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Discover Your Inner Creativity

By Joan McCain

UCF Forum columnist

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For three decades I earned a living in a creative profession. After college I worked for ad agencies and public relations firms writing promotional material—pithy one-liners, spiffy radio commercials, charming TV spots, moving corporate videos that appealed in Aristotle fashion to ethos, pathos and logos.

Today, I teach others how to prepare for this kind of career.

To my students and those I meet in social settings, this sounds glamorous. Rest assured it is not. Yes, it's fun to put words on paper and see them come to life. But the process is tough. It's hard work. It's a battle, most often with others who are analytical and uncomfortable with emotion-pushing narrative, yet have authority over your work seeing the light of day.

So frustratingly prominent was this conflict between artist and evaluator in my early career that I sought answers. I read and studied every book I could find on creativity. All of which helped me not only be more creative myself (perhaps because I had validation to trust my instincts), but also to convince those up the proverbial flagpole why the creative process needed to be trusted and respected.

Here are the top lessons I learned about creativity.

Artists are Everywhere

Is creativity a gift bestowed on a chosen few? No. Experience and intelligence are part of it, but the ability to be creative is about having random thought. And every person on the planet is capable of that. The difference is the van Goghs, the Michaelangelos, the Spielbergs paid attention to their random thoughts. They wrote them down and preserved them so they could pay attention to them later. (Steven Spielberg had the idea for the movie "ET" when he was 9 years old and took it with him to Hollywood.) Artists are comfortable taking an idea and turning it on its head. To be creative, you have to be willing to take that risk.

Quantity Leads to Quality

The only way to get one really good idea is to get lots of ideas. There are no shortcuts. Ad writers will draft 30, 50, 80 headlines to come up with one really great one. At the Savannah College of Art and Design in Georgia, first-year illustration students are given three hours to draw a single apple 100 different ways. The first 10 or 12 drawings are easy: the whole apple, the apple cut in half, upside down, on its side. Then there is that lull. Followed by the result of manipulating random thought, the 87th idea that comes two hours and 37 minutes into the process is so cool and different and genius that both creator and observer exhale in wonder, “Whoa.”

Bring Along Your Inner Child

When we were 3, 4 and 5 our imagination ruled. We could be anything and do anything because there were no consequences. Then we went to school and there were expectations and evaluations, and guidelines, and rules. What we learned was conformity. This may be good for society, but it kills creativity. In college I had a friend who was an education major doing her student teaching. She shared a story about her lesson on the moon. She asked the class, “Who knows what makes the tides go up and down?” Eager hands flew up, and she called on one exceptionally jubilant pupil. “I know,” he said. “All the people in Africa go into the ocean to wash their clothes, and that makes the tide go up. And when they walk out of the ocean that makes the tide go down.” What a brilliant answer. But creative may not be the same as accurate. To turn an idea on its head, you have to think like a child, forgetting the rules and the norms imprinted on us so your brain can wonder.

Find Your Happy Place

In studies of creative people, a characteristic stands out. They laugh. A lot. They have good senses of humor themselves. They also are positive thinkers, finding the good in all situations. To maintain these qualities, it is essential to surround yourself with stimuli that make you laugh, make you happy, and to be optimistic. Debbie Downer is not an artist. Don't be Debbie Downer if you want to find solutions to problems.

Here's to your next idea being a *big* idea.

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