

IT'S NOT
WHAT YOU
CREATE,

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BY KATE R. QUINLAN



We've all heard it. Many of us have muttered it in frustration, or silently surrendered to the anguished thought. "I'm just not very creative."

When I hear someone say this (or hear the words drag dejectedly through my own mind, like the losing team leaving the field), I politely but firmly repudiate this damaging admission.

True, some of us have been criticized and discouraged. We may have been told we should find something more practical to do with our spare time or our lives. Some of us lacked opportunity or a role model and have just assumed that we are in fact missing that particular speck of DNA that blesses some people with great creative genius, and passes by the rest. Regardless of why, if you think you are without creative ability, I think you're wrong.

I am intent on convincing you of two concepts. One is that you have creative ability regardless of your doubts. The second is that you should apply your creativity to enjoy its process, not solely its product.

Let me start with what I offer as proof that you, whoever, wherever you are, undeniably possess creative ability. You are innately creative by the very fact that you are human! Plants mutate. Animals adapt. But the human species manipulates the resources on this planet to meet its needs and desires. Look around! We have evolved from small foraging tribes seeking shelter in caves to tenants of high rise condos with a view to enjoy while we order our groceries online. One can simply list the creative trials and achievements that have contributed to meeting our basic human physical needs and provided for psychological well-being

and spiritual fulfillment. This is the legacy of our inexhaustible creative ability from all humanity, not just a select few. So to the lament, "I'm just not very creative," my response is, "That's just not very likely."

Now, it might take you some time to nudge your thinking from, "I'm just not very..." to "Oh, yes I am!" It is unlikely you will become an artist of great renown overnight. It's even unlikely that you will pick up the tools to create anything at the first blush of positive self talk about your innate ability to create. But when you do, you face the challenge of how to manifest your creativity.

This is actually a challenge similar to parenting. Those who raise children well don't try to force them into a model of what they think their children should be. Wise parents give way to each child's individuality and thereby guide, direct, and set examples. Optimally, parents enjoy the process of watching their children grow to become well adjusted adults worthy of admiration and respect.

The same holds true for nurturing your creativity. If you can view it as your child, you will begin to enjoy and fully experience the process. Like children, your creative efforts will go through stages, some thrilling, some disappointing, some causing you to want to pull your hair out, some rich with satisfaction and reward. It's a journey of hills and valleys; a timeline of events and feelings that grows to become a part of yourself that you are comfortable with and proud of.

Inevitably you will encounter notions that add to the challenge of nurturing your creativity. At the same time, you need to seek practices that enhance your creative development. Let me point out five notions you must resist and five practices to embrace in order to give your creative prodigy its best opportunity to flourish.

FIVE NOTIONS TO RESIST

Everyday you are subjected to attitudes and notions that influence your life, your thinking, your creating. Some of these attitudes are necessary cultural norms. Some are encouraging and liberating. But unavoidable are the damaging notions and opinions that can undermine your confidence. Whether a quick comment overheard, or firmly ingrained dogma, it is too easy to take on attitudes that do your spirit harm. It is paramount that you resist these notions and fortify yourself against the opinions that are not true to your thinking. They will not enhance your creating. In fact they will stifle your creative exploration. Think of it as damage control and resist taking these notions on as your own.

Assumption: As you nurture your creative self, you will often feel the nag of self-doubt. When you are in this vulnerable state, it can be easy to assume that the creative work of others is better than your own. You see the creative accomplishments of artists and crafters in the media, in galleries, on the Internet, at exhibits, workshops, and classes. This constant exposure to a variety of art and artists can lead you to assume that

others have been blessed with bountiful creative abilities and you are fooling yourself to think you have any.

The assumption that the creativity of others is better than yours is false and must be resisted. In fact, the creative accomplishments of others have no reflection on your work. Discovering and exploring your creativity is not a competition. Your creative work stands alone as your creative work.

When setting out on your creative path, determining whose is better is a false destination. Your goal is to learn about your own abilities and limitations, discover and play with materials, and to thoroughly enjoy the process. When you completely engage in these moments of creating, your work is as worthy as any other. Don't make assumptions about your creative work based on the works of others.

Intimidation: When you've worked hard putting your resolute spirit into creating, it feels good to be received with resounding praise. But showing your work to others can be unnerving. Sometimes when you reveal your work to family or peers or to public view, the reception is mixed. But if you let even a single disparaging remark – even something as banal as “What's that?” – undercut your confidence, it hinders your willingness to try again. Echoes reverberate from childhood telling you to stay in the lines or that the sky should be blue.

Plentiful is the advice to just ignore what other people think (yeah, right!). It can be very difficult to ignore the reaction of others, but it is worth objective analysis. Opinion about your work will always come from a variety of sources. Ask yourself: Is this opinion coming from someone you know or respect? Do you know from where this person's attitude about your work comes? Is it experience? Ignorance? Could it be envy?

It may very well be that a dubious opinion emanates from someone who is herself intimidated by your work, and is simply responding critically in self-protection. I am not suggesting you become defensive when someone's opinion of your work is less than glowing. But I am suggesting you keep in mind the possibility that the reactions of others are not always about your work, but rather about the person voicing the opinion. This may sound like an early chapter from your Psych 101 textbook, but it is nonetheless valuable to remember. You are in a vulnerable moment when you seek compliments and get something less. This can bring on unpleasant emotional and even physical reactions. What you interpret as negative criticism can scare and intimidate. You must process others' perception of your work carefully and not let them wound your creative energies.

On the other hand, constructive criticism, critiques from peers or a master, is a wonderful gift to seek, albeit carefully. You can gain from the expert whose work you admire and whom you trust to give valuable feedback. You must trust yourself to resist being intimidated when someone is willing to risk delivering an honest appraisal.

Ironically, praise can also be intimidating. You've worked hard, all the while yearning for recognition and praise. And when the adulation

arrives...whammo! Regardless of how much you wish and hope and pray for it, favorable judgment can be daunting. With acclaim can come self-doubt about the authenticity of your work or the ability to reproduce the same quality next time. A looming deadline, should your work be in demand, can intimidate anyone into a dandy of a creative block. The long sought praise, when it finally arrives, can be a double-edged sword.

It may take some personal soul searching and coaching to get you past your feelings of intimidation. Whatever it takes, you must resist intimidation and find better ways to process reactions, negative and positive, that others might express.

Implication: Sometimes those who are near and dear to you will invoke their ideas about what you “should” be creating. Comments like: “How about something to match the sofa?” or “Can you draw / paint / write something like what I saw on television or in a magazine?” These implications of how you should be doing your work, suggestions that clearly come from outside your creative exploration, are best ignored. Politely and firmly, ignored. I’m not referring to feedback or assistance you might ask for from a mentor or coach or fellow artist who knows you and your work. I’m referring to the so-called advice from someone who cares enough to offer their ideas, but has no clue what your work is really about. You need to be familiar, comfortable, and grounded in your work, and not be vulnerable to implications otherwise.

No doubt even the likes of Van Gogh, Picasso, Pollock, and other groundbreaking artists received well-meaning comments implying that they really ought to make their paintings a bit more realistic. Probably many more unknown artists endured creative lives of frustration as they let themselves be influenced by well-intentioned suggestions about their work or the trends of their time. It takes practice to develop skin tough enough to resist such advice from others, particularly when it comes with sincere amenity. But once you allow yourself to be influenced by errant implications...well, that heavy thunk you just heard was the door of a creative adventure slamming shut. Offer a simple thank you. They were, after all, just trying to help. Then stop listening and continue your creative work.

Expectation: The visionary work that occurs before getting your hands involved can take you into imagining all kinds of wonderful possibilities. A vision of what you’re going to create is necessary to the task. However, expecting a singular result can obliterate your view. If you are rigid in what you are working toward, you will bypass the process and miss out on the exploration of options.

Think of all the creativity lost when an assignment is given with the words, “It should look like this when you’re done.” If you’ve heard these words (haven’t we all?), abolish them from your thinking. It is the side-winding and veering off the path that takes you to new creative places. Perhaps what you thought was going to be a painting becomes a collage.

What you started as an embellished piece of clothing becomes a tapestry to hang on the wall. Or vice versa. You could end up taking on a lead role in the play when you thought you were auditioning to be in the chorus. Maybe your family expects you to complete your training in architecture, but you've discovered animation to be far more exciting. Don't charge forward hell-bent on getting to one place fast. Meander. Notice where you've been and where you might be heading. Having a single pre-defined destination reduces the many possibilities that could take you further than you expected.

Imitation: It can be tempting, particularly when your ideas are not flowing or your confidence is teetering, to look at someone else's creative accomplishments and endeavor to do the same. Sure, you might come up with something to show for it, but if it's meant to be like the work of another, it's lacking in your true and unique creative input. The effort will probably also lack in personal gratification. If you're only striving for praise, you can fool some of the people some of the time, but it's a nasty business to fool yourself!

Viewing the work of others is certainly a wonderful source of inspiration, motivation and stimulating ideas. We all study artists past and present for an overview of possibilities. It's exciting when the work of other artists spurs you to explore your own creativity. But you must translate your exploration into the realm of your own creativity, doing more than adding your mark to an imitative effort. Your creative work needs to come from your inner core, your mental imagery, your exploration. In your yearning to create, you only trip yourself up by duplicating the creative efforts of others. Bypass the personal creative journey and you cheat yourself of the personal gratification, and you cheat the world of your potential.

FIVE PRACTICES TO EMBRACE

It's as important to recognize attributes that you must resist as it is to determine the behaviors to take with you on your personal creative adventure. Many will give the advice that it is essential to not be afraid of failure. They are right, but they are also oversimplifying the dilemma of feeling uncreative. It's easier to say don't be afraid than to figure out what to do with your fear. To act courageously is not to be without fear; rather, it is to go forward in spite of fear. That's the start of the adventure, taking that first step and daring to begin.

Daring: You must have the courage to begin anywhere, anytime. Better yet, you must dare to begin creating here and now. Dare to follow an unexpected direction, to take a side road that appears, to create the unforeseen. Dare to make the sky yellow. Dare to tear rather than cut the paper. Dare to photograph out of focus. Dare to put a bit of yourself into your work.

When you are creating, you are exploring what you see and feel, playing with ways to use materials and tools, combining what you dis-

cover, and creating something that didn't exist before. That takes some nerve! And it takes trial and error, and trying over again. But daring will take you to the discovery of new entities, visually, audibly, tactilely, and emotionally. In the process, you will learn great things about yourself, your vision, your heart, your endurance, perseverance, stamina, and your sense of joy.

If you never create anything that takes the art world by storm, wouldn't you still gain great things? Wouldn't you still benefit from the experience? You can't make mistakes, because there are none. So dare to begin. Think about it, talk about it, gather the materials. Pick up the brush, dab it in paint and make a mark. Now keep going. Keep trying, exploring, and daring. It will get you much further than being afraid of making a mistake.

Inkling: You simply cannot be fully aware of all that your mind holds. You can't hear every message your brain sends. Many messages you act on automatically, many are pondered, and many are dismissed or ignored. It's easy when life gets too busy to miss some of the quieter messages, the zephyr of thought that is barely perceptible with all else that is going on. But those little whispered suggestions, echoed bits of self knowledge and kernels of wisdom you've filed away are the inklings, the keys to unlocking information and ideas that reside in the back of your mind. From these inklings emerge ideas from which you can create. They are the non-automatic, the less expected, the stuff from which you can generate the extraordinary.

You need to silence the pragmatic voice and listen carefully to the more fanciful, the less reasonable, the impish, obscure and outrageous. It is definitely there, even when seemingly silenced. Listen for the voice that has ideas. Honor your intuition. Quiet the boisterous brain that says, "We should do it like this!" Hear the timid whisper that says, "What if we tried it another way?" As you practice such listening, the voice of inkling will develop the courage to speak up more frequently. You will learn to hear it more clearly, and grow more appreciative of what it has to offer.

Doing: This is the quintessence of it all. You've planted the seeds, watered, fed, and eliminated the weeds. Your creativity must blossom. The clay hits the wheel, the chisel strikes the stone, the glass goes into the flame. The creation is created.

Planning to create, yearning for it, dreaming of it, collecting the materials for it – these are the preparations to create. At some point, you must take the risk, listen to your intuition, get your hands dirty, make a mess, and create something. Create anything! All of the notions that get in your way, the intimidation, the expectations, the fear of not making the mark must be thwarted, and you must pick up the pencil and draw. Open your mouth and sing. Thread the needle and sew. Whatever it is you've wanted to do, you must get to the beginning of it and do it.

It won't be quick or easy. Life will interfere. Time and money will run short. At times you will be overwhelmed, frustrated, and discouraged. This is an integral part of the process. It makes you no less capable that you face adversity. But it does make you less productive if you don't forge ahead in spite of the adversity.

Creativity is instinctual; nevertheless it requires time, space, and commitment. Despairing that you cannot create is using energy that could be applied to creating something. Creating anything is better than perpetuating your own despair. Feeling "I'm just not very creative" is more likely an excuse for "I'm just not willing to do it."

When observing a piece of art work, we've all overheard someone say, "Sheez! I could have done that." My response is "Yes, you possibly could have done something like that!" But "could have" is not the point. The point is that someone did it! They took the time, gathered the materials, put their ego on the line, took a leap of faith and did it! We don't have to appreciate the creative efforts of everyone. But we do have to honor that the artist took steps in their personal creative journey, made their mark, and dared to display it. That's a whole lot more than saying, "I could have done that!" Doing it is the difference.

Experiencing: The reason to create artistically is to experience the process. What you create is not necessarily the objective. That you create is the profound proof of your process. You must feel the process physically and emotionally. Get your hands dirty. Feel your muscles ache. Watch the colors blend and contrast. Touch the textures you're creating. Write down and tweak and rewrite and revise and start over and try again. You want to experience getting lost in the work, totally grossed in the task at hand.

Merriam Webster defines creativity as "to bring into existence something new." The crucial point is that creativity is not defined as the new thing produced; it is the act of bringing forth.

Do not procrastinate nor rush through the process, but savor it and tend to it with delight. If you've ever been told to hurry up and finish or to not make a mess, you will benefit by deleting those words from your memory. Linger. Thrash about. Daydream. Get things in a jumble. Be there in the Zen sense of living every moment. Mentally leave the everyday world and become oblivious to time and place. Be fully engaged. You will experience something new as it emerges before your eyes. And therein lies the bliss. Therein lies the frustration, and the excitement, and the tedium, and the gratification, and the joy. Feeling the diverse emotional range that is the process of your creating is confirmation of your being fully alive. Looking forward to the process can make you want to live a little longer and with greater satisfaction. Experiencing the creative process can get your endorphins flowing, uplift, heal, and energize you. Sharing your creativity will connect you to people and places you would not have known otherwise. The experience can expose qualities about yourself that you were previously unaware of. This is the pay-

off. Installation in a gallery is fantastic. Rave reviews, hundreds sold, reprints, and repeat commissions are exhilarating and perhaps profitable. But what you create is simply the evidence. That you live the experience is the true reward.

Rejoicing: By all means, celebrate your creative efforts! Set aside modesty and revel in a bit of self appreciation. Be pleased! Be proud! Show some excitement that you've created something! Hang your work on the living room wall. Wear your art when you're out and about. Say "Thank you! I made this!" Have an open house to show your work. Approach a gallery. Submit to a publisher. Toast your accomplishment. Giggle over it a bit. Pat yourself on the back and acknowledge a job well done. You have earned the privilege to indulge. Take pleasure in what you experienced and what you have to show for it. You resisted the intimidation, ignored the assumptions and implications. You kept your mind open and your hands busy. You dared to take the leap and enjoyed your journey. You created your own work. Congratulations are definitely in order!

THE ULTIMATE TRUTH

It is imperative that we all discover and encourage our own creativity. We must be wary of that which becomes an obstacle and embolden that which will open the doors. Creativity is waiting to seep out, to flow, and to tumble forth in torrents. We are healthier and happier when we dare to act on our creativity, when we foster the creative ability within us – and all around us! While nurturing our own creative instincts, by example we encourage the creative abilities of others. Much psychology can be explored as to why we lose our creative vitality. Imagine how wonderful if throughout our lives we were encouraged to pursue our ideas and enjoy our creative experience. All of us need to recognize and hold on to the truth that it's not what we create, it's that we create.



Kate Quinlan is a creativity coach with a background in education, social work, interior design, and art history. Having spent much of the first half of her life clinging to her creativity in spite of feeling intimidated and assuming that everyone else's work was better than hers, she will dare to follow her inklings and experience the rest of her life as an artist, writer, and coach encouraging everyone in her path to partake on their own creative journey. She welcomes email at krquinlan@yahoo.com.

Kate is grateful to her husband, Roger for his steadfast inspiration and corroboration. Also for the boundless support from her children, who are undoubtedly her finest creative accomplishment.