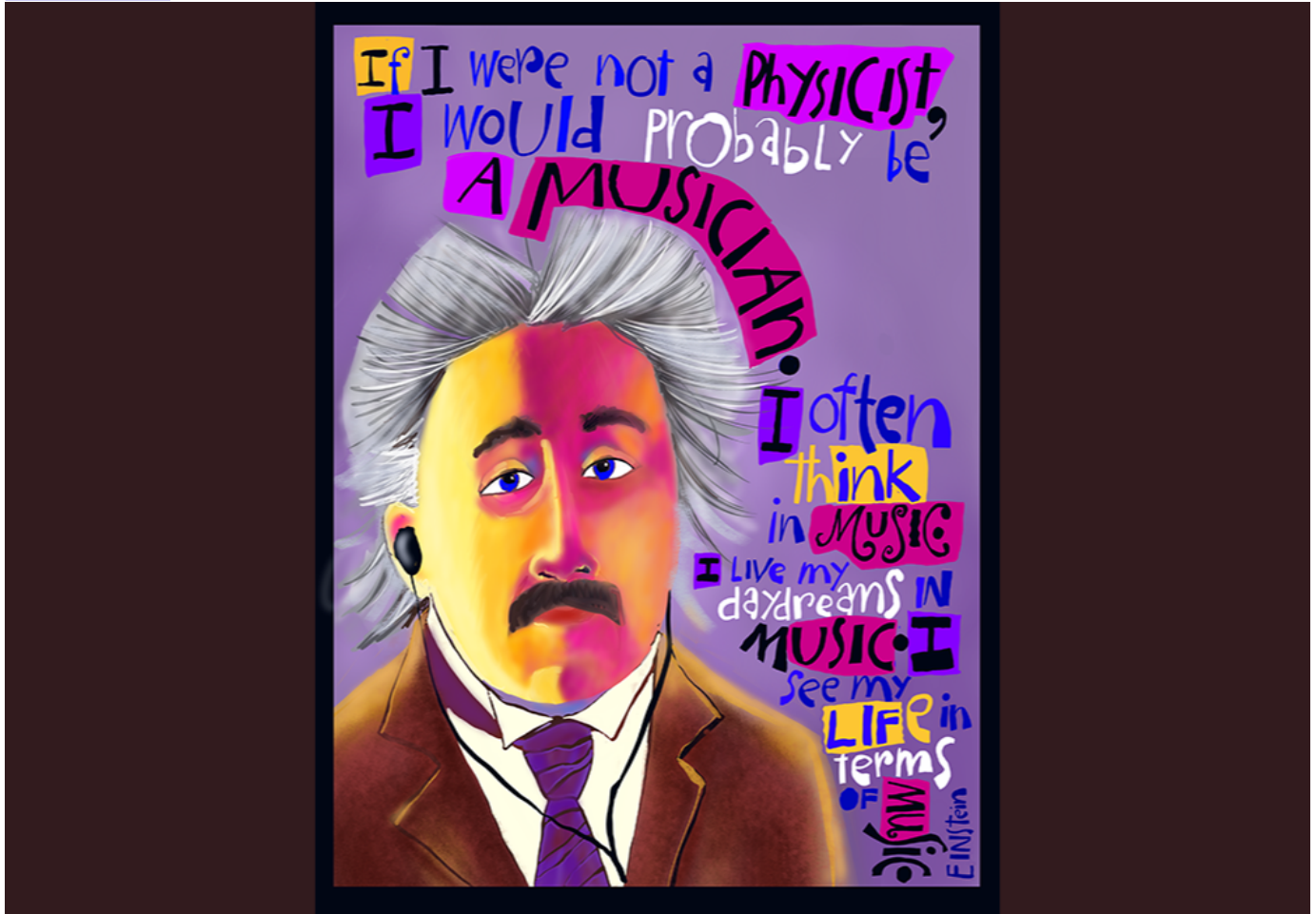




"Art, music, poetry and literature are expressions of God's presence in every moment. They don't help us escape from reality, they help us dive into reality," writes Br. Mickey McGrath. (Mickey McGrath)



by Mickey McGrath

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Because Albert Einstein was a brilliant scientist, I used to think I had nothing in common with him (except for the fact that my hair looks just like his when I wake up in the morning). But I have since learned that he loved music and was quite the violinist. He once said that most of his joy in life came from his violin. He owned many violins throughout his life, including one that he left behind with a friend before he fled Nazi Germany, [according to The Times](#). The violin was sold at auction last year for over \$1 million.

While I could never comprehend even one sentence from Einstein's theory of relativity, I do understand how the contemplative beauty of music helped him stay centered in a physics-induced frenzy. His violin also likely helped him endure the unthinkable horrors of Nazi brutality back home in Germany while he lived in Princeton, New Jersey.

Art, music, poetry and literature are expressions of God's presence in every moment. They don't help us escape from reality, they help us dive into reality. Art restores our hope and optimism; it inspires us to build a new and better world. Grief never leaves us, but creativity turns our grief into a gift. It sets our minds and hearts free and transforms fear and loneliness into compassion and kindness.

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My favorite saints and artists teach me the same lessons. Dorothy Day was quite the opera buff and took up [weaving as a meditation practice](#). Thomas Merton loved jazz and often used a Japanese calligraphy brush and ink in his morning meditations. Those two each had great devotion for St. Thérèse of Lisieux, who loved to paint and write poetry. Therese was inspired by her fellow Carmelite, St. John of the Cross. Vincent van Gogh left the institutional church but never abandoned his thirst for the awareness of God in dark skies filled with bright stars.

As a retreat director, my favorite moments happen when the participants share the artwork they have created with simple crayons and markers in meditative time. More often than not, the most reluctant person turns out to be the most surprised by

their own creative inspirations.

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One afternoon several years ago, I happened to be the only one at home when an indigent man came to the kitchen door for a cup of coffee. As he walked away, I noticed a sketchbook peeking out of his backpack. I knew the Holy Spirit had arranged this meeting when Carlos shared with me his beautiful, heavily shaded pencil drawings, the kind I loved to do as an art student many years ago.

He told me, "When I am drawing, a war could be going on around me and I wouldn't even know it," adding, "I like to sit under a tree when I draw, so I feel connected to creation." Those two lines totally uprooted my very limited perceptions of unhoused people and established a friendship that I cherish to this day.

Just as Einstein let a violin lead him to serenity in the midst of turmoil, Carlos does the same with a pencil or simple wood carving tools. He occasionally asks to come to my studio with me, where he gets lost in peaceful drawing while I'm either quietly painting or responding to emails, meeting deadlines and planning retreats. His calming presence reminds me to stop and recall that God is in our midst and that all will be well. In those moments, Carlos becomes the teacher and I am the student learning yet again that I am — we all are — powerless. Beauty is indeed saving the world, coming to the rescue one violin and paintbrush at a time.