

CONTENTS

Introduction	11
---------------------------	----

Chapter One: All Children Are Artists

Why we are all born naturally creative

1.1 Born to Be Something	15
1.2 All Children Are Born Artists	17
1.3 Born to Take Risks	19
1.4 Completely Unaware	22

Chapter Two: The Challenge Is to Stay an Artist as an Adult

How we lose our naturally born creativity

2.1 Art Belongs to Me	25
2.2 The Challenge Is to Stay an Artist as an Adult	28
2.3 The Great Disappearing Artist Trick	30
2.4 Creating Is Not Important	32
2.5 Art Is Not Creative	33
2.6 Finding Our Limitations	36
2.7 The Eye of the Beholder	37
2.8 Motivated to Be Lazy	42
2.9 Three Phases	46
2.10 Good or Good Enough	48

Chapter Three: Life without Beauty

Society suffers an epidemic of lost creativity

3.1 Happy Little Trees	51
3.2 Unnecessary Creation	53
3.3 Art Is Forsaken	59
3.4 Life without Beauty	63
3.5 The Ugliness Inside	65
3.6 Timelessness	67
3.7 Even the Playground	70
3.8 Beauty or Profit	71
3.9 What Does It Say about the Creator?	75
3.10 Left Behind	77

Chapter Four: Coloring inside the Lines

Relearning how to create within the boundaries of life

4.1 Best Friends	83
4.2 The Perfect Role Model	86
4.3 Following Directions and Nonconformity	91
4.4 A Life Full of Constraints	94
4.5 Beauty through Constraints	97
4.6 Perfection	102

Chapter Five: Freedom to Fail

Relearning how to take necessary risks

5.1 What Girls Want	107
5.2 Failure Is Fun	108
5.3 A Grand Contradiction	111
5.4 Time to Start Failing	114
5.5 Failure Is an Option	119
5.6 When Success Is Not Satisfying	121

Chapter Six: Born to Create

Relearning how to be a creator

6.1 Meant to Create	125
6.2 The Last Day of School	127
6.3 An Unfinished Life	129
6.4 You Are a Creator	132
6.5 Everyday Creator	133
6.6 Beauty or Ugliness	136
6.7 Beauty Is Fragile	139
6.8 What Will Beauty Look Like?	141

Notes	143
--------------------	-----

Acknowledgments	145
------------------------------	-----



All Children Are *ARTISTS*

why we are all born naturally creative

1.1 Born to Be Something

Some people are born athletes. It is just in their DNA, a card in the hand they were dealt at birth. Others are born to be doctors and inventors or farmers and builders.

It seems that I was born to be an artist.

I was a pretty inventive child. When I was a little kid, sitting on the living room rug, I loved to build things with blocks. When I was older and had a lot more blocks and playthings, my creations and buildings would cover the living room.

And while I did well in school, the art room really became my home. I have sat in many art rooms over the years. Some left something to be desired. My first art room, in a poor rural school, was limited to just one piece of paper per child per day.

One day, we arrived to art class to find that only green paint was available to us that day.

Some art rooms were really wonderful places. I had a phenomenal art teacher at the school we moved to in the city. I do not remember more than a few bits and pieces of art lessons, but I remember how that art room *felt*.

Do you remember how your favorite teacher made you *feel*? I remember how it felt to be my art teacher's student. She had a wonderful, warm personality. She made me feel like I was her favorite student.

I think she made all of us feel that way.

Her art room was a sanctuary that reflected her caring spirit, with lots of personal touches. The one detail I remember most was that she had placed the word "EMPATHY" in rather small letters on the ceiling. She never mentioned why it was there, and I am guessing most children did not even notice it. But I did.

Despite the art room being my natural home, art class is, of course, only an hour a week. And art never won a kid any popularity contests. It was strange how the same kids who were shocked and amazed by my artwork could jeer and harass me in P.E. I just wasn't dealt a very even hand of cards. You could not find a less athletic child than me. It made no sense that the same hands that naturally could paint and draw could not throw a ball accurately to save my life. As I began to fully grasp my athletic shortcomings, the gym would become my own little slice of elementary school hell. The art room was my refuge.

1.2 All Children Are Born Artists

What kind of a kid were you?

Perhaps, unlike me, you were the kind of child who did *not* take refuge in the art room. Maybe your school days revolved around your next chance to go to P.E. or recess, to throw things and run around. You may have been the kind of kid who liked to play in the mud and climb trees. Or maybe you played with dolls or action figures. Were you a solitary child, or were you a child who had a secret club with the kids next door? Kids come in all shapes and sizes and variety. But all children have some things in common that make them *kids*.

When I became an art teacher, one of my first jobs was to decorate my classroom. I wanted my room to show everyone how highly I felt about art and my students. So on the wall of my art classroom, I painted in large purple letters a partial quote from the renowned painter Pablo Picasso:

“All children are born artists . . .”

Do you believe that? Maybe you never thought of yourself as an artist. Can Picasso really paint all children with such a broad brush? I think Picasso must have been right. Because no matter what kinds of kids you and I were, whatever we enjoyed doing, chances are we were at our best when we were *creating* something.

Children are natural creators. In fact, all of us were creating before we even knew what the word meant. Children make up stories and games. They create characters, heroes and villains, and fabulous made-up places to live in. While some kids build with blocks, others play “house” or host tea parties. A child’s world is a surreal place where imagination swirls and blurs with reality.

The only difference between most kids is *what* they like to create.

I was building with blocks and drawing pictures. What were you creating when you were five years old? Were you creating stories or playing house or making up games or covering the fridge with paintings?

Yes, Picasso must have been right. This drive to create things, to re-create the world as we see fit, to play pretend—it must be in our genetic code. Simply put a few crayons or some paint in front of a child and she will know what to do with them. When most children come to kindergarten, they have creative energy to spare, and with a little leading, all children can create.

Children even surprise me with their creations. They do it regularly. They see things differently. They exceed my expectations. They make something unexpected.

For that matter, teachers and parents could take away every “creative” item in a room, and children will still create surprising things. Sticks, rocks, or even random debris on the playground are constantly transformed into dolls, magical items, weapons, or any number of things adults would never think of.

Through adult eyes, these activities may appear to be silly child’s play, but I want you to think of even these childish activities as “creating.”

That is not such a leap, is it? When adults go to a movie, what are we watching? We are watching other adults act like children, essentially. A writer and director made up a story. The actors are pretending that they are in danger or in love. The costume artists are playing dress up. The prop artists are making weapons

and magical items out of metal, rubber, foam, and even random debris. The set designers are creating a whole world from their imaginations. When you and I go to the movies, we are paying good money (earned in the *real* world) to watch adults, in essence, act like children. To put it another way, we're watching adults who have become *very practiced* at doing the same things that five-year-olds do.

1.3 Born to Take Risks

Children are not just naturally creative, but many of them are also natural risk takers. How many near heart attacks did you give your mother by climbing onto some too-high place? As a teenager, how many risks—that you would now call “stupid”—did you take? Though we want children to be careful and safe, risk-taking is a critical part of child development. Even the most cautious child must be taught to take a risk, to jump off the high dive at the swimming pool, or speak to the new kid at school, to try difficult things.

I was an exceptionally cautious and deliberate child, but risk-taking was still a part of my development. I slowly learned that if I ever wanted something, a measure of risk was sure to be required. As a thirteen-year-old, I learned I would have to risk getting punched if I wanted to stand up to a bully (which I did). As a teenager, I would have to risk my pride if I wanted a date with a girl. As an adult, I would have to risk rejection if I wanted a job. And as a child, if I didn't want to get struck by lightning, I would have to jump off the diving board.

Yes, one of the risk-taking lessons most vividly imprinted on

my mind involves the diving board and an impending lightning storm.

My brother and I were at the apartment complex's pool with my mother, having a great time. I had been thinking about jumping off the diving board all afternoon, but as a skinny, craven seven-year-old, I had not done so yet. Finally my mother decided she had enough of seeing me approach the diving board and backing away. She told me that I would have to jump before we left.

As I stood, shivering on the board, lips turning blue, I continued to think and hesitate, and my mother grew impatient. She began goading me every time I tried to back away from the edge. And there was an angry looking storm quickly approaching. She told me the requirement stood: I would have to jump off the board before we went inside. Lightning started to flash and the rain began to come down and she told me I was likely to be struck, standing up on that board.

If I got struck by lightning, I would be in big trouble with Mom.

So, thanks to the fear of an imminent lightning strike, I quickly jumped, scurried out of the pool, and we all scrambled inside.

Some kids may be cowards like I was. Some kids may be painfully shy. But of all the risks a child can take, creating might be the riskiest. And that is a risk that children always seem to be willing to take.

Think about how risky *creating* something is. It is much riskier than your chances of being struck by lightning. When you create a story or a song or a painting or a gift, you are opening up

your mind, heart, and soul to the scrutiny of others. Perhaps your audience will love your creation. But you are inviting criticism or rejection. This fact almost never seems to occur to children though. Even the shyest or most cowardly children are naturally *generous* with their creations. Anything a child creates becomes something to *give* to someone they love.

What good is it to make up a game without someone to play it? What sense is there for a child to create a puppet without an audience to watch a puppet show? Why would a little girl meticulously set a table if she were not planning on inviting Daddy to her room for tea? What child paints a picture and then refuses to let Mom hang it on the fridge?

From watching students in my classroom, it is abundantly clear to me that they simply cannot wait to show off everything they create. They want to show off their work to me. They want to show off to their friends. They want to show off to their parents. You and I were probably the same way when we were their age. When we were children, we probably could not wait to show off everything we created. If we made a card for Mother's Day or a Christmas gift for Dad, we were proud of our work. Kindergartners are practically *too* eager to show off their work, even when it's still in progress. They are so excited to bring their projects home, they are almost disappointed when paint has to dry, or I insist on hanging their work in the hallway for a week. They are eager to share their art with the people who are most important to them.

They are desperate to be generous, to share what they have created.

1.4 Completely Unaware

Why are children so generous and eager to share their creativity? Probably because they lack a whole lot of self-consciousness.

When five-year-olds go to P.E. or recess to create and play games, they never seem to be thinking about whether they are *good* or *bad* at playing games. It does not seem to occur to them that they might look silly while playing. They just play because it is fun to do so.

Likewise, when five-year-olds go to music class, they sing, not because they know that they are *good* or *bad* singers, because most five-year-olds sound sort of alike—that is to say, *bad*. It appears that they sing because they just *enjoy* the act of singing.

And in art class, five-year-olds never seem to be thinking about how *good* or *bad* they are. They rarely compare their art to anyone else's. I almost never hear a kindergartner say he's unhappy with his work. I ask children at the end of the hour what they are *proud of* about their work, and twenty little hands shoot up, eager to show off.

Children really just are not aware if they are *good* or *bad* at anything!

That's probably just as well. Interpreting children's artwork usually requires a bit of extra imagination on the part of the adults around them. Kindergartners have handed me self-portraits that looked like they were demon-possessed. And while they could not be prouder and their smiles could not be bigger, I wondered if I could hang their nightmare-inducing projects on the wall.

It is this naïveté that allows children to create freely and

joyfully, and so eagerly share their art with abandon.

To summarize: as five-year-olds, most of us had uncanny creative drives, we were generous with what we created, and we created with abandon and lack of self-awareness.

Think about the five-year-old version of yourself for one more minute. There is a lot of time and distance between five-year-old you and yourself today. This is the “you” before high school, before awkward teen romance and unrequited love, when boys and girls still had “cooties.” This was before you settled on a career. This was before you worried about bills or insurance or mortgages. You only had childhood worries and concerns. You were a creative child of some kind. I promise, you were. What were you creating? And you were generous with your creations. You couldn’t wait to show off what you had made to the people you cared about. Who were you most eager to share with? And you had no awareness if anything you made was good or bad.

Creating just made you incredibly, unabashedly *happy, fulfilled, and satisfied*.

Think about five-year-old you running around the playground, or singing your lungs out in music class, or smearing paint on paper in the art room. It was all so joyful and carefree. A lot has happened since then. Five-year-old you has been covered up under layers of dust accumulated over many years.

That moment in time so long ago was the freest you have ever been in your entire life.

This book is about rediscovering and living in that moment.

QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT

1. *What did you enjoy creating as a child?*
2. *With whom did you share your creations?*