

DON'T LET THE FEAR OVERTAKE THE JOY

Vincent Ciulla

My name is Vincent Ciulla. I have just recently wound down a 45-year career as a museum planner and exhibition designer. For most of that time, I had a private practice called, you guessed it, Vincent Ciulla Design (www.ciulladesign.com). My wife and partner, Julie Ciulla, completed over 300 projects, first out of our Soho loft, then later from a Brooklyn brownstone. Recently, we moved south to be near grandsons Charlie and Zach.

My essay is non-linear, a collage of thoughts, feelings connected to memories from my life. The overall theme is ...

“Don't let the fear overtake the joy.”

—Joe Maddon, Manager of the Chicago Cubs

I heard this last fall when the Cubs were playing the Mets in the MLB playoffs. The Cubs were contending a year earlier than expected, and Joe Maddon, their manager, calmed his nervous young players by giving them this sage advice.

The quote struck me as insightful, not only for that moment, but it could also serve as a kind of way to live.

I have experienced fear many times in my professional and personal life. I am sometimes haunted by my mistakes but know that I did not let the fear overtake the joy.

CREATIVE LIVES

FEAR AND JOY

When we were eight years old, friends of mine and I taught ourselves to play baseball. This was before Little League, and we played on traditional informal sandlots used by the community for baseball and softball. There were no coaches or any other adults around. It was the end of an era of open land on the outskirts of towns. We learned the moves of the game by watching major league games on TV and from each other. Every day after school, from April to October, a big group of us would ride our bikes to our own sandlot surrounded by woods and set next to a brook, called Red Wing Oval; “Red Wing” for short, for a two-hour exercise of pure joy. We had one ball, sometimes with the cover half off, one bat, and cardboard bases. We “chose up” sides each day—real Americana on Staten Island in the 1950s. After that I played on teams in Little League, CYO, PAL, Babe Ruth League, and American Legion. Sometimes I had three active uniforms in my closet. I played three to four times a week in various leagues. By the time I got to high school, I made the team. We had really good players and I often sat the bench.

Because of the tension of each game, when I did play, I played with the fear of making a mistake. My coach was a real SOB and he did nothing to encourage me. He was critical and nasty. “Son, you can’t hit,” he sneered at me. I lost all youthful flow of the game and sometimes made mistakes when I did play. The last game I played in was for the New York City Championship, and to add insult to injury, I was pinch-hit for in the last inning of that game, which we lost. Although I played some softball later on, like most high school seniors, I never played baseball again.

Fear overtook joy. Joe Maddon, where were you when I needed you?

Lately, though, in most of my creative activities I’ve reconnected to the pure joy we eight year-olds had teaching ourselves to play baseball. The fear has become a manageable and smaller part of my life as my joy expands into the vacated spaces of my mind and heart.

LUCKY ME

I consider myself very lucky. I spent my career planning and designing museum installations and exhibitions throughout the Americas. I started my museum career in The Metropolitan Museum of Art Design Department. I designed seventy-five exhibitions and installations there, including blockbusters like “Gold: Objects from the Museum’s Collection,” “The Kings’ Book of Kings: Persian Miniatures,” “The Permanent Musical Instruments Installation,” and “The Great Age of Fresco.” I opened my own practice after seven years at The Met, in 1973.

Since then I’ve designed over 300 exhibition projects for art, history, science, and children’s museums, as well as state and national park visitor centers. My clients have included The National Park Service, The Art Institute of Chicago, El Museo del Oro in Costa Rica, The Smithsonian Institution, The Henry Ford Museum, The Anchorage Museum, The Staten Island Children’s Museum, The National Trust, The National Purple Heart Hall of Honor, Colonial Williamsburg, Yale University Art Gallery, The Royal Ontario Museum in Canada, The Museum of The Americas in Puerto Rico, and many others.

Along the way I was lucky enough to collaborate with a diverse and committed group of clients such as Purple Heart veterans, National Park rangers, Native Americans, various children’s educators, Costa Rican archaeologists, NASA scientists, Puerto Rican historians, and countless curators. It was hard work, requiring travel to distant museum and park sites, but it was worth it. The Italian-American kid from Staten Island, first in my family to go from rural Little Italy on Staten Island to college and well beyond, is a success. Lucky me. Talent, a ton of hard work and unyielding perseverance made it happen.

CREATIVE TIMES

We all have the ability to be creative—but not all of the time, nor any time we want. Sometimes we just don’t feel it. We have nothing

CREATIVE LIVES

we want to do or say, have nothing we especially want to create. No statement we want to make. Can I use the time to simply wait? For now, I just watch TV, especially MLB Network, and relax.

DOING IT FOR MYSELF

I have mainly created for others. First I did it for my family, friends, and teachers; then for my clients during my 45-year career as a designer. I was a very good designer and had a successful career, but I hardly ever did art or design for my own pleasure. In the 1980s, I changed that. I took six months off, and with the coaching of my therapist at the time, created a dozen large assemblages. I “simply” explored saying yes rather than no to my creative impulses. “Yes” has helped me conquer my fears about creativity. I did some great pieces. Even then I felt joy. I find it in every creative endeavor I find myself in.

CREATIVE DREAMS

I'd never had creative dreams before a recent night. Oh, when I was a kid I remember a dream where I could actually fly. It was great, but that was it.

I dreamed I created a giant learning space for kids. It was created with a group of like-minded individuals. We worked on it together and finished it in full scale in a day. It was wonderful and filled with color and happy, creative kids. I knew I was dreaming and wanted to remember the design when I awoke so I could recreate it in real life. So, in my dream, I borrowed a digital camera to record the scene. I saved several stills from that camera. Of course, I didn't possess those digital images after I woke up.

What happened—where did the dream come from? I hope I have some more of them. I must have tapped into some current in me. I want to be open to it happening again.

Next night, I dreamed that I hit a cop with my car and got arrested.

SELF-AWARENESS

I have a family history of clinical depression. I didn't feel it until my twenties. Then it hit me big-time. I became self-sabotaging and ruined my marriage, which ended in divorce.

I decided to start psychotherapy to help me survive my life. I soon thought of therapy as a lifeline to help me cope, and even flourish. I found that I could do creative work, even with a self-image that wasn't positive.

I've "worked on myself," as they say in the psychotherapy world, for almost my entire adult life. I find that it's much easier to be creative with the more positive self-image I have now.

The more I accept myself, the easier it is to access the creative flow within me.

POWER

During the early years of my adulthood (ages 23–33) I got a really good job as an exhibition designer at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. I did some fine creative work there. I really enjoyed designing exhibitions, and began to see that I had some real talent.

Unfortunately, I had a boss, the Head of Design, who lacked even an ounce of integrity. He stole many of my projects for his own credit. Rather than be depressed by this bully, I became angry and fought him at every turn, but in the end, I had no power.

I didn't want my work to be stolen by this crud, so I left my job and went into my own exhibition design practice. It took me years to build a sustaining practice. Then, after Julie, my second wife and business partner, joined me, we started to really flourish. The joy of doing really nice projects, for good money, overcame years of fear that I would fail.

WORKING WITH GRANDPA

It was hard for me to work with my grandpa. He was so manically driven, he hardly looked at me when he was working, which he did most of the time. But work with him I did. He had a used car

CREATIVE LIVES

business, known to the family as “The Lot,” and my mother and he decided I could learn something by working there during the summer of my first year of high school. It took me an hour and a half on two buses to get there. My grandfather taught me the basics of cleaning, repairing, and refurbishing used cars. He showed me once; then it was up to me to deliver. He checked my work at first. After a few successful tries, he trusted me to do the job and finish it reasonably on time. It was lonely out there, without friends, but I figured out a temporary escape.

At 1:00 p.m. every day, the Yankees played on Channel 11 on my grandma’s RCA television in my grandparents’ house, right next to The Lot. I would leave the game on and put my head in for a peek every chance I got. Eventually, my grandmother, the Italian peasant, actually learned the game and became a Yankee fan from watching the games with me. Her favorite player was “Migee Mandela,” Mickey Mantle to the rest of us. I actually did learn to work diligently to complete projects Grandpa gave me, be they washing a car, adjusting its brakes, or gapping its plugs. By the time I got to college, I had a positive work ethic, always finishing my projects on time and in very good presentation shape.

ALEX AT THE LOT

Every so often we would get a visit in the dark of night from Juan, the Mexican mechanic. He came at night for two reasons. One, because he had a day job, and two, because he didn’t want to get caught doing what he was doing at The Lot. His specialty was turning back the mileage on the odometer of cars, which was considered a serious crime. Grandpa paid cash and never spoke about it among the family, even though we all knew what was going on. He cheated customers. What I got from this is that it’s OK to cheat, and hell, everybody did it. I didn’t get my moral compass from these experiences. It took me years to form a good sense of honesty and integrity about myself. I pieced it together from my early life of being with Grandma, going to church, and hanging out with caring people.

CREATIVITY AND PERFECTION

An architect colleague said that mistakes are “God’s way of reminding us we are human.” He’s right. When I was growing up, my mother convinced me that I could attain perfection in my life, if only I could eliminate my mistakes (sins). Whenever I tried something, whether it was playing baseball or making a drawing, I would feel frustrated when I was not perfect. This frustration with myself stopped me from continuing on my task, and took away any full joy I felt about my actual accomplishment. Creativity and perfection are at odds with each other. However, I shoot for perfection in each project, knowing I won’t reach it.

THE OLD WAYS

Picture me at four years old on a homestead farm in rural Staten Island, New York. My grandparents, illiterate Italian immigrants, were the head of our extended household. We lived a life more like the one they had left in the old country than the one they created for us in America. My grandfather hunted for table meats, my grandmother grew and canned fruits and vegetables from our immense garden. I remember very clearly putting in seeds with her in the spring. Our life was prescriptive; governed by the seasons, subsistence, and our old-world values of humility and simplicity. Inventive thoughts or actions were not normally considered in our day-to-day lives. My designated task was collecting the eggs from our chicken coop each morning. Although I got pecked a lot, my methodology never changed. These were the old ways, tried and true, and unchanging. Nobody considered that there might be a better way to collect eggs.

No one believed then that I, or anyone in my family, would actually have the opportunity to take the big risk. At four years old, the pecking just hurt. And yet, in the end I did it, with a lot of pushback from my family. Eventually, I had to reject them and the old ways to develop a new life. Today I lean on my unique roots for support in my life. I have great memories of my early life out in the country on Staten Island.

CREATIVE LIVES

HUMOR

I grew up in the 1950s with its rigidity, rules, and commie hating. Joe McCarthy lurked everywhere. There was always a right and a wrong way to do things, and God forbid you did them wrong. Looking back, I think my friends felt the same pressure to conform. So about five of us (Donny, Jack, Joey, Charlie, and I) did something sensible to relieve the pressure. We formed a regular hangout group of freewheeling humorists, creative funny men who laughed about the craziness of life until our sides literally split. It was our outlet. Fans of Sid Caesar, Carl Reiner, Howard Morris, and Imogene Coca, we invented complex characters, situations, and skits that set ourselves free. I hang around funny people even today, as laughter opens my heart as well as my mind; as it sets fertile ground for creative thought and action. It's good to laugh. It's joyful and totally eliminates fear.

RISK AND OPPORTUNITY

Someone once told me that the words risk and opportunity share the same character in Chinese. I later heard that it is actually danger and opportunity. Anyway, this seems to fit my life. I risked leaving my prescribed life for what, I didn't know then, and my life turned out to be filled with opportunities.

HIPPIES

Thank God for the Sixties and the hippie movement. It took hold just when I began rejecting my family and my early life. I liked the movement's challenge to live a life of integrity and of exploration. The pot didn't hurt either. In 1967, I discarded my hairpiece (my mother had complimented me on it for my "improving myself"). In actuality it was used to hide my negative view of myself. The rug was the final attempt to live up to others' view of myself. I ditched it, grew a beard, donned love beads, and railed against the horrible war in Vietnam. The hippie movement gave me hope that I could make a better life for myself, and it was worth the struggle for me to do so. I'M STILL A HIPPIE. I continue to live by the creed. Love, love, love.

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

I grew up in the late 40s and 50s a true believer in Jesus Christ and the Catholic Church. My family used the guilt of sin, invented by the Church to control the flock. It really did a job on me. The Church discourages individual thinking, controlling all of us with prescriptions on right and wrong, what to do and what not to do; the promise of heaven, and the threat of hell, control us. I am resentful for the ways it hobbled me, even to this day.

I remember a Saturday afternoon at confession when I was a young teenager and still under Church influence. I was confessing my sin of making out with my girlfriend, when I noticed Father Leone, who was hearing my confession, breathing heavily and kind of drooling. I was stunned and confused, only much later realizing he was most probably a pedophile priest, recently having been sent to our parish. Great job, Catholic Church. The Church taught me ethics, but the guilt of mortal sin kept me down, dampened the potential of my life, and generally led to my unhappiness. I came to learn while exploring life that other religions, such as Buddhism, are based on the unfolding of the self. Give me a self-actualizing religion like Buddhism any day.

MY FATHER

I loved him. He was kind and had a good sense of humor. I got this from him. He was no help in my navigating the world, nor protecting me from my mother; not doing a good job of those items for himself. I remember, when I was a teenager, my father's boss fired him. This was someone who was supposedly his friend. My dad cried on the back porch and said he felt like a failure. I felt sad for him then, telling him he wasn't a failure, wondering silently why he didn't stick up for me when I was a child. My dad's basic kindness, compassion, and heart, and his ability to cook great Sicilian food, give him a lot of points in my book. I accept the parts of him in me.

CREATIVE LIVES

FRIENDS

I am currently friends with a small group of people, most of whom have lived non-traditional lives. Some I've known for 35 years. Some I've known for just a few years. All of them are creative people; funny, fun-loving, searching, and unique. My friends know me and I know them. I've committed myself to my close relationships. Even though I don't require regular contact with any of them, we have strong bonds.

AMERICAN DREAM

I consider myself very lucky to have been born in this country and to live my life at this time. While our country has a lot of problems, it has a cultural climate that allows a person the opportunity to choose his or her own life. Grandpa and Grandma did a great thing coming here from the poverty of rural Italy. They had no idea how it would affect their offspring and grandchildren.

I hated, and still hate, capitalism. I'm more of a small-d democrat, so I work for museum clients to present exhibitions for visitors' enlightenment and entertainment. I've made a good living at it, and my design work contributed in no small way to society. Vincent Ciulla Design's work can be currently seen by millions of exhibition-goers per year around The Americas. Thank you, Grandpa and Grandma, for moving here and giving me this wonderful chance.

FROM STATEN ISLAND TO MANHATTAN

After my divorce, I had to pry myself away from the light, airy, safe apartment on Staten Island we lived in during my first marriage; to a derelict, unsafe one in the East Village in Manhattan. I had to break with conservative, rule-oriented, insular culture in favor of one with possibilities in New York City. The East Village was a fearsome place. I got mugged, lived on a block with drug dealers, had my car broken into, and had my apartment burglarized twice. I was free from the dead end of Staten Island. I had a few new friends in Manhattan, people whose lives were, like mine, not settled or secure.

I fit in better there. Looking back, it was a time for me to start over. At the time, I mostly felt pain. (I know for sure why babies cry at birth.) It was hard to go through this. During this time, I found a new steady girlfriend, developed my relationship with my daughter, and did good creative work at my job. The physical move was wrenching, but I don't regret it for a moment. It started me on my new road, which coincided with the beginning of my long career in museum planning and exhibition design. This move actually made a huge difference in my life.

BROTHER AND SISTER, TWINS NO LESS

When I was 18 months old my life changed drastically. Not one, but two siblings arrived at the same time—Connie, the older by minutes, and Jimmy, the baby. As we grew up a little I became in charge of taking care of them. Together we walked at least a mile to P.S. 48, with the two trailing me all the way. We also did the same to St. Sylvester's Church on Sunday mornings. I really love them both. They took entirely different paths from me, finding long careers as an emergency room nurse for sister Connie, and a Battalion Chief and Head of the Firefighters Officers' Union in New York City, for brother Jimmy. I'm proud of them both. Both were drawn to careers of service, as I was.

GRANDSONS

I saw my grandsons recently. They live nearby, so I have a lot of contact with them. They both like art, and the older one is in an art high school. I've had a very positive influence on them. They both have a great sense of humor and a positive outlook about their life choices. A very supportive and positive mom, my daughter, and her husband, have them feeling good about themselves. Seeing this makes everything—all my struggles, searching, risk-taking, blazing new trails—worthwhile. I know today that I have a lot to give them, as well as to get from them. It's my biggest joy.

CREATIVE LIVES

DISCIPLINE AND JOY

About fifteen years ago I took up rowing, mainly for exercise. This is a sport that strives for perfection—the perfect stroke, the perfect rhythm, the perfect ratio. The goal when in a boat with others is for everyone to row exactly the same way. No room for creativity here. But a lot can be said for the discipline it takes to do it well. I find that structured discipline is the counterpoint to creativity. With discipline, creative work can be actualized. I've used discipline over my career to get my designs built.

It's fair enough, also, to talk about joy here. When I row with four or eight others and we are rowing together nicely, moving the boat with both grace and power, it is truly joyful.

THE BEATLES

Thank God for The Beatles. They constantly reached for the new and the yet-to-be-explored. Their music was unique, as were their lifestyle and their ethics. John Lennon was their spiritual leader and a hero of mine. He took the creative approach to life. He influenced me a lot. I'm sad he was taken from us so long ago. I wonder what John Lennon would be like today had he lived; a world statesman at least.

“Got to admit it's getting better, getting better all the time (can't get no worse).”

PRATT INSTITUTE

I graduated from high school on Staten Island in 1960. I had been to Brooklyn, home of Pratt Institute, only a few times. High school was fun, and in many ways prescriptive, where the process was to find the right answer. There was a lot of testing and grading. Although we were given grades, Pratt was more flexible. The answers were open-ended, and the process was to explore. It was my first real experience in thinking subjectively on a regular basis. For a nineteen to twenty-one-year-old, I did great work there, showing openness to new ways. Pratt prepared me for my later rejection of the prescriptive life, and for how to use the fruits of learning.

JAIMIE

She's my little girl. She had a very rough go of it when she was very young because of the breakup of my marriage to her mother. I really regret hurting her then, but in the end I was able to give her a lot more as I myself grew and changed. Today, happily for me, we live only about 20 minutes apart. I forgive myself for hurting her and let go of the pain of it, while I enjoy its fruits.

THE NEW AGE

In the 1980s, still searching, I joined a spiritual/psychological organization called The Pathwork. I learned about "the God in me" and in all of us. The Pathwork satisfied my need to see and accept the best in myself. I have made some lifelong relationships at The Pathwork. I think the best in me, in all of us, is our ability to love, to feel compassion, and, for me, to be creative. The Pathwork encouraged me to learn as much about myself as I did and continue to do. Self-awareness, an ongoing quest for me, has been one of the basic tenets of my creativity.

JULIE

She's the rock to my kite. A string is tied around her and attached to my tail. Opposites certainly do attract. Most of our conflicts are about who is actually tugging on whose string. I met her when we were both employees at The Metropolitan Museum. Then she left for Paris and a life of good food and drink. A real bum. One spring, she let me know she was planning to visit America to see her dad, and wanted to know if we could meet for lunch. The rest is history. She became my life partner and business partner at the same time. Our business grew and prospered. When I was hesitant to buy a house in Brooklyn, she dispelled my fears, and we ended up living a great life in an 1879 brownstone in Park Slope. Our office was on the garden floor. Today, she's my best friend, quiet and deep in her own way. I was in therapy at the time I met Julie, and because she is more like my father was, I wasn't as attracted to her as I had been to women

CREATIVE LIVES

with whom I had had harsh and battling relationships. She was a very good move for me.

BROWN PAPER BAGS

When I was young, my mother saved the brown paper bags from the A&P for me to draw on. The bags and a No. 2 pencil were my only art supplies for a long while. I enjoyed seeing the shine of the lead on the brown paper. I appreciated the supplies. I give a reluctant thanks to my mother here. Thinking about it now, my mother did support me as best she could, considering who she was. A full “thank you” to her now. I forgive you and love you, Mom. Thanks for taking me to see Jon Gnagy’s TV show Learn To Draw live on a set in Manhattan when I was five or six. I got to show him a portfolio of my drawings. Wow.

GRANDMA

I had a good role model for grand parenting in my grandma. Unlike most of the family, which brought the art of the putdown to a world-class professional level, Grandma unconditionally loved her seven grandchildren, one of whom was me. We basked in it. It’s crucial to be open to love, and Grandma, long ago, showed me that love exists. Thank you so much, Grandma, you were the light of my early life.

FEAR OF WORK, JOY OF WORK

In my early career, I approached every creative task with the fear of not having any ideas. Gradually in the course of my life, some of which I’ve told you about here, the fear has turned to joy. Some call it the silent change. Now I look forward to creative work, knowing it will, in fact, be creative. The spark is there.

OLD AND NEW

Recently I’ve noticed that I have rediscovered many of the old ways, as taught to me by my family. I have combined those teachings

Don't Let the Fear Overtake the Joy

with the new ways I have created for myself during the course of my life. Together they complement each other and create the full me.

“Don't let the fear overtake the joy.”

—Joe Maddon, Manager of the Chicago Cubs