images of: Reclining Nude Leg Folded Up Study of Legs 1925, Study of Legs 1925 and The Turkish Blouse Study of Legs 1925>

Aren't they great, just all by themselves, without even knowing what the sculpture looks like? I think a mark of true genius might be to be able to recognize a sketch, a mere doodle, as art in its own right.

I ran this by a high school friend of mine named Annie Murphy who is a well-known comic artist in Portland, Oregon<sup>4</sup>. She started nodding her head immediately. She told me that she knows a lot of cartoonists and comic artists who love their 'pencils,' which is what they call the first draft of the drawing. But once they ink it over, so that the lines are darker and smoother, they feel it becomes too static.

She writes: "While a finished, clean line is one that is desirable for the market, the artists themselves (ourselves) often feel like their drawing has lost some of its 'life' in the process between quick, fluid sketch and intentional, methodical line. Because of this and being a compulsive archivist, I always make a Xerox copy of my pencils before inking 'em. And I often like that version best!"

I wonder which of these Matisse liked best: This first image, with simple black and white lines, nothing more or less? <Marie-Jose in a Yellow Dress, black and white>

The one with the risk of some color? <Marie-Jose in a Yellow Dress, with red and yellow>

Or this most vibrant one, the final version of this image that he created? <Marie-Jose in a Yellow Dress, third state>

It's great, right? But look back at the plainest early one. <Marie-Jose in a Yellow Dress, black and white> It doesn't need to be completed with color because it is already complete.

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<sup>4</sup> See her work here: <http://sparkplugcomicbooks.com/shop/graphic-novels/gay-genius/>

I think Matisse's lesson for us today is to enjoy the experiments, and recognize them as beautiful too. Rough drafts, in their own way, can be complete. Be sure to notice the surprising value of what at first might only have been intended as a building block.

I've seen couples overlook this during their engagement. As we start to wind down the summer wedding season, I've been thinking about how people who are planning to marry can inadvertently impoverish their relationship by focusing so much on the end goal of the wedding that they neglect the stepping-stones that could actually help assure a happy marriage.

Recently I was watching *Say Yes to the Dress*. Have you seen this show? Each episode documents real life brides on the hunt for the perfect wedding dress for their perfect day, which will of course guarantee a happily-ever-after ending. I'm not exaggerating. I'm quoting.

There is always much suspense. Will the mermaid shaped skirt look good? Will her conservative mother approve? And then, well, the bride-to-be always ends up saying yes to some dress. As a great act of due diligence I watched four episodes in a row just to make sure it didn't evolve into something meaningful. Spoiler alert! It did not.

I found myself wishing these brides could embrace their wedding preparation the way Matisse approached his art, by fixating less on the end goal (of a perfect wedding/life) and more on experimenting with form and function. Just like Matisse knew spending time and energy and honor on his prints would help with the marble eventually, taking seriously the less showy details of life will forecast a successful marriage.

Art and relationship both benefit from techniques that require honing. So, fiddle around with what might work in the art studio or in making a shared life. Good partnerships are nurtured as we practice responding to everyday opportunities to be good to one another, little relational doodles like negotiating who should not be spoken to before that first cup of coffee or how best to re-connect after a bout of work stress. That's going to be more important in a marriage than a dress with the right amount of lace.

The Wedding Industrial Complex can make it easy to forget this. For example, one bride on *Say Yes to the Dress* really took it to the next level by saying yes to a \$26,000 dress... and then saying to the camera that making such a purchase was like finding her soul mate.

It's kind of funny. There are no fiancés on this show; the men have been replaced by the dresses. As someone who officiates weddings as part of my job, I take issue with this for a few reasons. One of them might surprise you. I'm not entirely comfortable with the idea of soul mates at all. I know I sound like a crank but hear me out:

The New York Times recently highlighted a study published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* in which researchers gave married subjects a quiz involving common sayings that implied unity (like the idea of being "made for each other") or a journey (such as "look how far we've come"). Then they asked the couples to recall conflicts or celebrations in their relationships, and rate their overall relationship satisfaction. <sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> <http://op-talk.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/08/01/heres-the-thing-that-lasting-love-is-really-about/?php=true&type=blogs&r=0>

“It might not surprise you to learn that the science of romance isn’t incredibly romantic. The research suggests that believing in soul mates — or destiny, or the idea that there is exactly one person who you were absolutely put on this earth to find — can and probably will backfire... There is research that shows that people who believe in ‘destiny’ put less effort into working through relationship conflict.”

Here’s how it can go wrong: “If we are soul mates,” someone might think, “then nothing will go wrong in my relationship, and it will be easy and beautiful all the time.” And that, of course, is a problem when a conflict arises because the fact that there is a conflict at all causes the destiny-believer to question whether the current partner is actually their soul mate. They are then more likely to give up on working it out at all.

“In fact (says this study), we have pretty clear evidence that people who favor the journey idea have stronger relationships: “When conflicts arise, they are better at dealing with them; they have higher marital satisfaction; they’re less likely to divorce.

I don’t know about his love life, but in the art realm, I think Matisse fully embraced this idea of a journey. He lavished his best attention on his etchings and sketches and prints, valuing them for where they got him (like to his sculpture and paintings) but also for the precious works of art they already were.

This mindset can even be helpful after a relationship has ended. Someone I happened to chat up recently at a wedding rehearsal in another state told me that not only did he not regret his divorce, but he didn’t regret having had that whole relationship, in part because it brought into his life his wonderful children. It was not an easy divorce but I really admire that he didn’t cast off the first partnership as a prototype not worthy of esteem. He even expressed appreciation for some of the ways he was able to grow in the relationship with his former spouse because, as he put it, “I got a lot of life lessons for next time or for the time after that.”

I guess for him, his first marriage was like that chocolate chip cookie, worthy having even if the end point wasn’t as planned. Or like some of the lovely Matisse images we’ve looked at this morning, beautiful in their own right even if they were only rough drafts.

I emerged from the Paine’s *Matisse as Printmaker* exhibit and looked at the world with new eyes. Sometimes a carefully cultivated garden yields different results than originally envisioned. But the flowers are still lovely, the produce tasty. This summer when Amy and I were driving her belongings up to Appleton, a poorly marked construction detour deposited us onto a long meandering country road in the rural south. It was a beautiful stretch of scenery, emphasized by the first hints of a pink sunset, and we’d never have encountered it otherwise. A happy accident, indeed.

What are ways that your own detours, doodles or drafts have been great works of art?

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