

BUILDING A CREATIVE LIFE

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I grew up in a small industrial town in upstate New York. My grandfather owned an awning business that he started in 1908, which had provided a decent income to support his family. The business floundered after WWII and needed new ideas and a new direction for it to survive. When my father took it over, he expanded into the marine industry and developed the business to become a major player. He worked hard and did well. Consequently, as a child, all of my parents' energy and focus was on making the business grow and be successful.

My father had a very creative side to him, which he used to develop new products. He was actually an innovator, although I don't think he acknowledged that aspect of himself. I'm not sure why, but not recognizing his own creativity also meant that he was unable to nurture the creative side of his children.

I am a creative person, but I didn't know that, and didn't make use of my own creativity for many years.

When I was growing up, any activity involving art or creative expression was not only discouraged but frowned upon in my immediate family. But my grandmother was different; she encouraged my creativity through play-acting. She had a dresser full of old clothing to be used as theater wardrobe. My sister and I would create all sorts of fantastical costumes and put on plays for her. She always respond-

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ed enthusiastically, clapping and laughing at our efforts, enjoying our antics. She made me feel loved and appreciated, and she inspired my creative side.

But my parents didn't. As soon as I went home and related the experience to my parents, they quickly quieted me with their disdain and disapproval.

The educational system I grew up in did not encourage creativity in the classroom. Although art classes were a part of the school curriculum, it was looked upon as an easy class with no value at all. All art projects were the same. Every child had to do the same thing. But even though that was the rule, everyone still produced something entirely different and unique to themselves. We could all be looking at the same object, following the same instructions, and using the same materials, but each interpretation and execution was distinct from all the others. So where does creativity come from? How does this happen?

Even though I had more time and freedom to express myself as a child, I was not encouraged to do so. Certainly in my house the adage "out of sight and out of mind" applied to our daily lives, since I was little seen and seldom acknowledged for anything I may have done or created. I don't remember ever being encouraged to put pen or paint to paper to express myself. The one creative activity I remember well is finger painting. I liked the feeling of the cold, gooey paint oozing between my fingers as I applied it to the shiny, slick wet paper. I swirled my hands around, using different colors to create magnificent images. I could make anything from those colors. After I was finished, the paintings were hung on a line to dry until the next day, when I would take them down. The dried paper, curled at the edges, was not nearly as exciting. The colors were duller and I wondered what I had found so wondrous in my paintings the day before. I think it was the excitement of possibility and the process of actually creating an image that was exhilarating at the time, but what a disappointment to see the end result the next day. Part of creativity in one's life is a process and does not just happen. Perseverance and

acceptance play a huge part in our ability to access our creativity.

Opportunity is another. For example, when I was a child, my grandmother taught me how to sew on her old treadle machine. She was very particular about how she sewed. She would measure and measure again, cut, place pieces together, pin, and then sew. The sound of the repetitive movement of the treadle was soothing. I sewed with my grandmother sitting next to me and guiding me as I learned. Over the years, I followed patterns meticulously, altered them as needed, and sewed to my heart's content. But if a garment did not work according to the pattern, I settled for it as it was, wearing it or discarding it altogether. As much as I enjoyed sewing, I never knew the true joy of creating garments until well into my middle years. I volunteered to help at an event for teens called "Fashion Freestyle." Twenty-five teens came together for a weekend. Fabric, notions, and accessories were provided, along with many volunteers who offered to bring sewing machines and sew with the participants as they made their own creations. I worked with a teenage girl who wanted to make a dress to wear for her mother's wedding. I had only made dresses from patterns and she had never sewn before. What a challenge! We looked through the piles of fabric that had been donated for the event and found a beautiful golden-yellow piece that she loved. As we held it up to her, she started envisioning what she wanted to create. We sketched on paper the style she was imagining, held the fabric up to her, pinned it here and there, and started to cut. I had a knot in my stomach as I made that first snip into the lovely material. As I started to cut and fit and sew, my stomach relaxed and I became immersed in the creation with her. We had great fun finding contrasting fabrics for highlights, and ribbons and buttons that complemented the fabric. We sewed a little kick pleat in the skirt with a bright pink fabric that perked up the dress in a way I never would have done previously. As we worked together, my heart began to open, and the creative juices flowed for the rest of the weekend. I can still picture every detail of that dress, and how beautiful and proud she looked wearing it. At the end of the weekend, the teens put

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on a fashion show as a fundraiser for the homeless in the community. We were all in awe of the fashions that were created in just two days. When everyone strutted down the runway to music, displaying their creations for all to see, it was truly magnificent! We had spent two days as a group of individuals sharing and talking about where our clothing comes from in the world, who makes what we wear, and how we can all be ethical purchasers. This process, for many reasons, was an epiphany for me and a turning point in my own creative life. I realized I could make anything—anything at all—without a pattern, just by having the materials at hand.

Creativity is a mindset, a way of looking at yourself without judgment and allowing anything to happen. This was one of the most freeing experiences of my life. I was able to clearly see what happens when you give yourself a chance.

For years, my sister would tell me how creative I was because I would try my hand at so many different kinds of arts or crafts and do them well. I never saw this as artistic or creative, just a way of learning a skill that anyone could do as long as they learned the steps and the process. I didn't value my own abilities, perhaps because, when I was growing up, it was so devalued. That attitude became part of my own outlook on the arts. I had internalized the belief that the arts are not worth spending time on or doing because they are not worthwhile. My father always put a high value on achieving and making a contribution to society, but that did not include the arts. He felt that it was laudable to help someone in need but not to enhance their lives through any of the arts, even music. He didn't understand.

Unfortunately, I carried that attitude into adulthood and passed it on to my own children. When they were young, I was more concerned about putting a roof over their heads and food on the table than devoting time to the arts. I adopted my father's perspective, almost automatically. I was a single mother bringing up two young children, so I did not have the time or energy to address anything other than the necessities of living. There was no time for leisure

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activities such as painting. All my energy went toward fulfilling the very basic needs of life. By the time my day was finished, I was too exhausted to do anything but go to bed and get a good night's sleep, so that I could begin again the next day.

When my oldest daughter was in kindergarten, she had to make a poster about herself and her life. The idea was to portray who she was: age, height, family members, pets, home, and what she wanted to be when she grew up, as well as her likes and dislikes. She very clearly expressed her dislike of my smoking. She placed a picture of a package of Viceroy cigarettes squarely in the middle of the area where she had to express her dislikes. When she brought the poster home, I was astonished at how clearly her message came across. Her teacher had found a way for her students to creatively express who they were, how they felt, and what they looked forward to in their future lives, without dialogue, but expressing themselves visually. I see clearly today, sixty years later, the poster my daughter created in her classroom, which so clearly expressed her inner self at just five years old. All she needed was right there inside her, and provided with encouragement and materials, she was able to express herself beautifully, which I admire to this day.

I lived in Ireland for many years as an adult. When I first moved there, I was amazed at the talent everyone seemed to possess. For every social gathering or event, one had to bring a party piece to contribute to the evening—a song, spoken word, or an instrument to play. This was expected, and most everyone participated. It was encouraged within the home to develop whatever artistic skills one possessed to be shared within the community. At many a late night in the local pubs, a sing-along occurred; a way to carry on the history and culture of the country. I loved those times. They lifted our spirits and created a true sense of community.

When I moved to Ireland, I had to clean out the house I had been living in for twenty years. I remember sitting in my kitchen and going through the cupboards, finding so many of my projects: pulling out the inkle loom, the beading projects, unfinished knitted hats and

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scarves, bits of paintings; all the creative projects I had taken on during the years but never finished, life always getting in the way. I often felt that more important tasks had to be done. But a thread of creativity ran throughout my life, even though it did not have time to come forth. Creativity would rear its head, even when I was not aware of it. This was a basic urge that kept cropping up, not wanting to be dampened down, and springing forth even when I did not realize it.

I moved to Ireland in the mid-eighties to work in a manufacturing plant. We processed raw glass for the automotive, marine, and construction industries. Although the process seemed very straightforward, there was room for improvement, so I was delighted to have the opportunity to find new ways for myself and the people working in the plant to enhance the manufacturing systems through their creativity. Tying together work, creativity, and daily life was what I've always wanted to do, and I finally had a chance.

During those years, my creativity was expressed through my work. As more leisure time became available to me, I started to explore new avenues of expression. I joined local art classes and connected with a group of people who explored various mediums, such as oils, watercolors, and acrylics, for self-expression. For several summers, I volunteered at a youth camp in the UK, catering to teenagers. I worked in the art barn, providing beads for the youth and adults to make their own creations. As we sat around the beading table, they not only made a keepsake for themselves, but we also created a safe and supportive space for them to express their own thoughts and concerns about their lives. It was a most rewarding experience for me. Here too, creativity and life intersected.

So what do I want my grandchildren to know about creativity? That they are creative, first of all. All of us are. Another thing is that it is never too late to express yourself. I look back on my life and know that it has always been a part of who I am, even though for many years I did not actively pursue outlets to express myself. Now I have plenty of time, and I find that one of the biggest issues is pro-

crastination. I can so easily put off until tomorrow, or next week, the projects I am keen to take on. I think there are ups and downs around procrastination. Even when I put something off, it is always in the back of my mind, working away, so that when I finally get down to it, I actually have something in my mind to start with. So although I put it off, when I finally get to it, I can dive right in. Something to keep in mind is that sometimes it is easier and more productive to work under pressure or under a deadline.

Freeing my mind from the worries of everyday living also helps. I find it soothing to have music in the background or total silence; I can immerse myself in the creativity that comes through whatever medium I have chosen. It is most meditative; I lose touch with time, and can work for hours without realizing how much time has passed.

I also find that I need to step away periodically; take a walk and refresh myself, so that I can be renewed to step in again.

When creativity chooses me, my heart soars as I imagine the possibilities; the wonderful painting I will create with my watercolors and paper, or the beautiful quilt I will sew with all the scraps of fabric in my closet, or the fabulous sounds I will make on my drums. I lie in bed in the middle of the night, wide awake in my mind, creating all these delightful things, and cannot wait to get up in the morning and begin. That's one of the ironies of imagination.

I finally see the daylight peeking through my window so I can arise and start my day. After a leisurely breakfast, and with a steaming hot cup of coffee in my hand, I enter my studio. I pull out the crisp white watercolor paper and prepare my paints. I choose each color carefully, so there is a range of hues of primary colors—a blue, a yellow, a red—maybe several of each one, so I can create warm and cool tones of the many colors I can create from them. I stretch my paper on a board and place it on my easel, making sure it is the right height and angle for painting. I organize my brushes, palette, and water so they are all within easy reach. And now it is time to begin.

Where are all the marvelous ideas I had in the middle of the night? They are gone, buried deep within my unconscious mind, not

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to be reached during daylight. My mind becomes a blank! Nothing comes to me! I stare at the bright, blank watercolor paper and look at my paints in despair. Where is it? Where did it all go? It was so crystal clear in the dark shadows of the night, but no more. What to do?

There is nothing to do but to take a deep breath, wet my brush, dip it in paint, and splash color onto paper—wow—my mind begins to loosen and I start to see possibility. Yes, that splotch of red could be the beginning of a poppy, and that dark blue could be the center; the mixture of blue and yellow is emerging as large green leaves in the background, and that little splotch of yellow with black is beginning to look like a honeybee landing to sample the nectar to take back to her hive.

My heart and mind have opened as I place color on my paper to create this painting.

Suddenly the day has disappeared; time has flown as I created the painting which, in the morning, had seemed so impossible to approach. I stand back and assess my day's work, and I am quite pleased and surprised at the result.

Of course, the self-critic quickly returns as I peer at the work and think maybe it's not so good—that it should probably be put away and not be seen by anyone but me. Despair sets in again.

I have my chamomile tea before bed, and as darkness descends as I fall asleep, my mind soars and I think of the marvelous painting I will create tomorrow—one that will surely be good enough to share with others. Eternal optimism returns!

My creative life continues each day as I feel compelled to find a way to express myself. This has been a thread throughout my life; connecting my inner creative world to the outer experiences of my life, even when this does not seem apparent. I find it challenging and satisfying to experience the wonder and excitement of creating something new, in whatever way I can. And I still try.