

ON CREATIVITY, COMMUNITY, AND KINDNESS

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“If you wish to make an apple pie from scratch, you must first create the universe.”

—Carl Sagan

The creative life is one of possibility and vision. My vision is to bring light, hope, and opportunity so that we all may thrive and shine more brightly together.

I’ve been lucky to have WDI breathe life into a vision I had—to bring opportunity to people who do not know how to identify and develop aptitude for working in the software field; that is, to open the door to a meaningful job and career for intelligent, hard-working people who might not otherwise have had the option. Ed Murphy asked me to write my story of a creative life. So here is my essay, and I hope the ray of hope and opportunity that I have felt throughout my life shines through.

FAIRNESS

I love running a business, but underneath the business, within the business, and parallel to the business, I have a creative practice I get to do each and every day. It’s called everyday life.

If you visit the digital markers of my identity today (e.g.,

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LinkedIn, the Greane Tree Technology website), you'll get a clear image of my present incarnation. I run a software development company, sit on the boards of a few wonderful non-profits, and sometimes receive awards for community service. Most recently, I founded a program designed to expand the scale and diversity of the software talent pipeline here in the Capital Region, where I live and do business. I graduated from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, married a software architect, and am raising a son. Here's the first impression, the matryoshka doll on the outside: champion of the region's software sector, business owner who cares, local business-person who gives back.

What if I told you that underneath that portrait is the image of an artist? That the first step on the path I'm still on wasn't Junior Achievement or the computer club but a middle-school art project? That I used my time at RPI to immerse myself not in engineering but in electronic media arts?

What if I told you that beneath the community figure who gives back is a child whose earliest education was Head Start, who had subsidized school lunches, and a wardrobe unlike my friends?

Would you see as contrarian or crazy a young woman who won international awards for her art but left behind the faculty at both University at Albany and RPI because of a conviction that the business world would be not only more economically straightforward but also a superior platform for her creativity?

Finally, could you lay eyes on the smallest wooden doll inside all the others and understand that the lifeblood which keeps my heart beating isn't success, net worth, or position in the community, but the need to know that I raise my voice always for fairness?

The child, the adolescent, the young person we once were are inside us still. If we're lucky and skillful, every one of those versions stays alive and integrates with the current self. Identifying myself as a creative means that I keep the innermost doll, the curious and kind child in me, alive. Being a creative means I'm in conversation with the child who imagines a better world, the adolescent seeking be-

longing, the young adult seeking justice, the parent building stability at home and in community.

SECURITY

My choice to be a creative has required me to take risks. The kind of childhood I had typically leads to a series of decisions that don't always end well. Instead, I've made a series of decisions to build community and follow my impulses to make the world a better place. A small-business owner is willing to pay the price of autonomy in lost sleep and stress. A software developer has no refuge from the relentless pace of change. After all, computers have ceased to be tools for limited purposes and are now the very fabric in which nearly every type of commercial function and human connection takes place.

It's good to build a business, but it's a higher calling to change the way people see themselves, their work, their connections, their community. That is the calling that keeps me living a creative life.

Call me a businessperson and you are not wrong. Like everyone who has to design, make, and sell a product or service, it's my daily practice to frame problems in ways that make them solvable. Show things in a different and more hopeful light. Staying in business means the business has to solve questions.

Call me a creative and you are also correct, because my practice of everyday life is driven by a need to create. Things that embody a principle of fairness, enable transparency and kindness, shed new light on old problems. The creative life, for me, requires a strong focus on defining a better future, not only for myself but for everyone.

IDENTITY

Greene Tree Technology, the platform of my livelihood, is a rapid application software development firm. By the time my undergraduate years at RPI closed, I felt sure I would never work in computer science. The fact that I enjoyed the classes and did well in them wasn't the point: Computer scientists were people who did not

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look, act, or think like me. Yet, here I am.

At Greane Tree Technology, we lay down lines of code to make a client's vision a reality. In the case of Complex—whose tagline reads the latest in music, style, and sneakers—that meant ultrafast architecture to host millions of simultaneous streaming video views. In the case of Baby-Friendly USA, the WHO and UNICEF initiative for best practices in maternity, that meant building a system for online training and certification for hospitals and birthing centers. Our final product is made by typing in the syntaxes of Ruby on Rails, PHP, jQuery, JavaScript, and so many more technologies.

So, in this line of work, how am I creative? Because the process of application development is a creative process. In some ways it's the process of using technology to be truer to principles, truer to culture, more open to seeing things in new ways, to make an impact. That's a creative process.

At the beginning of my transition from artist to businessperson, I was offered a position as a videographer. Morse Associates was documenting architectural damage to the Deutsche Bank Building adjacent to the destroyed World Trade Center, and I took the job of archiving it all. In the long, quiet, dusty, and quite likely toxic, hours of shooting inside the cramped space of a crumbled skyscraper, I knew I was doing something that had value. Maybe there was scant artistic merit in the work, but it was about fairness. What else could I do with my multimedia skills that would serve a process of discovery, even justice? In response to that question, I ended up building a division of the company to sell multimedia as a form of visual communication for the science of building forensics. I was ready to leave my days as an art professor behind me, because using video to bring people to a point of dialogue and action had become much more interesting than becoming an art star.

In many ways, when I 'took a break' from the art community for the business community, I was staying true to what my art had always been about: lifting veils and asking questions that led to answers framed in community and opportunity.

ART

As a child, I had a loving mother, a brother, and a gram. The kids around me had new clothes, nuclear families, the security of a middle-class means, a dad. My friends had moms with free time and attention. Mine was struggling just to make ends meet, to keep the lights and the heat on. They had beautiful houses that commanded respect. We did not. Again, it wasn't fair.

When I found I could make things out of pixels, mastering that world beyond a keyboard is what gave me a sense of ownership. I owned light. I owned color. I owned images that I created that were like no others. Then I found video.

To create the work that still speaks most fully to my artistic vision, I needed myself, a video camera, a series of sunny days, and instinct. By now a young adult enrolled in RPI graduate school on scholarship, I still wondered about the paradox of ownership. One of my favorite pieces, *The Joy of Lying Down in Other People's Backyards*, was a hypnotic series of short videos. Silent, serene, and colorful, there was blip after blip of 30-second videos showing my shins and shoes pointing skyward in the many backyards I visited. They were nearly silent—the sounds of the suburbs.

A later work of video asked another subtle question: If our history books can celebrate its bootleggers, gangsters, and robber barons, why was the story of Troy's world-famous madam never told? She was a woman. She saw the moneyed industrialists building Troy and knew she could run an operation to redirect some of that wealth to the daughter of Irish immigrants, and to the other women who saw no other opportunity.

These two projects framed, if not directly, at least indirectly, the question that has always daunted me. If aptitude is distributed equally over the population, why isn't opportunity? How do we frame the problem of unleashing human intelligence as something that we can solve? How do we start conversations that recognize the pervasiveness of uneven opportunity?

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INNOVATION

Humans make tools. We want innovation, we want comfort. We want hope, joy, to feel alive. At the dawn of history, we used pottery to save water and serve food. In our time, we have smartphones and air conditioning, debit cards, Bluetooth.

Humans make art. Art is the jump from experience to representation in symbolic ways. When the first humans made cave paintings, we tuned in to the magic of existence. Life and art were one, directing that magic into experiences that promoted survival. Now we take for granted the magic of medicine, agriculture, transportation, refrigerators. We are accustomed to the abundance of music and video provided by iTunes and Netflix. The constant stream of museum-quality images on Facebook and Instagram. The never-ending text messages on Twitter. Our 10-years olds make short videos as if it were no more difficult than eating a banana.

I'm still tuned in to the magic that is yet to be made. My life as a creative is driven by the heart of that child who questions what can I do to make the world a better place? I stand on the cliff, look to the stars, listen to the sea, and capture the magic. We have so much: an impressive technologically advanced civilization humans have built. Now how do we invite everyone in? The artist in me sees that creative ability is distributed evenly. Now let us make the magic of distributing creative opportunity, so we all may shine more brightly together.