

# **The Creative Self**

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Ars Omnia Press

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*This book is dedicated to Don Hazlitt and Damian Hey, who, as living embodiments of the creative spirit in action, have inspired countless students throughout the years to realize their own creative potentials. This book would not have been possible without their inspiration.*



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# INTRODUCTION

If you are like most people, you probably never gave much thought to your own creative potential. Life for the vast majority of human beings living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is so filled with conflicting obligations, endless commitments, social expectations, frenzied activity, and financial pressures that the idea of spending even a few moments each day tapping into your own creative energy probably seems like a fairly frivolous proposition. After all, with the myriad of pressing demands that are placed upon us each and every day, who the hell has the time to spend engaged in creative activities that don't seem to serve any practical purpose?

Besides, you may be thinking, all this talk about creativity may be fine and dandy for those relatively few individuals who work in artistic fields—writers, painters, filmmakers, and graphic designers perhaps—but it doesn't seem all that relevant to ordinary people trying to live out their everyday lives.

Think again. The ability to engage in creative self-expression, along with our ability to engage in higher order reasoning, is what separates human beings from all other animals. Most of the other things that we do in life—eat, procreate, sleep, make sense of our surroundings—can be done, to a greater or lesser extent by any other animal. But only a human being can philosophize about the nature of reality, and only a human being is able to express him or herself creatively. Chimpanzees may be able to use simple instruments, establish communities, and communicate with one another, but no chimp has ever painted a Sistine Chapel or built a gothic cathedral.

The point I'm trying to make here is that in some ways you are really not living a fully human life if all you do is eat, work, sleep, party, and watch football on T.V. If that is the full extent of your daily activities, you might as well be a baboon. I would argue that to be a fully flourishing

human being it is necessary to engage in those pursuits that are uniquely human. And, as I have already indicated, creative self-expression is one of the most significant of these.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it will also be more important than ever to have people who are able to think creatively about many of the seemingly overwhelming problems facing our planet. The simple paradigms of the past will not enable us to tackle huge problems like global warming, the unequal distribution of planetary resources, and the ever-present threat of terrorism. We need to have people around who are capable of thinking “outside the box” in new and bold ways if our species is going to survive beyond this century.

### **“But I’m Not The Creative Type!”**

You might also be thinking that, even if it would be wonderful to become more creative in your daily life, you are not the creative type. Perhaps you’ve never picked up a paintbrush before or have never even given a passing thought to trying to write a poem or a play. Maybe you’ve spent much of your life working in fields that don’t require any kind of creative input at all, so you question whether you have it in you to be a creative type.

The aim of this little book is to show you that, not only do you have the potential to become more creative in your everyday life, but that the true source of your own creative potential lies closer than you can possibly imagine. It lies

deep within the very marrow of your being  
in the nooks and crannies that comprise  
the essence of who you are as a human being...  
in the lines that cross your craggy face,  
in ordinary, silly, everyday relationships with others  
in the volatile, erratic emotions that well up inside  
each of us  
in those rare moments of sublime perfection  
accessible to all of us  
but normally never fully realized.

To put it simply, you are your own magnificent work of art...better than anything that Michelangelo or Picasso could produce. The problem is that you just don’t realize it.

And that’s a terribly sad thing. Imagine, going through life with all that creative potential locked up inside of you, but never having the opportunity or the inclination to give it voice. It’s rather like having the

ability to soar through the air like a majestic eagle, but choosing instead to bury yourself underground like a frightened mole. Like all human beings, you have the latent potential to soar to dazzling heights of self-realization. All you need to do is have the courage to take the first bold leap.

That's where this book comes in. There have been many works written in recent years on creativity and creative theory, but this book is a bit different insofar as it places the emphasis on the process of self-discovery as a catalyst for creative exploration and discovery. You see, I have this wacky, unshakable belief that you—that's right, you!—are actually quite fascinating. Your life is filled with the stuff of novels, poems, paintings, and plays. In every silly, stupid, depressing, exhilarating event of your life, in every single thought that runs through the chatterbox of your chaotic mind, there is an amazing epic in the making.

What I would like to do is to help you start paying attention to your own life through a bit of much needed self-reflection, and to use whatever comes out of this experience as fodder for creative inspiration and activity. I guarantee that what you produce as a result of this process of self-discovery will be incredible because it is a reflection of who you are, and you, my dear friend, are utterly and completely incredible (whether you believe it or not).

This doesn't mean that I am promising that by the end of this book you will be writing poetry like Shakespeare or starting to paint like Rembrandt (the world probably doesn't need another Shakespeare or Rembrandt anyway). What I do promise is that, if you accept the basic premise that you have the potential for creative self-expression, you will create works of art that uniquely express who you are as a human being, and, in the process of doing so, you will discover much more about yourself than you ever could have otherwise.

And the best thing about what we are going to attempt to achieve as a result of our exercises is that there is no right or wrong, better or worse, way to proceed. So you can't ever screw up anytime you attempt to express yourself in writing, because simply by taking this first step you have already proceeded in traveling down the winding road of self-discovery. And that is really what this book is all about.

## **The Creative Self Program**

The 15 week Creative Self Program begins with something that you are very, very familiar with—namely YOU. The goal of this program is to compel you to start looking at what is happening around you—and even more importantly inside you—as a jumping off point for creative self-discovery. Theoretically, there is nothing and no one that you know better than yourself, and there is nothing that is more intrinsically fascinating to

you than your own life experiences.

If this sounds like a dubious proposition, just take a few moments to step back and observe the thoughts flowing through your own mind right now. If you watch the patter of your own thoughts for any period of time, it is probably true that—unless you have already attained enlightenment like the Buddha or Christ—the thoughts that you will observe are almost exclusively related to your own life experience (your own shit, in other words). Even the thoughts you may have about other people are probably inextricably linked to how you feel about these people, how they have treated you, or what they may be thinking about you.

For better or worse, most human beings are ego-driven creatures, who typically interpret reality in terms of their own needs, wants, desires, fears, and expectations. It is not within the scope of our discussion in this work to assess whether the self-absorption of most human beings is a good or bad thing or whether there is any realistic way to transcend our own auto-fixated approach to life (There are plenty of self-help books that address those issues). From the perspective of this program, human self-absorption is actually an interesting object of examination, a tool for deep self-discovery, and most importantly a potentially viable source of creative inspiration. In other words, we will use what religion, ethics, and pop psychology have always interpreted as a negative—human egocentrism—and see how it can be used for something positive, constructive, and uplifting.

### Tools of the Trade

In the past the tools of creative expression were fairly simple and relatively inexpensive: a bit of canvas, some brushes and paints, a few pieces of paper, and some writing implements. These are still perfectly fine tools to use in order to begin the process of creative self-exploration. In the technological age in which we live, however, there are other tools that we can use to develop creative potential, and I would encourage you to explore as many of these as possible. :

You definitely want to have a pen (or pencil if you prefer) and paper available to jot down your ideas and creative inspirations. Some people keep scraps of paper all around their home and office so that when inspiration strikes them they can jot down ideas, develop future projects, or just doodle. Keeping a creativity notebook is even better, because it enables you to keep a continuous log of observations, ideas, fragments of new poems, and possible future projects. A small notebook that can easily fit into your pocket or purse is ideal because you can carry it with you on the go and write in it as needed.

Other people prefer to bypass the pen and paper experience and do

their writing on the computer, either using a word processing program like Microsoft Word or blogging programs like Blogger (blogger.com) or Wordpress (wordpress.com). Writing creative pieces directly onto the computer certainly has its advantages: it's easy to revise what you've written and you don't have to worry about being able to read your own scrawl later on. Blogging programs go one step further, enabling you to share what you've written with the entire blogosphere and get feedback from folks who are interested in the creative process.

The process of creative self-expression, of course, doesn't have to focus solely on writing. Though that's the specific focus of this particular program, you should always feel free to follow your inspirations wherever they lead. That might mean leaving the pen and paper (or keyboard) for a while and working with a digital camera, a sketchpad, paint and canvas, video camera, or just about any other creative medium that you care to try. If you've ever been to a museum of contemporary art, you are undoubtedly aware that just about any material can be used in the creative act.

## **The Most Important Tool of All**

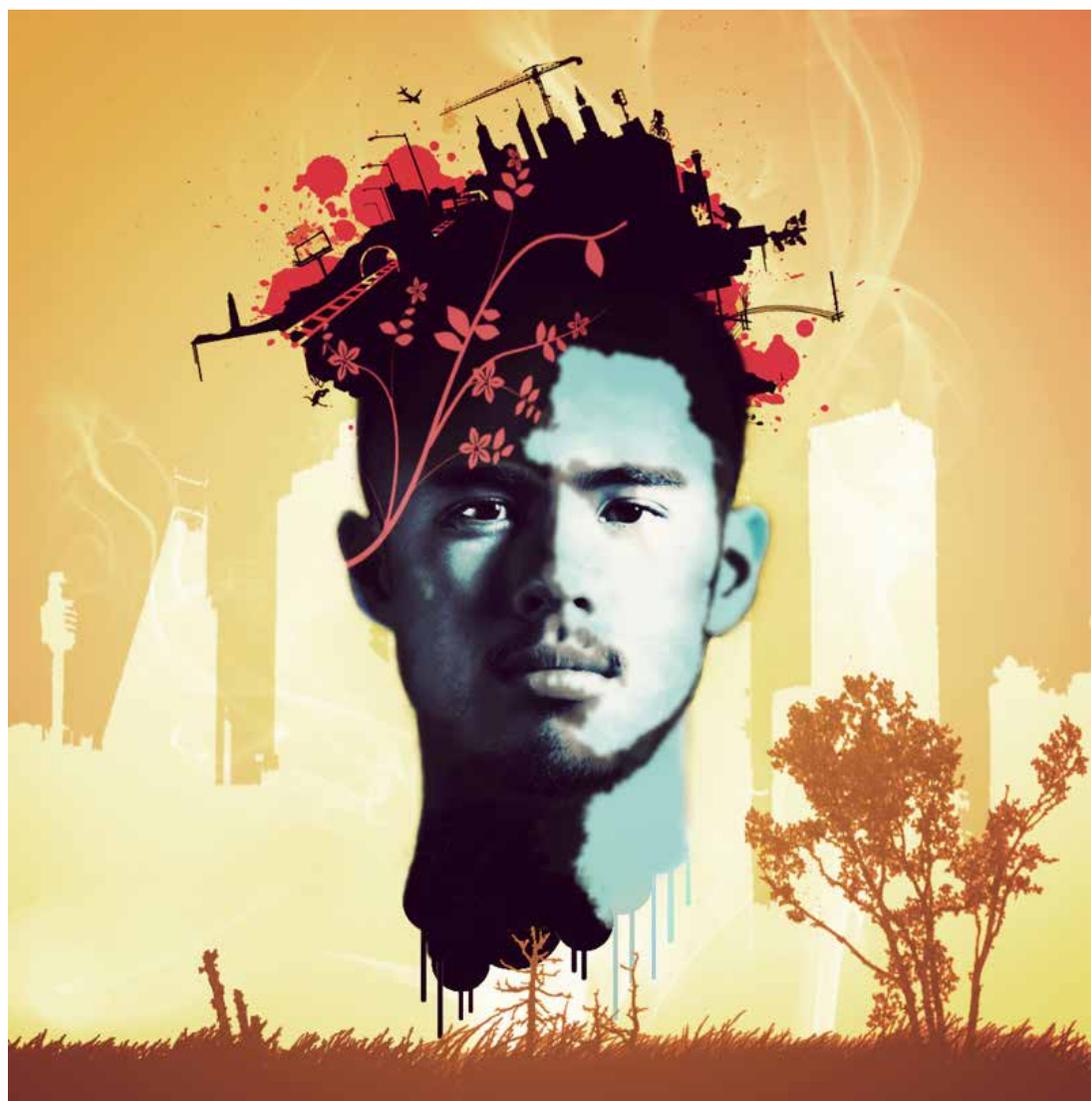
Of course, the most important tool that you will need in order to fully explore your own creative potential is a primal sense of wanton wackiness. This is nothing more than the willingness to stretch yourself artistically beyond your own comfort zone, to risk the disapproval of sterile, conformist society by being determined to create something vibrant, captivating, and potentially unsettling, and to go where your own vital creative spirit leads you, regardless of the risks. If you have this sort of radical openness to exploration and experimentation, you don't need many other creative tools, and you will almost certainly create something fascinating in the process.

It also helps if you are willing to view the entire creative process as a kind of play. When you were a child, I'm sure that you looked forward to playtime. You didn't have to be too serious when you were playing and you didn't have to accomplish anything monumental. You played just for the fun of it. The creative process should be viewed in a similar way. You create in order to have a good time. If you're not enjoying yourself, you are definitely doing something wrong. So next time you start thinking about whether what you are producing is "good enough," try to revert back to the five-year-old you once were, stop criticizing yourself so damn much, relax, and start playing.

Good luck and good creating!



# **Creative Concepts**



# 1

## What Is Creativity Anyway?

Since this is a book about the creative self (whatever that is) it seems to make sense before we start our amazing voyage of self-exploration, to get a handle on what we mean by the words “creative” and “creativity.” After all, we throw these words around all the time in everyday life, but it often seems as though we really don’t have a very clear conception about what we mean when we use these terms. Americans have this crazy tendency to refer to so many things as “creative”—soap operas, politicians, recipes, mechanics, electronic devices—that the word has almost lost any real meaning in our culture.

If you go to the dictionary and look up the word creativity, you will find an incredible variety of definitions. Even those who are supposed to be experts in the field of Creative Studies seem to have widely divergent ideas about what the term means. Just look at a handful of the many ways that creativity has been defined in recent years, and you will immediately see just what an elusive concept the term appears to be:

- “the ability to look at the same thing as everyone else but see something different.” (Chic Thompson)
- “Definition of the creative act—the combination of previously unrelated structures in such a way that you get more out of the emergent whole than you have put in.” (Arthur Koestler)
- “the process of bringing something new into being...creativity

requires passion and commitment. Out of the creative act is born symbols and myths. It brings to our awareness what was previously hidden and points to new life. The experience is one of heightened consciousness and ecstasy.” (Rollo May)

- “creativity consists largely of rearranging what we know in order to find out what we do not know...Hence, to think creatively we must be able to look afresh at what we normally take for granted.” (George Kneller)
- “the tendency to express and activate all the capacities of the organism to the extent that such activities enhance the organism or the self.” (Carl Rogers)
- “One man may be discovering a way to relieve pain, whereas another is devising a new and more subtle form of torture for political prisoners. Both these actions seem to be creative, even though their social value is very different.” (Eric Fromm)
- “Though my fantasies may be extremely novel, they cannot usefully be described as creative unless they eventuate in some useful product—unless they are symbolized in words, or written in a poem, or translated into a work of art, or fashioned into an invention.” (Eric Fromm)

Examine these definitions closely enough and certain key characteristics of what we refer to as “creativity” seem to stand out. You may want to jot some of these common characteristics down to see if you can make some sense of these divergent ideas.

## Exploring the Concept

As you can see, there is no universal definition of creativity that everyone can agree with. However, novelty, interplay, and utility seem to be somewhat essential to any truly creative act. Typically we describe someone as being creative if they devise something new (novelty) out of the combination of previously existing but unrelated elements (interplay), and in doing so produce something—an idea, a product, or a work of art—that others can use or enjoy (utility).

*Novelty.* The element of novelty in particular seems to be central to the idea of creativity. According to George Kneller, novelty “springs largely from the rearrangement of existing knowledge—a rearrangement that is itself an addition to knowledge. Such rearrangement reveals an unsuspected kinship between facts long known but wrongly believed to be strangers to one another.” Kellner goes on to say that when I express an idea or form that is new to *me*—even if it is obvious to others—a

certain amount of creativity may in fact be at work. But the highest level of creativity is one that “shatters the mold of custom and extends the possibility of thought and perception.” This sort of creative enterprise can expand the boundaries of art and science for all human beings. (4)

We witness such novelty every time a poet or writer combines words or images in new ways using metaphors. Take the following selection from Beat writer Allen Ginsberg’s poem “America”:

America I’ve given you all and now I’m nothing.  
 America two dollars and twentyseven cents January 17, 1965.  
 I can’t stand my own mind.  
 America when will we end the human war?  
 Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb.  
 I don’t feel good don’t bother me.  
 I won’t write my poem till I’m in my right mind.  
 America when will you be angelic?  
 When will you take off your clothes?  
 When will you look at yourself through the grave?  
 When will you be worthy of your million Trotskyites?  
 America why are your libraries full of tears?  
 America when will you send your eggs to India?  
 I’m sick of your insane demands.  
 When can I go into the supermarket and buy what I need with my good looks?

In this poem Ginsberg is essentially writing a plea to the citizens of the United States to live up to the ideals upon which the country was founded. What makes his writing interesting, however, is the unexpected juxtaposition of certain ideas which at first glance seem to have nothing at all to do with the point of the poem—the poet’s sick state, his love of nudity, the joke about the supermarket (Ginsberg would definitely not have been able to buy anything with his “good looks”). The poem works precisely because of these sorts of jarring, original elements.

While novelty is essential to the creative act, it comes with a price. Quite often the truly original thinker or artist is met with skepticism or hostility by his contemporaries. Because they often push the boundaries of what is considered acceptable by less innovative members of their societies, creative individuals are often mocked, criticized, persecuted, or ignored during their lifetimes. As Kneller reminds us, Copernicus and Galileo were denounced as blasphemers and Stravinsky’s “Right of Spring” nearly caused a riot. The poetry of Allen Ginsberg provoked a trial because it was considered obscene in the 1950s. Backlash is always

the price that true innovators must pay for their art.

*Interplay.* Of course, there is nothing really totally new under the sun. Take the plots of any plays or novels or the subjects of any photograph or painting and you will probably find that it has all been done before. In some sense, the ability to create something truly novel—something out of nothing—is possible only for God. We puny human beings have to make do with relative novelty, which essentially involves the imaginative interplay of already existing elements. Although the pursuit of novelty in the truest sense of the world is probably a futile endeavor, this does not mean that there are not greater or lesser amounts of originality involved in human ideas and actions. We should, therefore, view creative activity on a spectrum in which radical innovation would be at the high end of the creative spectrum and, at the lower end, mere imitation or reproduction.

*Utility.* Finally, novelty and interplay alone do not make an act intrinsically creative. Appropriateness, relevance, and utility are also essential. The creative act, says Kneller, is always a response to a given situation; it must therefore “solve, or in some way clarify, the situation that has caused it to arise” (6). If our creative endeavors fail to serve some real need, satisfy an authentic interest, or solve some genuine problem, they will not resonate with anybody. Ginsberg’s poetry, for example, touched his readers in the late 50s and early 60s because many of them were feeling suffocated by the sterile conformism of American society at the time. Ginsberg’s decidedly non-conformist sensibilities as a writer spoke to the needs of young men and women who were tired of stale Eisenhower era sensibilities and who were looking for new ways to express the fears and anxieties that they had living in the post-war, nuclear age.

## Can Creativity Be Learned?

Since this is a book about developing one’s creative potential, it would seem obvious that we believe that every human being has the potential to become creative to one degree or another. But is this really such an obvious proposition? As the philosopher Richard Taylor has observed, the lives of so many people—perhaps even a majority of our fellow inhabitants on this planet—are so uninspired that it is extremely unlikely that they will create anything of worth in their lives. Think about the guy who works at some menial job during the day and who is more than content to spend his evenings swilling cheap beer and watching football. He may never even consider creating anything useful or interesting, and when he dies, Taylor argues, he will leave nothing behind worth remembering.

And this poor uninspired fellow is not alone. The world is filled with party queens and frat boys of all ages; all around us are men and women

who live dull, insipid, and completely cosmetic, superficial lives. How many people can you think of right now who have created something novel, useful or interesting? Probably not very many, I would suspect.

Agreeing with Taylor, George Kneller argues that it is an illusion to think that everyone has the potential to become creative. Certain individuals, he maintains, possess a greater predisposition for creativity than others: "There seems to be no reason to believe...that nature is any more democratic in distributing creativity than she is in endowing intelligence. We accept a wide range of intelligence; why not of creativity?" Although he recommends that educators attempt to cultivate whatever latent creativity exists in children, and allow children the opportunity to attempt to express their creative gifts, the end results, he pragmatically warns, will remain unequal.

Although Taylor and Kneller may be correct when they maintain that most people will never be very creative in their lives, this does not mean that they lack the latent potential to be creative to one degree or another. As Chic Thompson so optimistically puts it:

Creativity is not the exclusive domain of a few fortunate souls. Every person is creative, because creativity is one of the traits that makes us human. To be creative is to be able to perceive and recognize the world around us, to understand what we need or wish to do in response to it, and to set about changing it. To be creative is to find a way, a thought, an expression, a human manifestation no one has found and to make newly discovered possibilities reality (15).

To be creative is nothing more than to be fully human, totally alive. It means expressing your latent potential for self-discovery and self-revelation. And we are convinced that this is something that just about any serious person can achieve given the right conditions (proper motivation and a supportive, nurturing environment) and sufficient opportunities.

Although we argue that, like any other skill, creativity can be developed, this certainly does not mean that everyone will automatically become a creative genius in every field. In most cases, there may be a particular domain of creative expression that is more highly suited for some than others. I have seen students, for example, who wrote fairly feeble poetry, but whose visual sensibilities enabled them to shine in photography or art. The trick is to find that particular creative outlet that meshes well with the latent potential of each individual. And this means that people have to be exposed as early as possible to as many different creative outlets as possible in order to allow them the luxury of finding an area in which they

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can shine.

Furthermore, even in those cases where a person finds some specific area of creative expression in which he can excel, this does not automatically mean that he will necessarily be able to rise to the highest levels of excellence in that area. The simple truth is that creative genius has always been, and will always continue to be, extremely rare. Very few individuals, no matter how great their potentials or how strenuous their efforts, will ever be able to paint like Monet or write like James Joyce. They can, however, develop a significant amount of talent in a particular area of creative expression. And that in itself is quite an accomplishment.

This distinction between genius and talent has been summarized by Nathaniel Hirsh in his work *Genius and Creative Intelligence*. As Hirsh puts it:

Geniuses themselves...know that they are not of the same breed as talented persons and are cognizant of the greater differences in relation to the talented than to any other group, including the peasant and the prince, the insane and the imbecile. By inherent nature they are antagonistic: the genius creates; the man of talent improves; the genius intuits, the man of talent analyzes and explores; the genius aspires, his life goal is creativity; the talented are animated by ambition and their life goal is power; the genius is ever a stranger in a strange land, a momentary sojourner in a strange interlude; the talented are those for whom the earth is paradise and social adjustment a natural and frictionless vocation. But the genius also has talent, and the development of his talent enables him to objectify his creativity and render it permanent. Genius with but little talent is like a great intellect with poor linguistic abilities; talent without genius is like a bright tongue attached to a feeble head. (cited in Arieti, 340-341).

In this program, I have absolutely no expectations that you will excel at everything you attempt or that, even in those areas where you do excel, you will rise to the level of genius. But I do anticipate that by the end of the 15 weeks of this program, you will be able to recognize those creative talents that lie within yourself and to develop them as fully as possible.

### **Your Creative Potential**

Arguing that an individual's creative potential can be increased in no way means that everyone has exactly the same creative potential. Psychologists have determined that certain character traits are more closely associated

with creative individuals than others (see Rogers, Kneller, Dacey). Those who possess traits such as openness to experience, tolerance for ambiguity, non-conformity, risk-taking, ability to focus, and some degree of basic intelligence seem to have an easier time maximizing their potentials for creativity than those who are lacking these traits.

If you want a sense of what your own creative potential might be, feel free to complete the survey on the following pages. A caveat, however, before you begin. There really is no absolute consensus on which traits are essential to creativity. Different theorists in the field of creative studies will list different traits they think are essential and the list is always evolving with new research. It should also be pointed out that, even if the traits listed earlier are in fact an accurate reflection of creative potential, there have been plenty of extremely creative individuals throughout history who completely lacked one or more of these traits (Most traditional icon painters, for example, could hardly be called non-conformist, yet within the confines of their art, some were able to produce truly outstanding creative works). The survey should be used, therefore, not to put you into some kind of creative potential box, but as a tool for reflection on your own personality and the traits you possess that might help or hinder you on your quest to become more creative.

# For Reflection

## Creative Potential Survey

*Instructions: Fill out this chart as honestly as possible. When you are finished, use the grading criteria on the next page to assess your own creative potential.*

	Always	Frequently	Sometimes	Never
I display a great deal of curiosity about many things.				
I am willing to take risks in life, even when doing so might cause me problems later on.				
I freely express my opinions about a wide variety of topics.				
If I had to choose between being an explorer or a physician, I would rather be an explorer.				
When I encounter a problem or difficulty, I don't stop until I find a solution.				
I spend time fantasizing, daydreaming, or imagining.				
I find humor in situations that are not always humorous to others; my sense of humor can appear bizarre or strange.				
I dislike having authority figures try to tell me what to do.				
I am not afraid of contradiction and have been known to contradict myself or my own opinions on a subject.				
I constantly ask questions about anything and everything.				
I am emotionally moved or inspired by beautiful things.				
I am willing to accept failure as the price of trying to achieve something worthwhile.				
When I am working on something that interests me, I become intensely focused and not easily distracted.				
I have a high tolerance for ambiguity; I don't view life in "black and white" terms.				
I have developed new ways for doing things.				
I get a kick out of breaking the rules and doing things that I'm not supposed to.				

I prefer highly unstructured environments or work situations to those that are highly structured.				
I enjoy spending time by myself.				
I am not afraid of making mistakes when trying something new.				
I have the ability to stick with hard problems over extended periods of time.				
My mind is filled with unconventional, weird, or provocative ideas.				
I have a great deal of difficulty keeping my impulses under control.				
Given a choice between becoming economically successful or following my own dreams, I would choose the latter				
I have been known to get lost in my own thoughts and ideas.				
I rarely see things in "black and white."				

**Grading the Survey**

For each "always" answer give yourself 4 points, 3 points for "usually," 1 point for "sometimes," and 0 points for "never."

- 81-100: You definitely have the potential to become a creative person.
- 61-80: You have budding creative tendencies, but need to work on nurturing them.
- 51-60: You are in danger of stifling your creative potential by conforming far too much to the sterile dictates of the larger society. Begin to trust your own instincts a bit more and start spending time nurturing your creative side.
- < 51: You would make a wonderful banker or accountant (Just kidding!). Take some more risks in life, broaden your horizons, do something creative to tap into the creative potential that all humans possess.

# Express Yourself

The “Express Yourself” exercises in this book provide you with the opportunity to write about the specific themes being discussed in each chapter. Over a period of 15 weeks you will be developing a creative portrait of yourself that should capture the “real you.” For now, however, we want to start nice and easy with some simple exercises aimed at getting you used to writing about yourself.

*1.1. User Profile.* You’ve probably created user profiles before when using popular web-based programs like Facebook or Twitter. A user profile is typically brief—about a paragraph or two—and tries to paint a sketch of who you are as an individual. Write one for yourself that gets to the essence of who you think you are. Try to have some fun with this: you can describe yourself any way you want, using whatever language you want.

This is only a first attempt to get a handle on who you are as a human being. You’ll have plenty more opportunities to develop some of the ideas you express in your user profile later on in the program. For now, just try to have some fun with this.

*1.2. The Pivot Questionnaire.* If you’ve ever watched “Inside the Actor’s Studio,” you probably look forward to the point in the show in which the host, James Lipton, asks a series of personal questions derived from Bernard Pivot’s *Bouillion de Culture*. The reason that these questions are so interesting is that they get to the heart of who the person being interviewed actually is. Try answering these questions yourself, but make sure to explain the rationale behind your answers:

- What is your favorite word?
- What is your least favorite word?
- What turns you on creatively, spiritually, or emotionally?
- What turns you off?
- What is your favorite curse word?
- What sound or noise do you love?
- What sound or noise do you hate?
- What profession other than your own would you like to attempt?
- What profession would you not like to do?
- If heaven exists, what would you like to hear God say when you arrive at the Pearly Gates?

*1.3. I the Expert.* This is a great exercise to get you started on your writing,

because everyone is an expert at something. Just pick some activity that you know how to do well and simply explain in as clear a manner as possible how to do it. This doesn't have to be anything extremely interesting. You can describe how to make the perfect cup of coffee, how to tie your shoe laces, how to dress for success, how to have a perfect bowel movement, how to offend people at a social gathering, or anything else you think you're an expert at.

*1.4. Anytime Writing.* Anytime writing is just that: it's writing you can do any time during the course of the next 16 weeks. Here's how it works: as things surface in your life that are significant to you, explore them in as much detail as possible and then write about them. You don't have to worry about how profound or interesting your writing is, or what other people might think about what you've written. Just get it down on paper. Later on you will have ample time to rework what you've written.

*1.4.1. What's Going On?* Take an experience from the past week that was personally significant to you and write about it. Again, this doesn't have to be a ground-shaking or life-altering event—just an experience that makes some kind of impression upon you. Describe the event as vividly as possible.

*1.4.2. What's on Your Mind?* This is similar to the “What's Going On” writing, except that, rather than focusing on what you are doing, you focus on what you are thinking. What's been on your mind lately? What preoccupies your thoughts? Now write about it.

*1.4.3. What are You Feeling?* The best writing comes from the guts—from that place deep inside you where emotions spring forth. Perhaps you've been experiencing a strong emotional reaction to a specific event in your life. Take the time to feel this emotion intimately and then write about it as honestly as possible.

Remember, these anytime writing exercises can be returned to as often as you'd like throughout the 16 weeks of this program. Part of what you are going to be doing in this program is to try to become more attuned to significant experiences, thoughts, and feelings in your life, to reflect deeply upon them, and then to write about them in as much detail as possible. So, if things pop up in your daily life that make an impression upon you, don't hesitate to shift your attention to them.

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# 2

## Impediments To Creativity

It has been argued by Carl Rogers that the desire to create is part of man's innate need to actualize himself, to achieve his full potential in life. Rogers goes on to describe this tendency as "the directional trend which is evident in all organic and human life—the urge to expand, extend, develop, mature—the tendency to express and activate all the capacities of the organism, to the extent that such activation enhances the organism or the self." He also believes that, although this tendency may be buried or hidden in some individuals, it exists in everyone and needs only the proper conditions in order to be activated (72).

Indeed it does seem that human beings are naturally creative to one degree or another. In fact, some of the earliest artifacts of our primitive ancestors are cave paintings that serve no practical purpose. Although life in prehistoric times was a daily struggle for survival, it seems that human beings nonetheless felt compelled to express themselves creatively. Children also seem to have a natural desire to play, create, and imagine—until these healthy tendencies are stamped out of them by their parents and the educational establishment.

If it's true that human beings are naturally creative, then why do so few people engage in creative endeavors? And why aren't you exercising your natural creative potential right now? There may be several different causes at work, but there are three fallacious attitudes in particular that seem to prevent most people from undertaking creative projects.

## **“I Don’t Deserve to Be Creative”**

The most common response that I receive from students about why they don’t attempt creative activities is that they really do believe that that sort of thing is reserved exclusively for an elite who are privileged enough to be anointed as artists. They may want to attempt to write a novel or make a short film, but don’t believe they are creative enough to attempt such projects. Art, music, and creative writing, we are told, are the realm of great talents, and we are often taught to believe that it’s almost sacrilegious for us to even think of trodding on the same ground as Monet, Beethoven, or Tolstoy.

We may never actually hear anyone say something like, “Who are you to think that you can write a novel,” but we know that is what the so-called authorities think. If you don’t belong to the right creative club from an exceptionally early age, you might as well give up all thought of even trying anything creative.

I remember a story a student, Eddie, told me once that is probably fairly typical of what most people have to go through when they first attempt to be creative. He was watching TV in the living room and his parents were in the kitchen talking. He remembered hearing his mother say to his father, “This is a picture that Eddie painted today at school.” It was a painting he had spent considerable time and energy on and he was proud of it. His father—probably never assuming that he would overhear—replied matter-of-factly, “Well, he’ll certainly never make a living doing that.” Perhaps Eddie’s father was simply referring to how difficult it was at the time for artists to earn a decent living, but Eddie, of course, took this to be a slight on his abilities as a painter and never seriously picked up a brush again.

Rejection is common in every creative field. All great artists, photographers, writers, and film-makers at one point or another during their careers are inevitably told that they lack the talent necessary to succeed in their chosen fields. Vincent Van Gogh heard this refrain his entire life, and never really knew artistic success while he lived. Van Gogh, however, persevered in his art, despite all the rejection he received. How many budding artists and writers are there in the world, however, who completely give up the attempt to be creative because they think they lack the “stuff” necessary to succeed?

## **“Everyone Has to Be Productive All The Time”**

If you are an American, you were born and raised in an environment which has directly or indirectly conditioned you to believe that the only activities worth investing your time and energy in are those which will reap the most

financial reward for you. From your earliest days, you were probably taught to work hard in order to make a success of yourself, and by the time you became a young adult you were probably discouraged from engaging in “frivolous” activities (playing, doodling, goofing off, or just hanging out) that seemed to serve no practical function.

This fundamental American attitude which suggests that most of our waking hours should be spent working and being “productive” has become known as the Protestant Work Ethic, but basically it is the underlying creed of the American capitalist system. This system judges individuals not on how happy, creative, or free they are, but on how much money and stuff they have managed to amass in their lifetimes.

In a system like this, the most useless people are those who spend their time engaged in idle thoughts (philosophers) or who produce things that cannot easily be sold at a profit (artists). Naturally, those who spent too much time involved in creative endeavors like painting or creative writing are viewed either with suspicion, bewilderment, or even hostility by the more “practical” people around them.

If you think that what I have just said is a gross exaggeration, answer these three questions:

- When was the last time you spent several hours engaged in any sort of activity that could be described as creative? What was the attitude of the people around you?
- What would happen if you started doodling or writing poetry at home for an extended period of time? Would you be praised for exercising your creative potential?
- What would happen if you told your family members that you were planning to take up painting or acting just for fun and you would be spending about seven hours per week—which amounts to only one hour per day—working on your new pastime?

Most people who answer these questions honestly would probably have to admit that our society as a whole is not particularly receptive or encouraging to those who attempt to be more creative. If you come from a family or a community in which creative enterprises are supported, then consider yourself lucky. You are definitely in a privileged minority.

### **“Everything I Do Has to be Perfect”**

The final great curse that stands in the way of attempting anything creative is an attitude of perfectionism that often makes us not want to take on new projects unless we think that we can do them better than anyone else.

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The perfectionist in us is always telling us that unless we can do things flawlessly, we shouldn't do them at all.

Naturally, there is absolutely nothing wrong with trying to produce the best work you can or attempt to do something better than others have done it before. It's precisely that kind of attitude that makes for great artists, thinkers, and inventors. The problem with perfectionism is that it is often used as a shield to protect us from the criticism of others. If we don't produce anything because nothing will be perfect enough, we don't ever have to worry about people criticizing, challenging, or belittling us for what we do.

The fear of criticism becomes particularly acute when it relates to work done by artists or other creative people, because, as Edward Kurpis points out, the act of creating something

is usually a powerful representation of oneself. Artists and creators in all fields often seek a measure of personal fulfillment, recognition or admiration through their private efforts and expressions of art. Seeking that kind of acceptance from those efforts is fraught with potentially devastating consequences, particularly if the need for such reinforcement is meaningful to the artist (21).

Unlike some other activities, the act of creating is also uniquely personal. The artist, writer, film-maker, or photographer always puts a little piece of himself into everything that he creates—and sometimes a very big piece. When a creative work is criticized, it often seems like a personal rejection. If we create nothing, then our work won't be criticized and our fragile egos get to remain intact.

### **Overcoming the Impediments to Creativity**

So, if these attitudes are what prevent many people from trying to be more creative, what can be done—if anything—to remove these sorts of motivational impediments? From my own experience, I've noticed that students who tend to be the most fearless creators tend to adopt four key dispositions that enable them to keep creating, despite any lack of support or encouragement they might receive from those around them.

#### ***1. Nurturing a Sense of Creative Self-Entitlement***

While we might not think we have the right to be creative, in fact, as Dave Storer points out, creativity is the birthright of every human being. "We are all born," he writes, "with incredible creative abilities, and few

things in life make us happier than fully engaging those abilities. To let a belief that we haven't the proper "permission"—from either society, family and friends, or ourselves—stop us from developing and expressing our deepest, truest selves in the best creative way we know how would be a terrible loss" (12). The choice to create or not to, he reminds us, is ours and ours alone. No one can or should be able to deprive us of this most basic right to express ourselves.

If you start to doubt yourself, just repeat the following mantra about ten, fifty, or one hundred times. Keep repeating it until you actually become convinced that what you are repeating to yourself is the gospel truth:

*I have the right to be creative!*

*I have the ability to be creative!*

*And, damn it, I will be creative no matter what anyone else says!*

## **2. *Jumping Right In***

Once you convince yourself that you have the right to express yourself creatively, the next step is to jump right in and try working in a medium that has always interested you. The choice of the particular creative venue to try will vary from person to person, but there is certainly at least one area that you can explore. If you enjoy writing, try poetry, drama, creative fiction, or screenplay writing. If you are more visually oriented, you might attempt photography, videography, or painting. The choice is totally up to you.

Then, just pick up the brush, or the pen, or the camera and start playing. You don't have to accomplish anything or even produce anything of worth. Just enjoy yourself.

Some people may prefer to take a more intellectual approach and investigate the works of great artists in books, museums or on the web. That's perfectly fine too. Just don't spend all your time reading, and don't forget that the point here is to actually create something. Above all else, don't think that anything you produce will have to reach the level of excellence achieved by the creative masters that you are investigating. Your job is to get inspired and start creating. That's it.

## **3. *Embracing Imperfectionism***

The overemphasis on perfectionism, as we have seen, can prove an impediment to undertaking any sort of creative endeavor. So what is the budding creator to do in order to overcome his or her fear of not being an

immediate creative master? The first step is to give yourself complete and total permission to fail at anything you attempt. All the great creative geniuses throughout history have failed at one point or another and some have failed repeatedly. What made them unique is that they didn't allow failure to stop them from creating.

Our own motto in the program is that to fail is to succeed, because if you are failing you are at least attempting to do something creative. On the other hand, if you play it safe all the time, you may never fail at what you attempt, but you will probably never produce anything really outstanding either.

One solution to get over your fear of failure and overcome your perfectionist tendencies is to actively cultivate a joy in doing things really, really badly—to embrace, in other words, the joy of imperfectionism. This may seem like a strange attitude to adopt, but it actually can be quite liberating. As Edward Kurpis advises:

Give yourself permission to do “bad work.” Not everything you create needs to be Mozart, Monet, or Mamet. In fact, set out to be the *anti-master*. Be messy on purpose; intend to write bad poetry; make a soufflé and then jump around your kitchen to make sure it falls. In other words, as an exercise, strive to be human. Most importantly, share these failures with everyone you know. Just don't tell them you failed on purpose. Have a few good private laughs as you put everyone in the uncomfortable position of examining the worst of your worst. Feel what it feels like to hear the less than perfect reactions you get—and not care about what's being said—since you directed this experiment. Do this until you develop the understanding that you can divorce yourself from the harsh reactions of others (Kurpis, 22-23).

In fact, some fairly significant artists have built their entire careers out of producing utter and complete shit and calling it art. John Lennon and his wife Yoko Ono produced no fewer than three albums that are considered virtually unlistenable, not only by music critics, but also by some of Lennon's most hardcore fans. And the filmmaker John Waters produced a string of ridiculously bad films, like *Pink Flamingos* and *Polyester* which went on to become cult classics.

#### 4. *Cultivating Wildness*

In his work, *Fearless Creating*, Eric Maisel argues that in order to be truly creative one must first learn to cultivate a sense of wildness. “This

wildness,” he says, “has many faces.” It is an amalgam of passion, vitality, rebelliousness, non-conformity, freedom from inhibitions” (12). In order to cultivate the kind of wildness that will fuel your creative tendencies, Maisel argues that you’ve got to get over your inhibitions, tameness, and conformism and tap into the adventurous, reckless, passionate side of your nature. A wild man or woman exists inside all of us, but quite often we are too timid or self-conscious to let him or her come out.

Although you can create art without cultivating any sense of wildness at all, the art that you do create will probably be so tepid and sterile that it won’t even inspire yourself, let alone anyone else. A life without wildness in general might suit an accountant or stockbroker, but if you are like most people, tapping into the inner wild man or woman that exists in all of us can only make life richer and more rewarding. I’m not advising you to go crazy, or to act in a way that would endanger yourself or others, but certainly you could conceive of spending an hour or two a week trying to break free of the sterile conformism that is expected by the larger society.

***Exercise***

*In Fearless Creating, Eric Maisel asks us to reflect on how wildness manifests itself in our own lives. When, where or how do you reveal your own wild face?*

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How easy was it for you to think about instances where you show your wild face in life? If it was difficult to think of any times at all when you bucked convention and did something purely spontaneous or unconventional, then you may want to reflect upon what's holding you back.

In this program, you are constantly going to be encouraged to become a bit of a rebel, to delight in your own creative genius, to pursue your passions wherever they might ultimately lead (within reason, of course!). If you do this, even to a limited degree, you might just find that your innate creative energies suddenly become unleashed. And you'll probably also find that your life in general becomes a heck of a lot more interesting as a result.

# Express Yourself

*Once again we are going to focus on simple writing exercises that get you comfortable expressing yourself in written form. This week, you can write about anything on your mind and express yourself using any form you desire (descriptive prose, poetry, story-telling, dialogue, etc.). Just write about what interests you and write for yourself. Leave your internal critic behind (you can always pick him up again later on!).*

*2.1. All Blocked Up.* Think about a time when you felt blocked. This blockage could be physical, intellectual, emotional, spiritual, interpersonal or creative. Perhaps it was a time when you felt blocked from becoming the kind of person you wanted to be. Describe what caused this feeling of blockage, how you felt about it, and how you eventually dealt with it.

*2.2. The Three Impediments.* Go back and reread the pages on the three impediments to creativity described in this chapter. Have you ever experienced any of these in your own life? If so, write about it.

*2.3. Permission to Be Very Bad.* As we have seen, part of what prevents people from undertaking creative endeavors is the fear of looking bad. To help you get over this, you now have permission to do some creative act very badly. For example, write a REALLY bad poem or story. Or do something really badly and write about how it feels. Have fun with this!

*2.4. Your Wild Face.* Go back to the exercise on the previous page and select one time when you let your wild face show in life. Describe what caused you to go wild, how you felt doing it, and what the consequences were of bucking the status quo.

*2.5. Automatic Writing (for those with serious writer's block).* If you find yourself completely incapable of writing about anything at all, try this exercise: Set timer for five minutes, take out a pen and some paper, and simply write about whatever comes into your mind, no matter how strange or incoherent it might seem. When five minutes is up, you have your piece of writing. We'll be returning to various forms of automatic writing throughout this program, because it has been used by many writers to free up the mind and to overcome self-consciousness in writing.

*2.6. Anytime Writing.* Remember, you can return to the "Anytime Writing" exercises in Chapter 1 as often as you like.