

# Creativity\*

Calvin Seerveld

I spell creativity ‘d-i-s-c-i-p-l-i-n-e,’ discipline. I believe ‘inspiration’ is a hoax, and artists who accept the Western Romantic tradition of needing to be ‘inspired’ and ‘creative’ have bought into a bankrupt bank and really handicapped themselves in the performance of their task because it inflates and isolates yourself as artist.

It is worth noting that the Older Testament word to be creative (*bara*) is only used with reference to God. Humans ‘fashion’ (*asah*) things, “make” houses, melodies, carvings, poems. So, if you are trying to be ‘creative,’ do something new, “out of nothing,” you are trying to be like God—which is a wrong-headed, inflated notion of artistry if I ever heard one.

Further, the supposition that as artist you need to be ‘creative,’ doing ‘inspired’ stuff or performances, is usually associated with the idea of ‘genius.’ A genius is above the crowd of ordinary blokes—journeymen, talented women—you are special, self-generating. So you are on your own. ‘Creativity’ puts the pressure on artistically isolated you to come through with something novel, or fail all by yourself because ‘inspiration’ did not strike.

So my initial suggestion is: don't put the pack of ‘creativity’ on your back. Walk around free, unencumbered, as a working artisan trained to see nuances in the world. Artists are called by God to be professional imaginers in society, skilled at bringing surprising insights to their neighbours' attention. Doing art is a certain kind of job: you don't have to be ‘creative.’

## The process of making art

My art is rhetoric. I make speeches and song texts. So you get a topic (whether assigned or chosen) or an initial idea, experience or question.

Step 1: You research the matter, get others' thoughts and feelings on the topic, play around with the idea, consider it in different contexts—this is a fun time. Your imaginativity is let loose without any need to pin things down.

Step 2: You reflect on the whole works and all the stray insights you've been collecting, and organise roughly the contours to your forthcoming remarks.

Step 3: You start writing, carefully. Three hundred words is a good day for me—I “secrete text line by line” (elegy poet Gray)—and it always heads off somewhere you hadn't planned. Great, keep going, but just take care you don't paint yourself into a corner.

Step 4: Deadline pressure grows; there's frustration at the slowness and fear of failure; and you become irritable and troublesome to family and friends. Finally, after a

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\* Based on a lecture given at *Chairos* Netherlands Conference.

week or more of struggling you start praying foxhole prayers to God for help—I'm doing this for You, Lord....

Step 5: You stay up all night; endorphins kick in; you get a high; you write down 500, 800, or 1000 words; and you finish things on the aeroplane, a tense wreck but passionate about getting the piece right.

That's a pattern as artist I've gone through for 35 years. It still doesn't come easier. You wish you could skip right to the endorphins. I wonder whether this pattern is idiosyncratic to me or somewhat standard for imaginative artistic deeds:

1. playful exciting exploration (FOB);
2. thoughtful organisation, sensing or finding connections;
3. beginning formulation, or practising performance or tentatively compose
4. obstacles: fatigue, tension, noise, distraction, self-doubt
5. persevering to some kind of conclusion.

Making art, like leading a political party or kneeling for genuine prayer to God, is work: living out a task, fulfilling a chosen responsibility in ordinary, regular ways. To realise that artistry is ordinary work would demystify art and make the problems of obstacles more manageable.

Years ago my wife and I visited a writer I knew; we stayed over-night on our trip through the Smokey Mountains in Tennessee, USA. We woke up next morning to the sound of his typewriter pecking away. He went to work early on his fiction because he was hosting visitors who would take time away from his writing. The novelist Larry Woiwode has a rule for working out in his writing shed, away from the farm house, for five or six days every week: so many words, or 8 hours a day, whichever comes first. You don't wait for 'inspiration'; you sit behind the typewriter or word-processor, or go to your studio where the sketch pad and paints or clay are, and take up your pen or pencil and write, doodle, wonder, chew the eraser.

### **Staying fresh in one's regular task**

How do you stay fresh in your job of making art?

One answer is: be human. What I mean is: realise and take seriously that as a human being you are more than an artist.

You as a person cannot help but be living in different dimensions of God's world for creatures. You have a physique, a measure of health, feelings, certain skills, an ability to imagine, to speak, think, be sociable more or less, to spend your resources, to be loyal to your fellow gang members or nationality and have an opening for friendship, and the horizon of piety or impiety.

You may be born with a defective kidney, have an extremely high IQ, walk around with abused feelings, and be so uncertain of yourself you are continually scatological or dirty in your talk. But you are always on call as a human being all these ways—somehow. And, in my book, you are an artist if you specialise in imagining and you get training in

the skills to bring it off—to walk across the theatre stage like an actor rather than as a pedestrian, to voice a song so people listening say to themselves, "What's that throb of tones I hear?" rather than sound like a monotonous announcer or the garble of an auctioneer, to put colours imaginatively juxtaposed on a canvas like Paul Klee rather than like someone painting a barn wall to protect the wood from deterioration.

Every human being has the prompt to be imagining things, I believe. Anybody who wants to be an artist for his or her vocation should have a fairly good gift to be imaginative or an over-riding will that that is how you have to serve God. If you are not especially imaginative, or you lack the patience to learn the underlying skills needed to draw the human figure, to act out an angry character, or to write a sentence that winks at your reader, it would be wiser for you to find a different profession in which to praise God and help your neighbour. Artists, as I understand it, are called to help their neighbours who are handicapped in imagining; so, if you yourself are weak at imagining and performing imaginative actions, you are not much help. Find yourself in a different job, because society is set up in our generation with the deck often stacked against artists, who are often considered a luxury when you draw up the budget for the church or the school or the city buildings—unless you need some "conspicuous consumption" art by a superstar-named artist to boost your local prestige.

Being an amateur artist, I think, is great. "Amateur" means you do it for the love of it. And if you love doing it long enough, you become pretty good at photographing portraits of faces, composing impromptus on the piano, turning verses for someone's anniversary into occasional poems. Amateur artists don't have the pressure to earn a living with their artistry, to meet the critical jealous eye of competitive colleagues or the society-appointed (or self-appointed media) judges who set standards for photography, sonatas, and "little magazine" poetry. I recommend highly becoming an amateur artist. It almost always takes parents who are amateur artists to make it possible for children to become professional artists.

By professional artists I mean those imaginative people who take the lifetime necessary to hone their ability to be imaginative as story-tellers, wood engravers, sculptors in clay, architects, song writers, musicians, cineastes, whatever art form it be. "Professional" means you give your guts and time with serious intensity to mastering your imaginative trade: gradually, over the years, you move from apprentice to journeyman/woman to consummate craftsman to master artist. When you can play with abandon in and with the medium of your specific art—gestures for mime, body rhythms for dance, watercolour and paper, nuanced words—a strong imagination can do wonderful things: Marcel Marceau's sadness, Martha Graham's choreographed sexuality, Andrew Wyeth's glistening watercolour raincoat, Baudelaire's urbane *fleurs du mal*, Brecht-Weill's lyrics and honkytonk melodies....

It is a temptation for professional artists to get swallowed up in their art. An Olympic athlete like the prima donna dancer of any National Ballet company sacrifices a normal life to be the best professional artist there is. In our post-industrialised age of competitive differentiated specialisation, that inordinate idolatry of expertise is not surprising.

Graduate medical students doing residence at the emergency rooms of city hospitals are forced to spend incredible hours of sleep-deprived tension in order to become MDs. Academics tend to become bookworms: you get authoritative books written and published if you specialise in research backed-up by evidence and with years of detailed reflection that comes at the expense of other sides to your life—friendship, socialising, civic duties. This concentration of lifetime on just one of your human activities is normal today, but that normality is humanly abnormal, I think, and maybe should be corrected or curtailed by a Christian conscience, so you don't dedicate yourself to becoming a "star"(?). At least one might say: the absorption of a person's whole life into becoming a professional artist (or career politician) who is "the creative/inspired best" is cancerous, and induces burnout. Along the way there can be periods of "artist's block"—you've stared at the canvas so long, you've studied the role to exhaustion, you can't get the plot to go somewhere, you're not a genius—so you become depressed....

A way to stay fresh and remain inventive as professional artist (or politician, teacher, lawyer, but now especially as artist) is to take stock of your full-orbed humanity, and don't put all your eggs in the professional art basket. Be human! Keep your vocational job relative while giving it passionate, disciplined lifetime.

I respect professional artists highly—theirs is a tough, scintillating ministry of performance. An amateur artist may come through on occasion with an exceptional artistic performance—everything just clicked. A professional artist comes through, on bad days, too, when things go wrong, when your heart's just not in it—the rent is overdue, you've got a touch of fever, the reviews were bad. A professional artist has the seasoned stamina and trained focus of concentration to do the job creditably anyhow, you don't depend on 'creative inspiration.'

The trouble comes for those who are trying to move from being amateur artists to becoming professional artists: how do you cope with the obstacles and breakdowns that normally occur (in step 4)?

### **Practical suggestions for young artists who would become Christian artisans**

1 Become as fully human as possible, developing all the sides of your aptitudes, temperament, character and personality; and stay aware of the riches to God's world and the human misery around us. Set aside sabbath rest after six days and nights of artistic work: act human—animals don't have a Sunday to celebrate the resurrection. After completing a speech, a concert tour, or publishing the book, enjoy a bit of restful activity. I'm not talking secular 'take a break,' 'have a blast,' or a vacant cruise vacation: I'm proposing sabbatical celebrative resting—what the convention retreat of Christian school art teachers in the Blue Mountains was this past July, or picking strawberries with a friend.

2 Develop a communal core of honest art-critical colleagues to sharpen up (tenderly) your skilled imagining profession. That is, don't be satisfied with getting together with artists in a cafe to cry in your beer about your troubles. Evangelical Christians in North America don't cry in their beer together, but hold hands for fellowship and prayer

meetings—that's a mistake. What's needed is forthright, edifying artistic critique of the concrete imaginative offerings you have brought into the circle of colleagues for that very testing.

3 If, as young artist, you are interested in having a future, get to know your past, the history of your artistic field, so you will have the comfort to know that your present problems as an artist in society are bigger than you and your impasses. These troubles have grown into their present shape over many generations and there will be no easy solution—papal blessing, government money, IBM supporting nameless artists rather than investing in them, are utopian wistful thoughts. Historical knowledge can also keep you from an Elijah complex—"I, only I, LORD, am left to serve You..." (1 Kings 19).

4 Acknowledge Christ in your neighbour (Matthew 25) and give away your gift of artistry to her and him and any children. Christians have got to get rid of the toxic individualism endemic to the art world today. For an artist to ask, "How can I stay creative?" is like the fellow asking Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"—it is an utterly individualistic, self-centred approach. Jesus tried to convert that lawyer's query with a story into a good question: "Who is my neighbour?" (Luke 10:25-37). The right question for artists is: "What nuances do I see/hear/find in God's world which, as a deacon of imagination, I may make known to my neighbours?"

If you actively belong to an underground community like the body of Jesus Christ and you are convicted to obey God by leading them and your neighbours with your loving artistry to be imaginative humans, despite sin in God's world, I can assure you that you, like Moses once upon a time, will be beset and angry enough to stay freshly productive in your artistry for a lifetime, even if you do not get to see the Promised Land on Australian shores.

Calvin Seerveld is Senior Member (emeritus) in Philosophical Aesthetics, Institute for Christian Studies, Toronto. This article is from part of one of the talks that Calvin gave at the conference for Christian art teachers in the Blue Mountains, NSW, last July. Calvin is a world-wide known and loved speaker, best known for his books on art *A Christian Critique of Art and Literature* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Dordt College Press, 1998?) and *Rainbows for the Fallen World* (1980), and his books of devotions such as *On Being Human* and is the author of many popular and academic articles and presentations.