

Creative Living



by
joan campbell

10 KEYS TO
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Introduction

Create, *kre-at'*, v.t. to bring into being or form out of nothing: to bring into being by force of imagination: to make, produce, or form: to design: to invest with a new form, office or character: to institute: to be the first to act; **creative**, having power to create; **creator**, one who creates, a maker.

Every one of us creates something new every day. Our words become sentences and thoughts. Our pots simmer with stews of potatoes, tomatoes and aromatic herbs. Our meandering thoughts take us to far-flung, fantastical worlds. Yes, we are all creators, and if we weren't, we wouldn't be fully alive.

Still, we do not fully value the role of creativity in our lives. The intellect is more highly esteemed than intuition. Science is considered more important than music and art. Over time we've told ourselves that creativity is just the gift of the lucky—and slightly whacky—few.

But creative living is for everyone. It's a joyful approach to living in an authentic and unique way, of exploring and playing, of failing and trying again. It's living with a zest for life and an appreciation of the richness all around is—in nature, relationships, literature or whatever else interests you.

It's possible to live in this creative, alive way and this book will give you 10 simple keys to help you on the journey of unlocking your creativity.

It's a fun process—enjoy it!

“All the arts we practice are apprenticeship. The big art is our life.”

M.C. Richards



Know you are inherently creative

“All children are artists, and it is an indictment of our culture that so many of them lose their creativity, their unfettered imaginations, as they grow older. But they start off without self-consciousness as they paint their purple flowers, their anatomically impossible people, their thunderous, sulphurous skies.”

Madeleine L’Engle

Creativity is a part of every one of us. Studies show that at the age of five, 90% of the population measures ‘highly creative’ (Eversole).

Here’s a hint as to why this is true. In the Bible we are called “God’s poiema,” a word meaning ‘work of art’. What an astounding thought. *You and I are works of art!* Shaped by a master Craftsman, we are brushed by His creativity. It is an inherent part of who we are.

Yet, over time this creativity usually diminishes. By the age of seven, only 10% of the population measures 'highly creative' and in adulthood the figure has dropped to 2%. Our creativity is destroyed by criticism, our imaginations dulled by the demands of 'real life'. Self-consciousness sets in and makes us too worried about saying the wrong thing or playing the wrong note.

Still, like a painting coated by years of dust and pollution, those master brush-strokes lie just beneath the surface. All we need to do is uncover them.

Yo-Yo Ma suggests how we can do this: "One needs to constantly remind oneself to play with the abandon of the child who is just learning the cello. Because why is that kid playing? He is playing for pleasure. He is playing because making this sound, expressing this melody, makes him happy. This is still the only good reason to play."

The first step in creative living is to know and believe that you are inherently creative. Then, re-discover the joy of that five-year old who paints bold purple flowers, builds palaces of sand and stones, and dances to a tune only they can hear.



Silence your Inner Critic

“Negative beliefs are exactly that: beliefs, not facts. The world was never flat, although everyone believed it was. You are not dumb, crazy, egomaniacal, grandiose, or silly just because you falsely believe yourself to be.”

Julia Cameron

It may come as a surprise to some, but we all have voices in our head! There is one that is particularly damaging to our creativity. Let’s call it “The Inner Critic”.

This is the voice that may well be telling you that you are wasting your time even reading these words. That you don’t have a single creative bone in your body. That the last poem you wrote was horrible, so why try again. That you can’t even spell, so how are you planning to write a play. That your fingers are too stubby to play the piano.

This voice taps into our insecurities and magnifies them. It has gained strength over the years, mimicking the criticism of parents, teachers or anybody who might have told us we were wasting our time on creative pursuits.

The first step to switching off the Inner Critic is to become aware of it. Start eavesdropping on your own thoughts and you'll be surprised at just how outspoken and powerful this particular bully is! Start making a list of everything your Inner Critic is saying. Then, write down some replies that contradict it.

For instance, my Inner Critic was always telling me that I didn't have the perseverance to finish writing a book. So one of the replies I wrote was, "I have willpower and finish what I start." Read that list of replies out loud at least once a day and start believing the words!

Like most bullies, the Inner Critic may well increase its efforts when you start talking back to it. There's nothing it hates more than genuine self-worth. But persevere—as you start proving this tyrant wrong, you diminish its power over your life and it has no option but to fall silent.



Go outside and Play

“In our mediocrity and distraction, we forget that we are privileged to live in a wondrous universe. Dawn is the ultimate surprise; it awakens us to the immense ‘thereness’ of nature. The wonderful subtle colour of the universe arises to clothe everything.”

John O’Donohue

Go outside and play! If these sound like words from your childhood—good. They are words of wisdom. Nowhere are we closer to the heartbeat of our Creator, than out in nature. An array of colourful sights—changing skies, bright blossoms and golden grasses—play to a soundtrack of birdsong and trickling water. The same wind that tousles your hair, carries on it hints of a sweet spring perfume.

Inspiration is all around us outside. All we have to do is soak it in.

It's not just country-dwellers that have this privilege. Thoreau once said, "There is more of nature between my front door and front gate than I will ever be able to observe in a lifetime." Think of a child lifting rocks to stare with fascination at the squirming bugs beneath it. Let's keep our eyes open to the wonders under rocks and moss.

And while we are outside, why not build a few sandcastles or mud cakes, or jump barefoot through some puddles? Art needs plenty of playful inflow. A little bit of fun can make our work feel like play. According to Stephen Nachmanovitch, the most potent muse of all is our own inner child. We can't keep that inner child cooped up inside (literally *or* figuratively) all the time.

Rather, we need to make sure that we let them run free—and have fun—as often as we can.



Slow down and look around

“We are always doing something, talking, reading, listening to the radio, planning what next. The mind is kept naggingly busy on some easy, unimportant external thing all day.”

Brenda Ueland

Most of us live in a haze of busyness and ‘doing’. Our alarm clocks, phones and computers dictate our schedules and activities. We are too busy to pay attention to the richness of the world around—or within—us.

In order to live creatively, we need to learn to slow down and take in the small, but precious things happening around us. We need to rein in the thoughts that are constantly galloping ahead, and bring ourselves back into this precise moment. As Marie Beyon Ray says, “We have only this moment, sparkling like a star in our hand... and melting like a snowflake. Let us use it before it is too late.”

So, savour that deep aroma of your coffee, and the hot sweetness of it on your lips. Hear the children laughing in the room next door and the pigeon cooing outside your window. If you're anything like me, this will take some practice!

Here are two exercises to help you (Cohen):

- ❑ Firstly, set aside some regular time to 'watch the world go by'. This can happen anywhere—a coffee shop, park bench or the train station. Look, listen and notice whatever catches your attention. Then go home and write about (or draw) a **sight you saw**, a **sound you heard**, a **memory evoked** and a **discovery made**. This is a great way to start 'switching on' to what's happening around you right now.
- ❑ Secondly, pay close attention to a routine that you do on 'autopilot' like brushing your teeth or chopping an onion. Study the sounds, smells, thoughts, feelings, motion and environment as if it's the first time you've ever had the experience.

Living in this moment—the only one we actually have—is an important key to unlocking creativity.



Hang out with the right crowd

“I cannot give you the formula for success, but I can give you the formula for failure, which is: Try to please everybody.”

Herbert Bayard Swope

People can be a wonderful source of inspiration and encouragement, but they can also damage our efforts at creative living. Try to surround yourself with people who accept your beautiful uniqueness. These are the people who are loyal and protect you and give you space to be yourself.

Avoid people who are skeptical of your creative efforts, criticize you harshly or try to manipulate you in some way. Let's call them the 'Creative Leeches' of life. Sometimes—if we are in a close relationship with them—we can't avoid these people. However, become aware of their negative influence and try to minimize its effect on you.

Also, make an effort to connect with people who are living their own lives in a creative, unique and authentic way. Not just accomplished artists or musicians, but individuals who have a zest for living. Maybe it's the lady next door who is learning flamenco dancing at the age of 71, or the missionary couple who speak of far-flung places and the fascinating people they've met. Maybe it's the folk at the amateur drama club or the men's choir. These are the people who make you feel joyful and alive and inspire you to cook something new or write a poem or design a dress.

Finally, make time for yourself too. Some of us have a tendency to neglect ourselves, doing everything for others at the expense of our own needs. Start learning to say 'no' to people (especially the leeches!) and 'yes' to yourself.

Claudia Black reminds us, "Trust in yourself. Your perceptions are often far more accurate than you are willing to believe."

Start becoming someone you would like to hang out with!



Stray off the beaten track

“Don’t keep forever on the public road. Leave the beaten track occasionally and dive into the woods. You will be certain to find something that you’ve never seen before.”

Alexander Graham Bell

Our creativity is shackled by familiarity. Like a well-worn road, routine behavior strengthens the neural pathways in our brain. The advantage of this is that we become faster at doing the familiar activity, but in the process, creativity is traded for efficiency. That’s why it is so important to break away from the familiar places and routines, to expose ourselves to new cultures and different ways of doing things.

Talking Head's lead singer David Byrne, cycles to work and keeps his office window open. He describes the city as a kind of 'energy source'. For him, "the metropolis is like a sonic blender; every street a mix tape. Cities expand the imagination by exposing us to unexpected things, to funky Latin beats and jangly Nigerian bass lines and abstract works of art" (Cohen).

There are countless ways we can get off the beaten track. Like Byrne, we can cycle around the city (not particularly safe in my own city, Johannesburg). We can drive a detour to work, start a conversation with someone on the bus, take a trip to a place we've never been, buy a CD of Senegalese music. We can simply re-arrange our living room, go to an art exhibition we wouldn't normally go to, or order something different off the take-away menu (or better yet, try that new Thai restaurant).

Just have fun and 'shake things up' in your life!

Henry Miller put it well when he said, "Develop interest in life as you see it; in people, things, literature, music—the world is so rich, simply throbbing with rich treasures, beautiful souls and interesting people. Forget yourself."



Make a start (even if it's bad)

“Whatever you think you can do or believe you can do, begin it. Action has magic, grace, and power in it.”

Goethe

We spend a great deal of time thinking of all the things we would like to do, if the conditions were just right. Write a book. Act in a play. Take some black and white photos of the old, ramshackle cottage we pass by every time we drive into the country. What keeps us from doing these things? Maybe apathy or the belief that we just don't have time.

Yet, I think the biggest factor that keeps us from following our creative dreams, is fear. We fear that we don't know how to write a story or that we will make a fool of ourselves at the audition, or that the lighting in the photos might be all wrong (is that the Inner Critic I hear?). Basically, we fear looking like beginners.

There is such a sense of joy and liberation in taking even a small step towards fulfilling a creative longing. Write the opening paragraph of your book. Find out what time the audition is and diarise it. Charge your camera's battery and find the tripod. Make a start and just do it! As Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "Do the thing you fear, and the death of fear is certain."

And here's the thing—you *are* a beginner. Your first efforts might not be all that amazing. But it doesn't matter at all. You overcame your fear and leapt into the unknown. You showed your courage. And if you have to leap again (and again, and again) you now know that you can do it.

"Give yourself permission to be a beginner. By being willing to be a bad artist, you have a chance to *be* an artist, and perhaps over time, a very good one." (Julia Cameron)



Hone your skills

“If I don’t practice the piano for one day I know it. If I don’t practice it for two days my family knows it. If I don’t practice it for three days, my public knows it.”

Arthur Rubinstein

It’s fine to be a beginner, but if you want to develop in your creative pursuits, spend time honing your skills. The best way to do this is to practice—write, play your instrument, paint, sing, dance. Study the work of people you admire. Read up on the skills you need and then apply them to your own work. Keep learning—that’s what the best artists do.

On the day that the great painter, Renoir, died he was still painting. His daughter wrote, "An infection which had developed in his lungs kept him to his room. He asked for his paint box and brushes, and he painted the anemones which Nenette had gathered for him. For several hours he identified himself with these flowers, and forgot his pain. Then he motioned for someone to take his brush and said, 'I think I am beginning to understand something about it'."

Like Renoir, creative individuals are always experimenting: living on the edge of new fields, new discoveries and new knowledge. They never feel that they have arrived. They are always striving to improve in their creative field. They show up regularly to do the work required.

Of course, we can't all be—or even want to be—Rubinstein's or Renoir's. We don't need their level of discipline or practice. Yet, our enjoyment of creative pursuits will increase as we gain skills. If it starts feeling like a chore however, consider if it's really something you enjoy, and want to pursue. No amount of skill will compensate for a lack of passion. If your passion starts dying, re-assess your creative goals and dreams, and give yourself time and space to re-discover the fun in what you're doing.



Don't Compare yourself to others

“We are absolutely unique. The combination of attributes that constitutes us will never be duplicated. If this is true, and if it is true that we are created by God—an original by a master artist—it makes the exploration and development of that uniqueness an item of the highest priority.”

Alan Loy McGinnis

Nothing kills our creativity faster than comparing ourselves to others. Comparison shatters our self-confidence and passion—the very factors we need to live creatively.

There is a big difference between drawing inspiration from people we admire and the negative comparing that says, “I’ll never be as good as them.” Inspiration leads us to try harder whereas comparison often leads us to give up.

The root of this negative tendency is fallible thinking. We don't believe that we are truly unique and creative. In fact, we've probably been listening to the Inner Critic a little too long. Start telling yourself often, "I am a one-of-a-kind design. What I am going to do and create will be wonderfully unique."

As you begin believing these words, you will see how irrelevant it is to compare yourself to others.

Comparison can lead to jealousy, which is really a mask for fear. We fear that we don't have what it takes and are frustrated to see others succeed where we ourselves want to. Jealousy's big lie is that there is only room for one poet, one painter, one singer—or whatever your dream is. Don't believe the lie!

The Hasidic rabbi, Zuscha, was asked on his deathbed what he thought the kingdom of God would be like. He replied, "I don't know. But one thing I do know. When I get there I am not going to be asked, 'Why weren't you Moses? Why weren't you David?' I am only going to be asked, 'Why weren't you Zuscha? Why weren't you fully you?'"



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Celebrate!

“My goal has always been not to look forward to the next thing, but to relish and celebrate the successes I have at the moment. Whether it's landing a part in a student film or having a good day in acting class, I never discredit anything.”

Dianna Agron

The problem with living in a success-driven culture is that we do not celebrate enough. Writing one poem is not seen as something to rejoice in—we need to write an entire collection. Once we have the collection, we may still put off celebrating—until we have a publisher. Even that we might not consider worthy of a party—we delay it until we get at least one good review.

As a mother, I clearly remember my daughter's first tentative steps. How we cheered her on! We took photos and a video, and her face lit up with the realisation of how special the moment was, and how great her accomplishment.

That is how we should celebrate ourselves too. Bask in the joy of those first steps of creativity. That opening scene of your novel. Your three-line part in the local amateur production. The 21 'likes' on the You-tube video of you covering a Katie Melua song. Those moments are worthy of celebration. They show that you had the courage to leap into the unknown and try something new, beautiful and a little scary.

Don't let those moments pass by unnoticed. If possible, find somebody supportive to share it with you (or even e-mail me on joan@joancampbell.co.za to tell me about it!)

Don't just focus on yourself, though. Make sure that you celebrate the creativity of others too. Let's become a community who encourage and inspire each other, who celebrate the small and big victories of living a creative life.

Final words of wisdom

I love the words that an anonymous friar in a Nebraska monastery wrote, late in his life. I believe they summarise the art and joy of living your life in a unique, passionate and creative way.

*If I had my life to live over again,
I'd try to make more mistakes next time.*

*I would relax, I would limber up,
I would be sillier than I have been this trip.
I would take more trips. I would be crazier.
I would climb more mountains, swim more rivers,
and watch more sunsets.*

*I would do more walking and looking.
I would eat more ice-cream and less beans.
If I had to do it over again I would go places,
do things, and travel lighter.*

*If I had my life to live over I would start barefooted
earlier in the spring and stay that way later in the fall.
I would ride on more merry-go-rounds.
I'd pick more daisies.*

Thank you, Dear Reader, for sharing in these words with me.
Now go and live your own—completely unique—life, and make sure to enjoy the journey!

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Joan Campbell



Joan Campbell is a contributing devotional writer for The Upper Room and Scripture Union. She is the author of *Encounters: Life Changing Moments with Jesus*, *Journeys: On Ancient Paths of Faith* and *The Poison Tree Path Chronicles*. Joan lives in

Johannesburg and is the South African workshop facilitator for MAI, a training ministry for Christian writers and publishers.