

CREATIVE LIFE BY BRIAN LING – MAY 20, 2018

Indeed each of us enjoys a piece of music that touches us, a Rumi poem that moves us, a painting that impacts us, or watching in awe as a high jumper glides over the bar, while I wonder how did that happen? We may describe these moments and authors of them as an “essence of creativity”.

What about the rest of our lives when we are not listening to a symphony or writing a book? I am simply left with the ups and downs, frustrations, sorrows and so on. It feels like I am at the mercy of each moment. Where is that creative symphony when I most need it? Where is the figure skater doing the impossible triple lutz that mesmerize me?

This takes me to what I call “the art of living”. Maybe each moment of life can be twirling through triple lutz, but most of the time I am not there yet. Maybe my ups and downs, frustrations and so on are simply getting in the way of me spending 24 hours a day gliding across the ice.

To a great extent I am responsible for creating each moment of my frustrations and unhappiness. I have developed a habit of allowing my mind to judge, evaluate, categorize every situation & person. Thus I am left with self-talk that sounds something like.... That’s not good, this is scary, that person is a jerk, I can’t stand doing this, I don’t have enough money, and it’s raining too hard and on it endlessly goes. There is no room left to allow creativity to enter. In addition I continue to jam other belief systems into my mind; no wonder life has come down to barely surviving each moment. My mind is bursting and clogged with junk. There is no room for creativity in that.

People who write music tell me that it appears and simply takes form in its own beauty, and they are simply the medium.

When I paint, the finished painting has little to resemble with what I imagined. I sit and ask myself, “how did this happen”? It’s as if I have little direction or control and the painting simply arrives. I am simply the conduit. I allow patience and space for the paint to appear. I am getting out of my own way to do this.....this creativity. I am doing nothing.... And in some way don’t exist.

When I am mesmerized watching ballet dancers, I am not there, there is only beautiful dancing.

We are all aware of Albert Einstein’s place in history. As a student he was described by his teachers as dull, incompetent and one who struggled to pass exams. It was suggested that he leave school. But Einstein was simply in a different place than his educators. His mind was not full of the junk I mentioned earlier. He lived in a world of wonder, awe, possibility and imagination. He did not ruminate and think about things like we do, which surely is a barrier to creativity. He was allowing the wisdom of the universe to pass through him. Pleasing his teachers and parents with good marks simply was in his way.

A century ago at the University of Toronto, Drs. Best & Banting watched patients die because of a lack of insulin in their blood. Their pancreases were not functioning. They had diabetes. The dialogue that the two doctors had with each other revolved around words & phrases such as “I wonder”, “is there a possibility”, “what might happen if”, in their reference to administering solutions of dog pancreases into the blood of humans diagnosed with diabetes. They had allowed room in their minds for such creative self-talk and possibility.

The universe is constantly expanding, remaking itself thus creating in each moment. It is simply my job to tap into this to allow this creating to present itself each moment. I cannot do this when I am judging, complaining ...full of ideas and opinions.

Eleven years ago I sat with my 91 year old mother who was dying.....simply sitting and holding hands in silence. There were no thoughts or feelings on my part that this should be different.. My mother and I simply allowed space for creativity.....the natural expression of what was to happen next.....the beauty of my mother's death. We allowed space for it.

Years ago at my job I had the opportunity to apply for a year's paid sabbatical to return to university to study. I had already enrolled and began studying for this additional graduate degree. So the notion of a paid sabbatical fit the plan perfectly. I learned that 44 people in total had applied for one paid sabbatical. The odds were definitely not in my favour but I wanted the sabbatical. I prepared the application as best I could, as well as planned for my oral presentation to the selection committee. I then sat back and reflected, wondered "what happens if I don't get it?"

I realized my life would still be as wonderful as ever, there would just be a different turn in the road. The flowers would still gift me with their perfume and the trees would still dance in the wind. Now as much as I wanted the sabbatical I didn't care, there was little attachment to the outcome. This allowed vast space for things to happen, for life to be creative. I was no longer in the way... I was free.

I thoroughly enjoyed studying on my year's sabbatical.

Some time ago my son Adam died. I found the situation challenging. Among other things I felt the need to control the situation... do something, fix it, take charge, be the parent in charge etc. Eventually upon surrendering to it, I realized I had no control over anything or anyone, there was nothing to control....there is just life. This freeing yet painful still moment allowed space, emptiness which then gave over to what I needed next.... The space and energy for a long, engaging personal dialogue with life! I learned there is no creativity when I am under the illusion that I have any control in life.

Many years ago I had the privilege of running in the Olympic marathon trials. In the last 2-3 miles I was exhausted and in extreme pain while pushing in my final thrust to the finish. Remembering that several years prior I was in a similar situation in a race, where I collapsed and was transported unconscious to the hospital. I momentarily thought this was going to repeat itself again. In extreme exhaustion and mentally confused I embraced the notion, the race will be over for me when I go down...it's okay if I end up in the hospital again, they will salvage me...it would be a good effort...and besides I wasn't going to win anyway. This did not happen. All of a sudden I felt as though I was observing from outside the body....Brian running freely sprinting with no pain or exhaustion right to the finish line. I cannot explain what happened. I do know I embraced the challenging moments that in my mind I accepted that I was done and offered no more resistance to it. It seems to me there was allowed space for the next moment to enter and something else to take over... the energy of what is happening next.

No.... I did not make the Olympic team. I am not advocating a "laissez faire" attitude toward life, in fact, I advocate immediate right action. I advocate for doing my homework and being as prepared as possible.

That leaves vast open space...where...an essence, quality, energy, and energy that is different from any other energy in life.....enters the space and does its own thing... creation.

My job is trust there is no other way.... to get out of my own way, to allow it to happen. During my working days in one position I occupied at least.... I was doing assessments, preparing findings and making recommendations. Each report had to be "signed off" by someone above me in the pecking order. One day this person handed me back a report saying "I can't sign off, you need to change, it makes this organization look bad."

I reread the report many times and continued to see it as accurate, well-spoken and professional. I had had no intention of changing a word. The other person in the story, I had noticed in my mind at least, was always angry about something and irritated everyone he could. On a regular basis he was asking for a revised report. Each time he did I politely replied that I stand by my report and it would not be changed. At first I allowed his requests to bother me, upon reflecting, I solidified my view that the report was first class and professional ... and because of his personality traits/// he had the problem. I was going to let the problem remain in his office. I was freeing, his further requests for the report did not bother me, I never thought about the person.

A week later..... the signed report came back across my desk signed.

From my perspective, in putting the problem where it belonged opened up space for creativity or life itself to solve it. I did not do anything. I summary what I am suggesting I have learned is:

“Allow the canvas to be a beautiful painting, don’t paint it”and my job is to get out of the way!

I would like to share briefly a few attitudes and behaviours I have learned that foster a creative life!

- I am not in charge of life
- I am not important in the grand scheme of things
- I have no control over anything or anyone.
- My beliefs and opinions have little relevance – that’s wonderful.
- I don’t really know anything, even when I think I do!
- Do not make assumptions.
- Don’t follow others, be my own guiding light
- find out for myself
- I need to be prepared and do my homework
- Don’t be attached to the outcome
- Realize all things are in constant flow, change and creativity
- Drama & creativity are mutually exclusive
- Don’t take credit for anything, it simply happened
- Don’t do something because others expect me to
- If an outcome is painful, it was intended to be that way; life can be painful
- Be curious, open to possibility and wonder
- Be simple, I am anyways!
- Sincere humility is the cornerstone of creativity
- Don’t offer answers, I don’t have any anyways
- Run though a meadow
- Don’t create problems & issues in my mind
- Creativity is LOVE
- Be clear on the distinction: “I am not creative, creativity flows through each of us....as does the essence of life flow through each of us”.

THE CREATIVE SPARK BY MIKE DAVIDSON

So, What's the deal with all this creativity stuff anyway? What stops us from being creative? Well the truth is we start losing our creativity very early in life. Think back for some of you this will be a short while ago and for others like me a long long time ago, a time before cell phones and google. What was the first word you learned as a baby? The answer is the word No and that was the beginning of you losing your creative spark.

We start to grow up at three years old your number one question is why. Why is the sky blue? Why do cows give milk? Why can't I have more cookies? You enter the school system and it teaches us much but, by the end of it the creative spark is almost completely out. Students enter school asking why and leave asking will this be on the exam.

First let's look at the barriers to creativity

What stops you from being creative?

- Fear making a mistake and fear of failure
- Afraid to try something new
- We think about things vs. trying them out
- We make assumptions
- We don't want to look dumb, so we don't ask why

What now. you might ask how can we reignite the creative spark?

First, we must learn to listen to each other and I mean really listen, not just listen long enough to hear something we disagree with and start planning our rebuttal. Really listening means you our willing to change.

Second, we must get comfortable with failure. We make failure a big deal as we get older nobody is born knowing how to walk or ride a bike. We learn how by failing so be ok with failure and use it to make next time better.

The next step easier than you might think it starts with one word saying Yes. I could explain why but lets all try it. When ever I say something I just want you to say yes. Tell with fellowship saying Yes. Ask them to say no and see what happens.

Saying yes is the first step, now we must learn to say yes and not yes but. With yes and our ideas can come together we can collaborate to make something great. Yes, but leaves us arguing about why an idea won't work.

All those steps are part of Improv and I have witnessed many people have their creative spark reignited by Improv classes. It has been one of the most rewarding things in my teaching career helping students to find their voice, become more confident and willing to try new things. I had one student in my class he was taking electrical techniques the first 4 weeks he hated the class and wanted out since it had nothing to do with electricity. When he graduated he came and shook my hand thanking me saying it was the best course he took at college. He said it made him a better person.

In life I have found there are two kinds of people when it comes to creativity. Red lights and Green lights, the red block creativity and green encourage it. You need to look for the green lights in your life to turn your spark into a creative flame. You must make yourself a green light by listening to others and yes anding their ideas. By being willing to try new things and risk failure. By expressing yourself confidently clearly without second guessing your ideas. If we make ourselves green lights and surround ourselves with green lights our creativity grows into a strong flame. The alternative is to be red lights constantly finding problems, with our own and other peoples ideas and never trying anything new.

I know where I want to go who is ready to join the green team.

THIS I BELIEVE: REFLECTIONS ON CREATIVITY AND CHANGE BY JAN STIRLING TWIST

As I sat at my computer this week trying to write this brief essay I found myself digging deep to find a creative impulse and convert it into action. Where were the words I knew I knew about creativity as a catalyst for change? There were no juicy nuggets that felt timely, relevant, or useful to impart. Frustrated I turned to my archives – boxes of materials produced over decades of working as an actor, teacher, drama-therapist, etc.

Yet as I sifted through the familiar artifacts I found myself feeling disconnected from the passion and excitement of growing my arts-based practice, and the joy of collaborating creatively with others. Alas, this retrospective journey failed to inspire or engage my creative imagination. Rather it left me feeling hollow and bereft. How had I become so estranged from the ‘me’ I had been during those years? What had changed?

Well... One way to describe it is that I’d become someone whose job titles had changed. Beginning with becoming a seriously ill patient, and later a cancer survivor, I’d returned to Peterborough after 30 years to be a care-giver to aging parents both of whom were now dead. Along the way I’d become a Hospice volunteer, and a student and teacher of Hospice and Palliative care approaches. More recently I helped to care for a dying friend until her death at home. There have been smatterings of arts-based practice in the last few years. But mostly I’ve felt called to be a wife, a daughter, a friend, a neighbor, a volunteer, a care-giver.

So rather than focusing on how creativity can be a catalyst for change, it seems timelier to reflect on how *change* has been a catalyst for *creativity*. More to the point how the anticipation of profound loss – the death of a loved one – has called me to my creative self. How can caring for the dying, or dying ourselves be valued and understood as creative processes? These are questions I need more time and space to explore, but as a beginning I offer the following three brief vignettes:

Vignette One

I recall my mother’s last days. She was able to stay in her home overlooking the Pacific Ocean in Mexico, cared for by a team of nurses and carers who spoke only Spanish, and me who spoke only English. Over 13 days we all acquired a few words and phrases of each other’s language, augmenting our verbal communication with expressive gestures, drawings, and what I like to call onomatopoeic vocal sound effects - often followed by bursts of laughter. We cried together, hugged often, and grew to know something of each other’s hearts. In this way we managed to communicate about crucial things while supporting mom as intimately and lovingly as possible in her dying time.

Vignette Two

In the final days of my dad's life he lay semi-conscious in his hospital bed on the palliative care ward at PRHC. Living with Alzheimer's and advanced cancer Dad was curious about all the medical equipment he was connected to and we were constantly anxious that he would accidentally disconnect something vital. Eventually it occurred to me that he was just doing what he'd always done, he was problem solving – working out something that he didn't understand – through tactile means. When we placed a small three dimensional puzzle in his hands he spent hours taking it apart and putting it back together. In this way there was no need to suppress Dad's natural curiosity which was the very thing he needed in order to literally and metaphorically explore the puzzle of what was happening to him.

Vignette Three

My friend Jody lingered for many weeks in the end stages of breast cancer. Confined to bed, weakened and dependant on others for her personal needs she sometimes struggled to understand why she was still living. Her journey with cancer had been profound, and as part of her journey Jody had taken up painting – something she had always wanted to do. Her small canvasses were marvelous. Extraordinary. In-expert and at the same time beautifully rendered, they were unrestrained by doubt or self-judgement. The loss of the life Jody had known before her illness had cleared the way for her artist self to be born. Watching Jody create, even in her waning days, was watching someone who was fully alive.

These three vignettes illustrate some of the ways that profound loss and change have called forth creativity in myself and others. Each vignette describes a time where much was unknown and unknowable. In each we can discern a latent or emerging need – the need to communicate, to express something meaningful, to make sense of one's experience. All of the vignettes have something to do with the desire for connectedness – the urge to make meaningful connections with oneself or with another, with Spirit. With more time I would explore the ways that courage, humility, love, curiosity and the willingness to risk failure enabled creativity to emerge in each situation.

For now, and in closing, this I believe (today): Creativity is not contained in a role, manifested in a title, or found in a job description. It is not even a set of skills, or the product of training. Creativity is not given to some and denied to others. Creativity is innate. It exists within each of us. Even at the hardest of times, and in the face of death and profound loss, creativity is a very human potential that may be realised in any given moment.

Thank you for listening.