



The Innate Creative

Local artists share their knowledge of creativity

By LISA GRAY YOUNGBLOOD

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NE OF THE MOST beautiful mysteries of the universe is creativity. What is it? Where does it come from? How does one find and harness it? I believe all humans are creative. In fact, I believe we were born to create. Perhaps creations are a gift to each other, to the larger world, to ourselves or to our maker. Whatever their purpose, however, I believe they arise from our most pure, most natural state.

Creativity comes in many forms. If you enjoy cooking and ever dabble on the out-

skirts of a recipe, if you have ever whittled raw wood into a new shape, planted a garden, found a unique solution to a pesky problem, or set a table with flowers you arranged yourself, you are a creative. Welcome to the club. It is a wondrous one.

Some among us, of course, are well into their creative journeys and have explored creativity in great depth. At Plateau Magazine, we have the pleasure of featuring such artists in every issue, and I decided to lean on a few to learn more. I asked each of them to reflect upon the nature and source of creativity as well as their

method of harnessing it. Their answers have inspired and surprised me, opening my mind to the expansiveness of creativity. As a fiction writer, every story I have ever written has come to me in the same way, which led me to believe, erroneously, that I had stumbled upon a universal path to creativity. I had not. I had only discovered my personal path, a realization that has magnified my curiosity about the mysteries of creativity.

Perhaps one of the paths below will inspire and encourage you on your own journey.

Mysticism, Then Muscle

RON RASH, Author

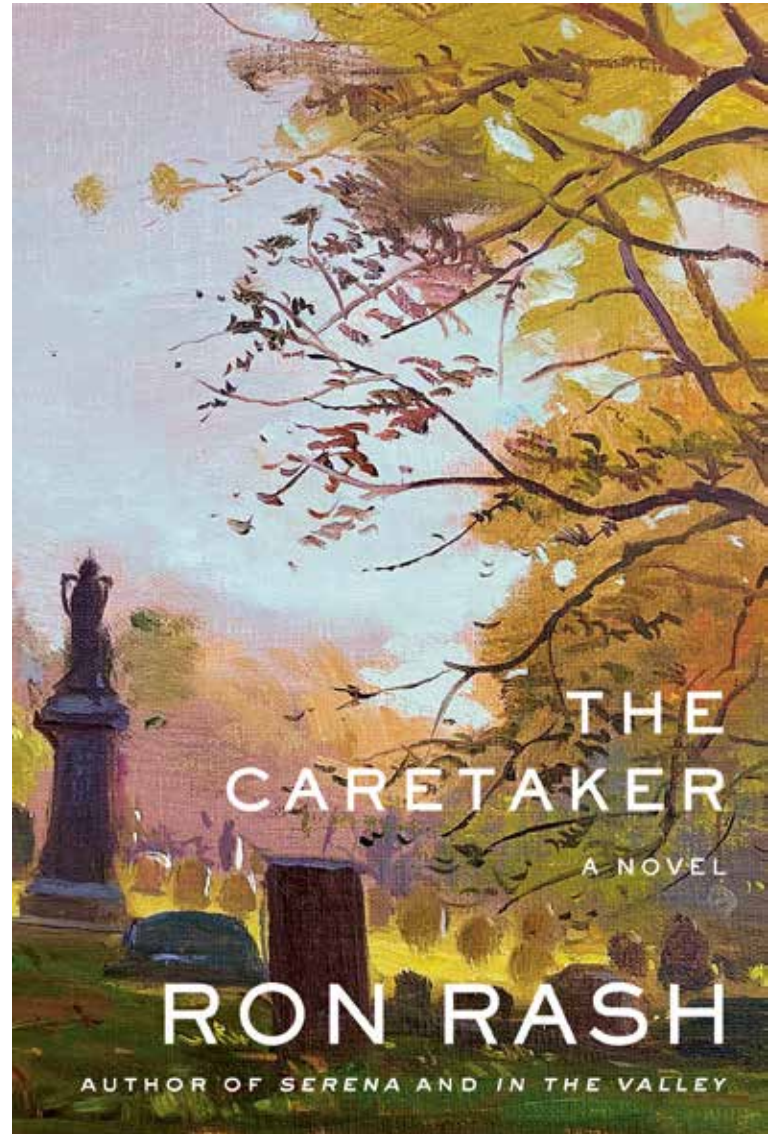
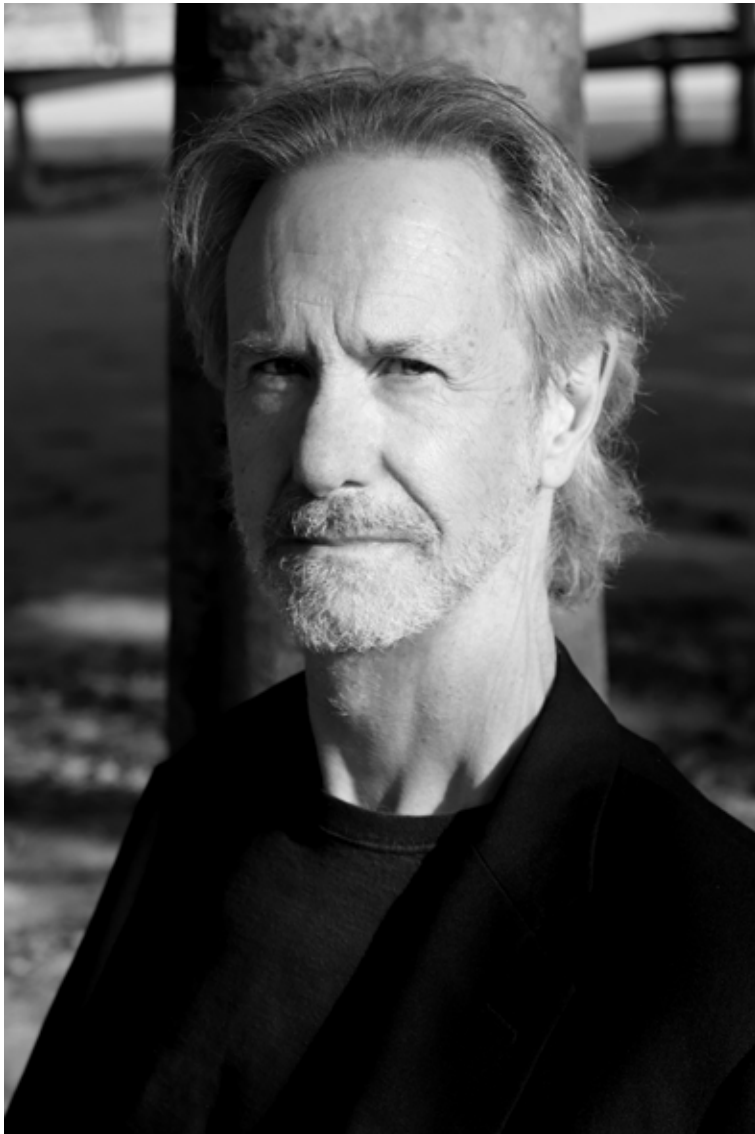
When writing fiction, the worst thing I can have is an idea, for the process becomes labored and controlled rather than organic. Instead, my novels and short stories begin with a single image. With my novel *Serena*, the image was of a woman on horseback. Her erect, confident carriage depicted someone very much in control. I also knew a man was watching her, with equal parts fear and love. In my short story, *The Ascent*, I had an image of a child in a snowy forest. He had come upon a plane wreck and despite the horrific scene, he was not terrified.

As to the source of the images, I have some Jungian notions, but ultimately, I

don't know the why or the how. I do know that it *feels* as though I have been glimpsed something that already exists. The story begins to emerge. At times the narrative seems to be telling itself, and I am frantically trying to get it written down before it disappears. When this occurs, I tend to be in my story's world more than my own, as my friends and kin attest. I hear my characters' voices. One afternoon while teaching after a morning of writing, I caught myself using one of my character's colloquialisms, "like as if," instead of "as if."

Working without ideas or outlines can be frustrating, and I sometimes wish I were like other writers I know who begin

with a sturdier sense of where a narrative is going. Almost every novel I've written comes to a seemingly dead end, often after a year of work. Michelangelo believed the completed statue was within the unheven block of marble. I make myself believe the image that triggered the novel will lead me the rest of the way. Somehow, it always seems to do so, and when the story is clear, I'm free to focus on the language—which syllables to stress in a sentence, more resonant verbs. I always do a number of drafts, but it is never drudgery. This is the part of writing I enjoy most, a reprieve after so much uncertainty and vexation.



An Unveiling

MARY PALMER DARGAN, Landscape Architect

As a landscape architect, I'm blessed with an intuitive, artistic gift for seeing the potential in undesigned or chaotic places, a gift honed by over 45 years of looking at properties. I use a technique of quiet reflection to get under the skin of my project.

Typically, I'm rushed for time while at a new site, and noisy chaos is everywhere. While on my walkabout, I look for a five-minute sit, quickly take a few deep breaths and focus on my third eye. Here, a fleeting

dreamlike state behind my eyes settles into the center of my brain. With my five senses tuned up, I drift into this piece of nature to find its spark of personality or coax its spirit of place into being.

If my pad of paper is handy, I'll take the mental image and draw it immediately in a childlike effort to capture the vision. Yes, I do use art elements, having been well-schooled in them, and as a result they are part of my design consciousness. For in-

stance, a mental desire line to move around and past a tree becomes a path but mimics the line of the creek beyond. A mountain in the distance is the color of slate blue and touches other mountains that are billowing grey green. I think in terms of "laying" these colors down on the field canvas by using harmoniously colored plant material. Getting into the zone is as individualized as the fingerprint of the place.

As to the source of this creativity, I think it comes from above and into the center of my mind. I rarely preconceive my designs.

For anyone interested, Mary Reynolds, an Irish landscape architect, has wonderful ways to connect with your place in her book, *The Garden Awakening: Designs to Nurture Our Land and Ourselves*.



Harnessing the Mind

FRANK VICKERY, Ceramicist

For me, creativity is the implementation of the imagination.

When I am working, my imagination takes hold; images form and shapes appear. Prototypes of the product are spinning in 3-D in my hands, and with the clay and skills I have learned and practiced, I am able to bring that form to life. Sometimes ideas come to me through clients. Most of the time though, it is my mind challenging my skill, pushing the limit of my ability

and understanding at that moment.

As I continue to work an idea or form, new challenges are presented, and then instinct takes over—familiarity with the process, the freedom of imagination, and creative problem-solving techniques. The process of working with clay is hard, repetitive, easily derailing, and constantly challenging. Not all ventures are successful, but every one offers a learning and growth opportunity, which is important for my creativity.



Honoring and Serving

DIANE McPHAIL, Author and Painter

As I was working on my Masters in painting, I happened upon Madeleine L'Engle's *Walking on Water: Reflections on Art and Faith*. Reading it changed my work and my life. In a nutshell, her premise is that the work is not "yours" but comes to you from somewhere else, asking you to give it birth. If you say yes, your job is to follow the work where it knows it needs to go.

This concept opened the threshold for me into both art and authorship. It has

led me along unexpected and surprising paths that both delight and astound me. Images appear in my paintings that I do not intend, but which carry great meaning and have led me into major series of work. Characters in novels have revealed to me tales about themselves I could never have imagined on my own.

The "somewhere else" source of all creativity seems to me to come both from within, perhaps the deep unconscious, as

well as somewhere without, perhaps anchored in our deep belonging to a larger whole than we can imagine. This wealth of creative possibility swirls endlessly around us, as vast as the Cosmos. We are embraced in it, but to harness it, we must acquire, often through years of discipline, the fine-tuned skills that honor and serve that creative mystery. Most importantly, we must open ourselves and trust its abundance.



Exploring Beauty in Fresh Ways

CARL TURNER, Painter

Creative flow is always happening. It has no beginning and no end. Everything you see and experience is a result of an unseen universal creative flow. Nothing is static. Nothing ever stands still, so in reality our entire life and everything in it is a creative act.

As an artist, specifically a painter, I choose to participate in that creative force in a very particular way. Using paint, I tune into that creative force in order to make something visible that was not previously visible.

What sparks the creative process for me as a painter? Often it is an idea that I want to express in a visual form. I try to stick to universal themes. Existential truths. I generally want the viewer's reaction to be something like, *ahhh, yes, that's how I feel*, or *yes, that's so true* or even, *wow, I've never thought about it like that before*, but something inside the viewer recognizes it, which evokes a sense of comfort. My intent is always to evoke a sense of beauty, hopefully in a way they've never quite seen it expressed before.

Recently, I finished a painting that was inspired by a visit to some friends who live near Brevard, NC. In their neighborhood there are many deer that very casually, very peacefully wander around the place, following their natural patterns, and no



one bothers them. They are curious and unafraid, and the whole neighborhood cherishes their presence. I grew up in a family of deer hunters, and my first exposure to deer was as prey I was supposed

to kill. I realized early on that I did not share that impulse. I wanted this painting to be an expression of my own feelings about the deer and to serve as an homage to their naturally serene nature.

Finding the Soul's Song

PENNY POLLOCK, Encaustic Artist



Creativity for me is a thirst, a longing and spiritual response to what I feel and see and wish to express to the planet, be it arranging flowers from my garden, feeding nectar to the hummingbirds and having the gift of their playful visits, cooking a dinner with fresh bounties from the garden and painting to share my expressions of the world around me.

Being imaginative in every facet of my being is what makes my soul sing.

The Highlands-Cashiers Plateau is my most treasured external source of creativity, how could it not be? I am enthralled with the treasures of the creatures who reside among us. Every day I have unexpected sightings of animals and bird life that are the source of inspiration for my work.

My studio is my sanctuary where I go to tackle the job of illustrating and illuminating the gifts that are present in our everyday life and the lessons we as humans can learn from them. I am spellbound by the natural world.

The Interplay of Art and Craftmanship

JOHANNES KLAPDOHR, Chef

Creativity is a gift. It is a form of liberation from all that is predictable and normal. It gives me the spark to transform ordinary things into the exciting and unexpected and to find unique solutions to challenges. In my mind, creativity is constantly in motion. It never stops. I never stop thinking and imagining.

As a Chef, I have the privilege of showing my personality on every plate because my approach to food is unique to me. The most wonderful reward is when people recognize the difference of flavor combinations, the artistry of presentation, the attention to detail, love and passion that go into my creations. It is a soft communication tool, unassuming and without prejudice. It is a celebration of individuality, diversity, originality and each other.

Creativity comes from being alive, from love and from passion. Just look at the diversity of cultures around the world. The different ways people live, love and celebrate food is an endless fountain of inspiration. Combine that with a true appre-

ciation of nature, with all its bounty and variety, and you have the most wonderful ingredients for creativity. It could be a conversation, a delivery of fresh products, a moment of failure or success, a nature walk or hike, a tragedy or joyful event, traveling, reading, watching, listening or anything that activates the senses. However, for me, the most creative moments come from a place of happiness, appreciation and solitude.

In Germany, where I am from, we have a different name for profession: *Beruf*. *Beruf* means calling. It is what you are supposed to do in life based on your inherent nature, talent, passion and loves. For me, it is all things food. But creativity alone and unchecked does not get the job done. A great Chef I once worked for said it best. "As a Chef you are neither an artist nor a craftsman. You are both!" If one overtakes the other, it creates an imbalance that inhibits success and sustainable creativity. Craft and art need to be in unity and must com-

plement each other. Creativity solely for the purpose of being creative has no purpose. It should be used with wisdom, a balance between the unlimited possibilities of imagination and restraint, logic and reason.



Curiosity and Fearlessness

KAT FORD, Freelance Artist, Designer and Author

Creativity is an inherent and involuntary function of human existence, manifesting in countless physical forms. The creative process is in artists' brushes and writers' pens, but also in parents' guidance and leaders' decisions. Creativity is the most valuable and least-valued commodity in the world. Wealth can employ portions of creativity, but creativity is limitless, can amass fortune, and build new worlds.

Creativity is a faceted prism, bending the abstract energy of experience and curiosity. It refracts emotions, learning, and skill into a rainbow of opportunity, and, like a precious gem, the greater the number of facets, the more brilliant the result.

In a way, creativity is like a muscle—frequent use increases strength. Perhaps more important, though, is fearlessness. Creativity lends itself to uniqueness. Often, we strive to compare ourselves to others' talents, successes, or processes. Creativity is a still, small voice, equal parts revelation and revolution. To harness creativity is to understand the calling to bring a portion of that voice to life, learn to heed it, and conquer self-doubt long enough to act.



Mastery and Expression

MASE LUCAS, Painter

I'm guessing creativity comes from a place in the human intellect. Intellect seems to be a part of the mind more highly developed in humans than other species. I'm thinking here of creativity not born of survival (i.e., the elaborate displays other species create to facilitate breeding or to capture food prey).

For me, there is little distinction between creativity and the ability to harness it. Harnessing creativity is the means by which it is expressed. One may express it

musically by mastering an instrument or one's voice, visually by mastering a visual art like painting or film making, or by mastering the use of words.

I do not use the word "mastering" lightly. It is the artist's responsibility to do the work. An idea without expression is just an idea. Creativity in and of itself is not enough. It is the actualization of that idea that is creative. The intellectual urge to create is manifested by mastering a means by which to express it.



Surrendering to the Magic

CHELSEA CRONKRITE, Photographer

For me, creativity is an active emotion that truly feels like it consumes my entire being. I could be some place exciting and new or in the same spot I sit in almost every night before bed, and my creative brain will show up demanding to be fulfilled. Sometimes it feels like adrenaline, and other times it feels like I'm drowning. It's all dependent on what's being laid out in front of me to capture or create.

I believe my creative energy comes from within, but I can also say it's influenced by life's happenings. It shows up at the most random times—and it's definitely inconsistent. Sometimes it almost feels inconvenient, but it's always liberating once I complete the quest for whatever I'm trying to make happen.

When the creative genius side of my soul shows up, I don't deny it the space it needs anymore. These days I realize that I need to totally give in to allow the real magic to happen.



Conclusion

Having had many hours to reflect upon these answers, searching for both commonalities and distinctions, I am left with the feeling that a willingness to be curious is key to creativity. It may come to each of us through a different path but, however it arrives, we must lean into it. We must listen. Then, once we have heard what it has to say, we must put our heads down and do the work.

When I spoke with Ron Rash for this story, he said something that stuck with me. "As children, we all enjoy this sense of wonder. One minute my grandson is fully inhabiting life as a donkey and then, quite suddenly, he is a pirate. The flow is seamless, if nonsensical. Perhaps artists do not lose this sense of wonder." I will take that one step further. Perhaps this sense of wonder is never truly lost. Rather, it is waiting patiently for each of us, hoping to be rediscovered, ready to inspire.

On a final note, I found it hard not to get distracted by the science of creativity, especially when I discovered a remarkable consistency between the primary side of the brain used for a particular art and that artist's belief about the source of creativity. But that is a story for another day. Today, we focus on the magic of creativity.

For bios of these accomplished artists, see our online publication, www.theplateaumag.com