

# Exposing the Artist Within

*by Kim Adams*

I believe creativity to be intrinsic in nature. People are born with the natural desire to create. I think there are many ways this impulse is tempered in people and sadly I think we are “trained” to believe that we are not creative. I once read a book called “*Uh –Oh! Some Observations from Both sides of the Refrigerator Door*” by Robert Fulghum. The author reflected on self esteem and how it changes and seems to diminish with adolescence. The example he used could also describe the lack of confidence in creativity. Fulghum suggests that if you went to a group of 5 year olds and asked the question “who here is a really good painter (dancer, singer, storyteller)?” you would see most children raising their hands (jumping up and down and probably shouting “me, me, I am”). He then offers trying the same thing with high school students or adults. Sadly, the outcome would be very different with few hands raised. How is it that the same child who paints for the love of squishing drip dropping slimy paint on paper can reject the notion that she might still enjoy such sensations because her product is somehow not good enough? How is it that the child who dances with total abandon, moving his body to almost any music with a decent rhythm, later will not even clap along at a live performance if he thinks it “un-cool”? How is it that people begin to believe that being “creative” is designated to a chosen few (artists, musicians, actors) in society?

I think it is no coincidence that children literally “learn” to stifle their creativity to meet the standards set for them by adults. The adult (and the cultural) standards for what is beautiful, for example, denies that the child has an aesthetic sensibility of his own.

*Many years ago, I picked my then 6 year old daughter up from kindergarten. Her teacher in an effort to praise my daughter commented to her... “Did you tell your mom what a beautiful tree you made at art today?” My daughter said “yeah, mommy Mrs. Moss said mine was the best.” The teacher then turned to me and commented that my daughter really did make a good tree compared to some of the other children. I replied (I think in an effort to be modest for my daughter??) that perhaps some of the younger children may not be developmentally ready for representational drawing yet, to which she replied... “Well, they would have been able to do the tree if they would have just followed the instructions.”*

The teacher in the above example meant well, but she was stuck in the more traditional model of “teaching” kids by asking them to follow step by step instructions to end up with a “desirable” product (desirable for whom? I might ask). Sadly, it is possible that a piece of my child’s confidence in her own aesthetic sense was taken from her as she rose to the occasion of “pleasing” the teacher, by being able to follow the instructions (better than the other children, I might add). The benefits, to the child (being able to learn to follow instructions), in my opinion, is not worth the cost to her self-motivation in the creative process. In the book, *Creative Activities for Young Children*, author Mary Mayesky cautions the reader about the teacher’s power to influence, *“The purpose of aesthetic experiences is to help develop a full and rich life for the child. It does not matter whether an activity is useful for anything else. There does not have to be a product. ... Teachers must be careful to allow for and encourage such motivation. ... Teachers who prefer that children see beauty as they themselves do are not encouraging a sense of aesthetics in children. They are fostering uniformity and obedience.”*

The development of creativity will naturally occur given the right environment. Environment defined as the physical space, the people in the space, as well as the safety necessary for physical, social and emotional well-being. In the early childhood classroom the environment is set up to help the child learn through exploration and play. The teacher acts as a facilitator to the learning process by setting up the environment, forming relationships with children (and families), and observing the children’s daily interactions with the environment and each other. Open-ended activities, (like the “projects” you might see set up when arriving with your child in the early morning; beading, gluing, paint in any form, collage, glitter art, play dough, etc.) foster creativity as the children find new and interesting ways of using materials and manipulatives. Mayesky notes *“young children will never be bored using the same media over and over again if they have new, interesting and exciting ideas, thoughts and feelings to express.... Children will continually be challenged to find new and different ways to use the same paints, clay, crayons, paper, and markers to give form to their ideas.”*

Children daily tap into the *creative process*, described by Mayesky as usually having two parts:

*Discovering* – using the imagination, playing with ideas, and exploring

*Process* – using learned skills, evaluating and testing.

One example of this process occurs at the block area. Children use imagination, and innovation to build structures (at times naming them “castles”, “zoos”, “houses”, etc.) the children use learned skills of classification (this color block goes here), seriation (start with the big blocks and pile up with smaller blocks), physics (If I put this flat block on this round block it will fall if it is not balanced) often evaluating and testing as they proceed. Children

may incorporate other objects like people (real, imagined, or dolls) plastic animals, paper, tape, and other building materials. As long as the time, space, materials, and motivation are present, the creative, sensory, learning experience has meaning and value. I see it as our job (early childhood educators) to provide such opportunities and to impose only as much structure as is needed to maintain a safe environment. The teacher may be involved in the play and or creative process by asking open ended questions or offering “what if?” statements. “*I wonder what would happen if you built that tower on this piece of mirror?*” or “*Tell me about this structure, it looks like some kind of habitat for those animals...*” etc. By being present and attentive the adult is communicating that he or she is interested in the children’s imaginary play, discoveries, and, in essence, their creative process. This kind of reinforcement is much more valuable than an adult praising the child for neatness or directing a child to build in a certain way. Foundations for future creative endeavors have been laid.

The idea that creativity must be nurtured is not as radical as the idea that traditional methods for learning may damage our intuitive sense of aesthetics and creativity. It will not matter that we have the best materials money can buy, or the best intentions of teaching children to appreciate art; if we the teachers and parents do all the directing the children will suffer. Peter Senge, author of the *Fifth Discipline. The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, discusses the term “metanoia” or a shift of mind. Senge notes that “metanoia” took on special meaning in early Christian tradition of “awakening shared intuition and direct knowing of the highest, of God”. Deeper meaning or shift of mind takes learning to another level, it is more than simply taking in information; learning can also be “generative” or creative. Many world religions have the view of God as Creator. Perhaps for many the direct “knowing” of God is tapping into the ultimate source of creativity. It is in collectivity and creativity that the movement of mind, “metanioa” takes us beyond our basic learning for survival; to the fullness of life we are able to experience through beauty, wonder, community and self. For many it will take this shift of mind to see the value of the creative process we strive to embrace.

It is difficult work “un-learning” the urge to stifle one’s creativity. It takes an open mind as well as no small amount of courage to take the risk of exposing one’s creative self.

I challenge all who read this article to do one of the following “creative” exercises to tap into the *Artist* within all of us...

- Get a blank piece of paper draw anything (even a design/doodle) with out lifting the pencil/pen/chalk, from the paper. Just see what happens the end result is not important.
- Listen to your favorite music and move your body (yup dance!). Go ahead no one is watching.

- Create a “beauty folder”...make a list of things you think are “beautiful”, gather photos/images of beautiful things and keep them in a file (in your file cabinet or on your computer), create a pin board. Use the beauty folder as inspiration for artwork, poetry, or just enjoy it for what it is.
- Explore your home with your senses... be aware of visual images, smells, textures, sounds. Write down or share with a family member some of your observations.

Pay close attention to your feelings when doing any of the activities; talk about them or journal them. You may discover something new about yourself!

As an exercise in unlocking my own creativity, I wrote a poem that included words that were in my mind one night when I awoke from sleeping. I have never really written a poem before, so this was difficult for me. I used the poem in a collage. Each time a friend or family member has looked at the artwork and read the poem I still have the sensation of feeling my work is not “good enough”. The artwork on the wall and myself having to confront the uncomfortable feelings when others look at it, are part of the process for me to “let go” of the inner critic that says my product is not good enough.

I will conclude this article with the poem I wrote:

*Memories spill  
Like so many tears  
Shed,  
Beside a house.  
Green  
Tart, ripe  
Like apples baked in  
Grandmother's Kelly crust.  
Loved by father.  
Peeled by daughter,  
One long twisting skin.  
Sweet cinnamon memories.  
Filling the mind,  
Stirring the soul  
Home.*