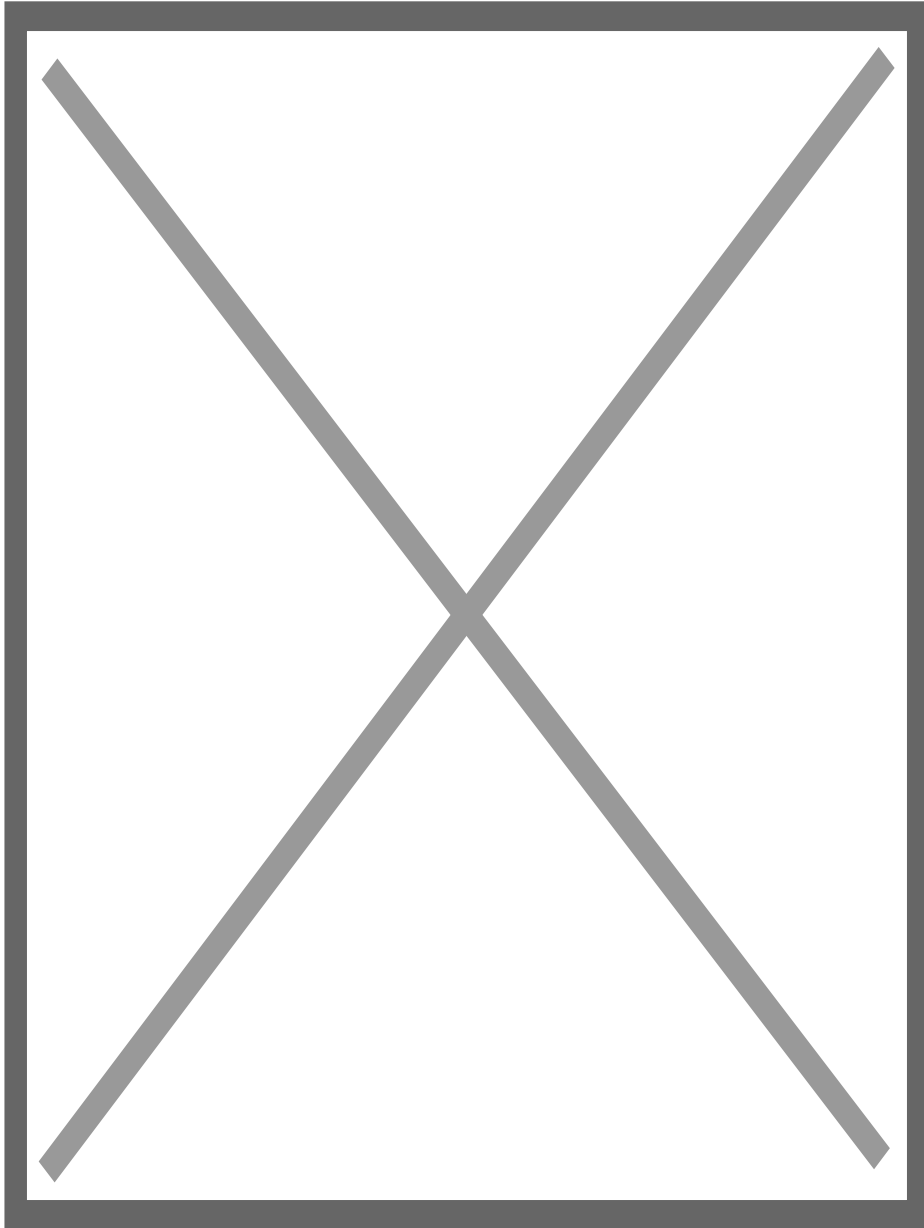


Being devoted to being inspired

“We spend a lot of time identifying kids with talent and training them on technique,” says writer Carey Wallace. “But there’s virtually no rigorous thought on inspiration.”

Interview by [Bromleigh McCleneghan](#) in the [October 2025](#) issue



Writer and speaker Carey Wallace (Photo: Koray Kasap)

Carey Wallace *writes and speaks on the creative life. Her most recent book is The Discipline of Inspiration.*

I've always wrestled with the idea of spiritual discipline and spiritual practice, and reading *The Discipline of Inspiration* offered me a way to name how my writing corresponds to my spiritual life. What led you to this project?

I came to it as an artist and as somebody who is very dependent on the work of other artists. Art has, at crucial points, really saved my life. When I published my first book, I saw that having a creative habit was really important in my life. I come from a family of musicians, which is an enormous advantage, because when I said I was going to be a writer, the musicians said, "Well, of course you will practice every day."

From a very young age I practiced writing for a couple hours each day, and I saw how powerful that was, how much I could learn if I spent that time consistently. I also saw how much I could get done. As I got out into the world and saw other people who are successful as artists, I saw that all of them, across genres, had some form of practice. They were working at publishing companies but writing on the train. They had "straight jobs," and then they were in the studio all day on Saturday, and that was how they had made their way.

I wanted to help people form a habit of art creation. This is a very democratizing thing to do, because the vast majority of money that goes into the arts goes to performance or publication. When funding goes toward creation at all, it's being poured into programs that take you out of your daily life and remove you from your family and your community. Those programs are simply not feasible for people like me. I was working as a waitress and as a maid; I could not go away for six weeks without losing my job. Very rarely do those funding sources negotiate the needs of people who are in any way marginalized.

I thought that if I could give people across backgrounds a creative habit, then really interesting things could happen. I also thought I needed a curriculum in order to do this, and I wanted the testimony of artists who I cared about. What did Rembrandt say? What did Toni Morrison say? I was interested in this whole slew of ideas regarding the artist's life (Do you have to be unhappy?) and character (Do you have to be a jerk?). I wanted to explore definitions of art, the purpose of art, and the spiritual experiences that artists have.

In art, there are three crucial elements. The first two are talent and technique. But the most talented people are not always making the most interesting things, and neither are the people with the best technique.

The third thing is inspiration. Artists often talk about the "in-breaking" of something that tells you what to do with your talent and your technique. Inspiration tells you what to write in your song, and inspiration tells the singer how to sing it. When artists talk about this, they are in eerie agreement: They tend to talk about inspiration as something that comes from beyond them, something that is more intelligent and better than they are, something that is at odds with their own will and is asking them to do things they didn't plan or want to do. And that if they don't take it, it is going to go somewhere else.

People reach for religious language to describe the experience of inspiration. Some have no problem ascribing it to God; some have an enormous problem ascribing it to God. But they often use religious language anyway, even if what they're forced to do is deny that it could possibly be a religious experience. I wondered, *What if we went ahead and believed this testimony?*

How would that change our understanding of God? Or of art and of ourselves as creators? Would it change how we understand who is and isn't an artist, or what is and isn't art? That turned out to be a very fruitful question, and that's how I got to this book.

I think you're exactly right about the need for this democratizing practice. For example, there are continuing education opportunities for clergy that pull you out of your everyday life. My first book was born at a clergy writing workshop, and I met a couple of my closest friends there. We all had toddlers at the time, and it was the first time any of us had been away from our kids for any length of time. It was a big sacrifice for our partners, too. And we could only go because it was grant funded.

The workshop leader was a prolific writer who also ministered in a church. We asked if he could share suggestions on how to do both things. "Write about the questions that the people in your congregation are asking," he said. That was helpful.

We also asked, "How do you balance that with your family life, children, and responsibilities?"

And he said, "Oh. I have a wife."

I would really like a wife. I think that'd be amazing.

I appreciate this idea that we need a practice within our ordinary days. That's the transfiguration story, right? You can go on the mountain and find something there, but you can't build a tent there. You have to go back down and find inspiration there, too.

There are some wonderful, mostly implicit, theological claims here, too—for example, the way our culture tends to practice art veers toward gnosticism, as it's structured in a way in which only special people have space to create.

You also suggest that art and religion are often at odds. Do you have thoughts about religious or Christian art?

Well, I think it's been some of the best and some of the worst art in the world. There's a lot of nostalgia for a time when the church was in charge of all cultural production, and I don't think we're going back there.

In the book, I deliberately left out the art and faith discussion, because it seems to me that an enormous amount of the work that has been done here just beats the same drums over and over, to the point of hero worship. I love Lewis and Tolkien, but they've been elevated to sainthood in certain parts of Christianity, and nobody's reading anything else.

I wanted to talk about something more universal than art that comes from personal devotion, to make a broader argument: that something can be an act of devotion even if you don't know that it is. You may be touching the face of God without knowing it. This suggests that the transcendent experience you have when you create or confront art is not an illusion, not a mirage, but rather the presence of God. Where can we go from that? Do you want to know more about that God? Do you want to have more of those experiences?

I'm not saying the work that comes out of personal devotion is not valuable. Some of it has saved my life and my faith. But this kind of work was not my project.

Talk about the spiritual disciplines you discuss in the book. I was moved by the idea that these practices that might lead us to inspiration, which can then lead us to art, are also fairly traditional practices of faith.

I arrived at the argument I described to you earlier, that God is present in the act of creation, that God is actually invoked or present in art objects when we see them.

Then I started wondering how I, as an artist, could get more of this inspiration. I realized we spent a lot of time identifying kids with talent and training them on technique. But there's virtually no rigorous thought on inspiration and how to get more of it; that's all passed on informally, outside of class at art schools. *Go for a walk. Take a bath. Take a nap. Wash the dishes.* An extraordinary number of the suggestions actually involve rest or manual labor.

I realized that the classic spiritual disciplines, which appear across the major world religions, are the places to look to find the best human wisdom on how to surrender to a spirit beyond yourself. I hope I chose a pretty exhaustive list of the basic disciplines out there. They build on each other, starting in solitude and winding up in community, then from community into service. I talk about poverty and fasting as mirrors of each other, naming, of course, that voluntary poverty is a very different thing from involuntary poverty.

The book seems to me like a strong argument against AI.

AI didn't exist when I started writing this book!

Well, you have amazing foresight. Way to go! Given that, is this a fair reading?

Yes. I think it can be boiled down to the fact that AI can't create. The devil can't create. All they can do is ruin and recombine.

I am tempted to say that [AI is just straight evil](#). It has a lot of usefulness, but it cannot function without us, right? What it does without us is tell lies. And it tells lies with words we taught it, words and grammar we came up with. I am just so thoroughly unimpressed by AI.

AI reveals, though, that we have been using humans as machines for a really long time. Its presence means that we now have to be human again in order to distinguish ourselves from AI and to have any usefulness in the world beyond AI. I think that only human stuff—human action—is ultimately useful. It's also sometimes harmful, but to the extent that there is good and creativity in this world, it's human. It is not produced by machines, even those that seem to speak our language.

Yes.

There are also questions here about how humans reflect God. We talked about humans being loving because we reflect the image of God, though I'm not sure that's a very good argument because humans are not nearly as loving as they should be. But humans are uncontrollably creative. We build entire lives, entire worlds, entire weather systems of possibility, of good and evil. We deeply reflect God and God's creativity. If to be human is to be made in the image of God, then the most fundamental definition of that is to be creative.

It's also just the thing that we most naturally are, and yet we deny it all the time. I think we would do a lot better if we confessed it, leaned into it, and built practices around it so that we don't do so much evil with it—so that we do better things.