

How to Unleash Your Creativity

Not everyone is the creative type, right? Wrong. Peggy Orenstein uncovers the roots of imaginative thinking.

By Peggy Orenstein



Photograph: William Abranowicz

My daughter, Daisy, was thrilled last fall when she was placed in a second-grade class with a special concentration on science and math. I pasted on my best Enthusiastic Mom smile as she chattered about baking-soda volcanoes and lemon-powered batteries, but inside I was roiling. Math? Science? What about her love of writing, drawing, composing music? That school was going to suck the creativity right out of her! They'd turn her into one of those people who talks in a monotone about things no one else can understand! Or worse: They'd somehow turn her into me.

For as long as I can remember, I've been haunted by the conviction that I am not a creative person. True, I'm a writer, but not the kind who relies on her boundless imagination to make things up. I'm the knitter who's lost without a pattern, the longtime piano student who was never able to improvise. I can't even doodle without hyperventilating; I fear drawing the way other people fear heights. Creativity, like red hair, always seemed to be one of those things you either had or you didn't. Clearly I didn't.

Maybe you know what I mean. According to James C. Kaufman, an associate professor of psychology at California State University at San Bernardino and author of *Creativity 101*, a majority of Americans don't consider themselves the creative "type." This wouldn't be a big

deal if the self-assessment didn't tend to become self-fulfilling, but it does: We think we're not creative, so we don't cultivate our creative potential and—voilà!—we're not creative. In recent years, that cycle seems to have become a spiral: Americans' scores on the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking, a 90-minute series of visual and verbal tasks administered by a psychologist, have plummeted since 1990.

No one can fully explain the decline; too much TV, texting, googling? Whatever the culprit, experts in the emerging field of creativity studies—a broad array of psychologists, educators, and neuroscientists—would like us to chuck the have-it-or-don't mentality and start recognizing creativity as basic to human development, as elemental as reading or counting. Creativity can be squelched, these experts say, but if we take the time to better understand what it is and how it works, it can also be fostered and enhanced.

Which is good news, because it turns out that the creative impulse is crucial to psychological health. A 2007 study of Hurricane Katrina survivors found that those who scored higher on two measures of creativity—originality and flexibility—coped with the crisis better. In a study of amateur female musicians, higher levels of creativity correlated with lower levels of stress. And Mark Runco, PhD, editor of the *Creativity Research Journal*, has found that for many people the ability to imagine potential obstacles to a goal and generate a range of solutions—hallmarks of creative intelligence—predicts both overall well-being and more satisfying personal relationships. (Inflexible thinking, on the other hand, is associated with depression.) Meanwhile, cultural trendspotters like Daniel Pink have argued that it will be the creative, not the meek, who inherit the Earth—at least in the coming decades—as flexibility, innovation, and aesthetic flair become the go-to traits in business and politics. There's even evidence that creative people have more sex.

Scholars define creativity as the production of something both novel and appropriate. (That latter condition is important from a research perspective: "If *anything* new qualifies as creative, then the term loses its meaning," Kaufman says. "Suppose the person you hired to repave your driveway covered it with salami—that would be original, surely, but inappropriate." Similarly, an innovative design for a bridge would not pass muster if, once constructed, it collapsed.)

By this definition, almost any human endeavor has the potential to be creative. Which brings us to step one in claiming our creativity: becoming more expansive in our own definition of the term.

So many people operate under the default assumption that creativity is the sole province of the arts. I, it appears, am one of those people. Intellectually, I know it's wrong to think this way. I'm well aware of Einstein, Curie, Gates—not to mention Temple Grandin, James (Mr. vacuum cleaner) Dyson, and the creatively self-amputating guy James Franco played in *127 Hours*. Heck, there's even Daisy and her baking-soda volcanoes.

In my defense, it's only recently—in the last century or so—that *anyone* acknowledged creativity extending beyond the arts. The Victorians applied the term primarily to painting; the ancient Greeks, to poetry. For all we know, future generations may consider our own parameters equally quaint. In the decade since advances in imaging technology have allowed researchers to precisely track the way our brains process creative tasks, it's become clear, for example, that we were mistaken in thinking creativity resides in a single area of the brain. Brain scans of people engaged in different types of creative tasks—visual and verbal

problem-solving, artistic performance involving music—reveal that many brain areas are involved. Moreover, domains such as the arts, science, and leadership appear to harness various types of creativity, each drawing on different sets of mental abilities. "It's a very optimistic finding," says Oshin Vartanian, PhD, a cognitive neuroscientist at the University of Toronto, "because we now see that creativity can be exhibited in many different ways."

So I will try to resist my fine-arts bias. While I'm at it—and this is step two, if you're counting—I'll try to let go of the notion that immortality is the one true measure of creative achievement. The Edisons and Picassos of the world are what Ron Beghetto, an associate professor of educational studies at the University of Oregon, calls Big-*C* creators: people whose ideas changed everything. If that's your standard for success, basically you're screwed. "You put yourself in the shadow of a giant," Beghetto says, "and it makes you think, *Well, I'm not that and never could be.*" In which case, the only logical thing for you to do is quit.

Even the dream of making a living at your creative work, or simply reaching a professional level—what those in the field call Pro-*C* (and the rest of us call Etsy)—can be self-defeating. *And unnecessary.* Because it turns out that the creativity that enriches our life and confers all those feel-good benefits is something far humbler: everyday, or little-*c* creativity. We're not talking anything revolutionary here. Little-*c* is the school science project comparing frogs' responses to heavy metal music and show tunes. It's combining ingredients in a new way to surprise your dinner guests, or developing a new skills drill while coaching your kid's soccer team. Everyone, says Kaufman, has the capacity for little-*c* creativity. Rather than a rare gift, it's more akin to kindness or compassion—an innate human trait. It's something we're born with, and naturally draw upon, until something, somewhere, goes awry.



Photo: William Abromowicz/Illustration: Oksana Badrack

For years I've kept a dog-eared copy of an old Lynda Barry comic taped to a wall in my office. The first panel shows one of the artist's iconic, primitively penned women hunched over her desk with a cup of coffee, pencil poised in midstroke. Two thought bubbles hover over her head: "Is this good?" and "Does this suck?" "I'm not sure when these two questions became the only two questions I had about my work," Barry writes beneath the image. "I just know I'd stopped enjoying it and instead began to dread it."

As the strip unfolds, Barry describes the easy pleasure she took as a child in drawing and storytelling ("Look out! It's Dracula! What's that smell? He's pooping! And the mummy is pooping back! But it's lava!"). It didn't seem special, she recalls: "Every kid I knew could do it."

That's because children are naturally driven to understand their world. They live by that incessant, creativity-inspiring "why?" *Why does the grass grow? Why is the sky blue? Why can't I fly?* And to answer these questions, they experiment, imagine, and explore. Their minds are free to wander and to wonder.

Then, usually around the time they enter school, that loopiness disappears. They begin to compare their work to others'. Will they be judged as better ("Is this good?") or worse ("Does this suck?")? Suddenly there are right and wrong answers. Expressing their own tentative understanding of an idea becomes less important than figuring out what the teacher makes of it. Beghetto, who studies the ways in which early experience influences creativity later in life, found that by first or second grade, students realize that "the game of school requires replacing the question 'Why?' with 'What do you want me to do and how do you want me to do it?'"

In his work with teachers and older students, Beghetto found that most had vivid memories (from both inside and outside the classroom) of what he called creative mortification, a term so evocative I will carry it with me to my grave. "They were moments when people were developing their experience in something—music, sports, science—and were having a personally meaningful insight, which is the catalyst of creativity," he told me. "But when they shared that insight, they received a too-harsh evaluation. And once they'd experienced that moment of shame, they often stopped doing what they'd loved."

In rapid succession I recalled my beloved kindergarten teacher putting my drawing of the solar system into what was obviously the "bad" pile; being repeatedly, negatively compared to my musically gifted brother; being mocked for wrong answers as one of the few girls in eighth-grade accelerated math.

So, step three in claiming our creativity: realizing that we're actually reclaiming it, that it was always, rightfully, ours to begin with.

But let's be clear: The response to creative mortification should not be to reject criticism altogether, or to overpraise middling work. Rather, for both children and adults, experts advocate shifting our idea of critique from evaluation to exploration: asking questions about process, identifying what works, wondering what can be improved. Those suggestions, by the way, eased my mind about Daisy's future creativity; her school promotes open-ended learning and rejects grades for teacher-written progress reports. And I had to admit that her imagination didn't seem to be suffering from her math/science placement. She was as enthusiastic as ever about churning out poetry and hand-drawn comic books. (Though, for better or worse, no lava-pooing vampires yet.)

The point of little-c creativity is to express and challenge yourself, to make meaning, to enhance your life. It's not about being the best at something, but about becoming better than you are. And as you tinker with your poem, or work on your rendition of "I Dreamed a Dream," you might even change your brain: Rex Jung, PhD, a neuropsychologist at the University of New Mexico, has found that people who consistently engage in creative activities become better and faster at marshaling the brain's creative networks. In other words, the more you are, the more you will be.

I had never really considered where and how my punishing ideas about my own creativity—about myself—had formed. But as I spoke to scientists and researchers, I started to feel surprisingly liberated. Still, I couldn't shake the question: Supposing I, like everyone, *was* creative—exactly how creative was I?

I convinced Kaufman to give me a series of tests to find out. He started with some classic Torrance-style questions ("In three minutes, how many uses for an egg carton can you think of?"). I also took a personality inventory to gauge, among other things, my openness to new experiences (creative people score high). I completed the Remote Associates Test, in which you come up with the one word that links three others (*eagle* was the answer for *bald screech emblem*). In three minutes, I wrote a haiku with a science fiction theme. And though it made me sweat, I even agreed to draw a picture.

When Kaufman looked at my drawing, he said, "Well, I don't mean to be rude..." But instead of hearing those words and deciding that I was a failure, I did something far more creative: I shrugged. So I had a block when it came to drawing—so what? The test had confirmed that I was creative in other ways: as a writer and a thinker. I was clever, curious, and, yes, open to new experiences.

I wondered whether, now that I had a more realistic sense of my strengths and weaknesses, I could wear them both a little more lightly—and worry less about my daughter's as well. Maybe I could even treat creativity the way I do...bowling. Bowling, after all, is one of the rare things in life it's okay to be spectacularly lousy at—which gives you the freedom simply to play. You cheer the strikes, you laugh at the gutter balls. Sure, you could ask yourself, "Am I good?" or "Do I suck?" Or you could just give it a roll and see what happens.

From the February 2011 issue of [*O, The Oprah Magazine*](#)