

Chapter 13

Culture 2: The Creative Self. You Are an Artist.

*Neglecting your artistic self means neglecting
an integral part of what it means to be human.
Artistic self-expression is a form of self-fulfillment,
as this chapter will reveal.*

How many of you ever wrote or desired to write your thoughts down on a page? How many of you dabbled in poetry, drawing or painting? How many of you learned a craft like woodworking, pottery or sewing? How many of you learned how to play a musical instrument in high school? How many of you still do any of these things? How many watch television instead?

Regardless of artistic talents, you have an innate appreciation of art and a creative need. These qualities have shrunk under the life-long consumerist barrage. In acquiescing to the consumer lifestyle you neglect one of your most precious gifts, one of the special qualities that differentiate you from the myriad of species that share the globe. It's time to stop denying the creative self. It's time to break out of the consumer trance.

Reclaiming your creative imagination and artistic sensibility is key to reclaiming your stolen identity and fulfilling your potential as a human being. Since we understand so little of this universe the best we can do is seek to understand our self. Our artistic gifts are crucial to the process of self-discovery.

Consumerism seeks to prevent the artistic voyage of self-discovery since it would be fatal to your needs for their products. The satisfaction derived from artistic creation makes consumer pleasures pale by comparison. Just as men have used their artistic creativity to free themselves from the oppression of brutal totalitarian regimes, so you must employ it to escape the thrall of global corporate giants.

Even the most humbly-gifted among us is capable of artistic expression. Our family kitchen business has employed a certain loader for 15 years or so. I shall call him Jean. Jean is a man with minimal education. His social background is rural and working class. A severe myopia has further limited his choices in terms of his activities and career. His professional life consists of carrying heavy objects and doing menial chores for various businesses. To all outward appearances he seems the typical, unskilled labourer, spending his hard-earned money on beer and junk food. But, just like the hero of Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, Jean's seemingly mundane existence is deceptive, for Jean has discovered an outlet for his artistic self.

Dancing is in some ways the perfect creative release for Jean, considering his lack of education and his myopia. With dancing, it was only a question of concentrating on his partner and memorizing a few steps and he was well on his way. By entering the dancing world not only did he find an excellent method for developing his creative self, but this artistic efflorescence tore him away from the bars and the television that had previously monopolized his existence.

Jean's ascent on the ladder of self-fulfillment has been gathering pace with this discovery. Jean practices daily and is now proficient in various dances such as the tango, the waltz, and the fox trot. He travels to dance competitions with his partner, even winning a competition against other dancing pairs. His dancing partner is a white collar professional, very much taken with his qualities and abilities, who has conquered any initial prejudices about Jean's lower income or "inferior" social status.

If Jean, considering his limited education and disadvantaged background, has achieved so much, what of those of us who benefit from superior education, who have attended colleges and universities? Think about the enormous amount of artistic potential that lies dormant within you, waiting to be awakened.

The expression of artistic impulses catalyzes an unparalleled process of personal growth and self-development. The very act of expression reveals the unexplored territory of your being. It is perhaps the most authentic process of self-discovery available to human beings.

The creative act is an intensely private one, free from the deceptions of Consumer-world. When immersed in the process of creation as an artist or a craftsman, regardless of the influences or inspirations that drive your creation, the ineluctable fact remains that the creation is yours. There is an intertwining between your self and your creation, an inseparable link. Whatever you produce will forever be your legacy, the manifestation of your self in this plane of existence. It is irrelevant whether the finished

product is durable or evanescent, whether it has any artistic value or is worthless, whether it is the product of a genius or a simpleton: it is an outward extension of you within the universe.

The act of creation demands that you summon up and impose your self upon the artistic material. It is the process of taking an art and imbuing it with your voice, your touch, your meaning. It is the transposition of your intangible spiritual beauty into a form that can be appreciated by others. In creating, you are nearest to the divine, you are manifesting that infinitesimal fraction of godliness that was given to each of us.

The value of artistic creation does not rest in the finished product but in the act of creation itself. Reared on a diet of finished consumer products, often expertly packaged and marketed, you have lost the value of the process of creation. Underestimating the value of the creative process is an essential obstacle to many an individual's failure to recognize and nurture his creative self.

Too many have either abandoned or are afraid to pursue artistic inclinations because they feel their talents are not up to par with the leading lights in these artistic fields. Some have actively tried to gain recognition for their creations but were discouraged by repeated rejections.

If you have stopped practicing artistic activities due to the modesty of your talents you are not alone. Writers, poets, painters, singers, dancers, sculptors and craftsmen of all sorts have forsaken their calling, convinced that their battered egos could no longer take the pounding. Most have disregarded their creative selves altogether, their self-esteem overwhelmed by the "perfect" creations of consumerism.

The obsession with perfection propagated by consumerism is the principal culprit in destroying the artistic impulse. Consumerism has undermined your self-esteem by constantly telling you that unless you do something extremely well – with the bar being set by the multinationals – you should not do it. The torrent of idealized images and objects produced and mass-marketed by the multinationals has poisoned your mind and has made you reticent to explore the possibilities of your artistic self. Better to fall back in the comforting arms of mass entertainment, brand names and junk food, better to satisfy all of your artistic needs at the shopping mall than struggle to satisfy them yourself.

Saving the Self

Art is for the Self:

To combat this fallacy, remember there is no such thing as failure. Success lies in the attempt. In a Consumer-world where tangible results are the sole mark of success, individual artistic achievement lies in the act of participation. Art is for your benefit alone.²⁷

As a child, I instinctively knew my creative self needed to be expressed so I was never self-conscious about my talents. Always a lover of music and art, during my childhood and adolescence I practiced both. In music I took the flute as my instrument of choice and in art, aside from writing, I was particularly attracted to drawing and painting.

I was also atrocious. Both in terms of my music and drawings I was the pinnacle of ineptitude. I nonetheless persisted in exercising my non-existent talents for a good number of years. I had no illusions as to my lack of talent. I was perfectly aware and often frustrated at my inability to render my creative impulses in a more pleasing form.²⁸ But whether it was the jarring squeals of my flute or the awkward squiggles of my drawings, the act of creation gave me pleasure. Through my rough and awkward attempts I was expressing my own love for these arts, I was manifesting my self's interpretation of them. Lost in a world of my own creation, I was removed from the mesmerizing charms of consumerism, free from any influences but the free play of my own mind.

Music: the interpretation of art

The artistic self does not only exist in your creations. Artistic abilities are expressed in interpreting the creations of others.

Famous classical pieces such as Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 have been interpreted by thousands of orchestras throughout the centuries since their composition. What draws people to classical concerts is not hearing the actual symphony itself. Most classical concert attendees are perfectly familiar with the music and its nuances, and probably own one or more recordings of the piece. They come to the concert to

27. If others benefit from it, good for them. But art is not a search for recognition; that is vanity.

28. Although my family was even more frustrated by my incompetence as one day my flute disappeared in mysterious circumstances. It was never seen or heard of again. Strangely, my parents did not seem to mind this unfortunate turn of events.

see that piece interpreted by a particularly accomplished musician or a renowned conductor.

Nor is this confined to classical music. People attend all sorts of musical events to see a “live” rendition of their performer’s favourite hits. What attracts them? It is the originality. Each live performance is an original. Your CD recording will always repeat the same performance. That is the beauty of humanity. We are not robots, we are not automatons, we are not perfect. Each of our actions will not, cannot, be a perfect replication of a previous action. No matter how closely we might try to mimic it, there will always be a difference. Musicians celebrate this difference by constantly varying their interpretation of a particular piece. Each version is a new creation. Each version adds to their development as artists and human beings.

It is not only the great performers who delight in interpreting musical compositions. Who among us does not like to whistle along to a favourite tune? Who does not find himself singing a favourite song in the shower? In doing this, you are no different from the original artist or the accomplished musician in one essential respect: just like them, you are expressing your creative self. Your mind and soul’s need for art finds expression in your rendering of a musical piece.²⁹ The same hunger that drives tenor Andrea Bocelli drives you as well. Regardless of what set of pipes nature has given you, you sing for your needs, you sing because it gives you pleasure. The pleasure lies in the fact that it is your performance, your unique and signature performance. The self relishes its own creative expression. Never deny it the joy of manifesting its potential.

The act of artistic creation is also a meditative one. It is a communion of a mind and body, separated from the totality of existence by the concentration required for the generative act. Focused on the task at hand, the creator loses track of time. The stresses and cares of day-to-day life are obliterated. Vanities, fears and frustrations fall by the wayside. Artistic creation provides a sanctuary for the battered ego and assaulted senses, victims of consumer over-stimulation.

Unlike television, artistic creation soothes the mind without numbing or indoctrinating. Through the unadulterated expression of the self which marks the creative act you achieve a greater sense of inner peace and balance. Artistic creation reassures the ego because it knows itself to be in complete control, free from any external menaces. There is no ultimate

29. There is actual benefit to derive from the experience of art. Tests have shown that listening to certain types of classical music improves the mind’s reasoning faculties.

goal, no barriers to overcome, no deadlines to meet. Artistic creation relishes only the act of creation. The product itself, no matter how satisfying, can never compare to the sheer joy of the process.

Engaging the artistic self inevitably leads to a progression of your art. Once your creativity is stirred it will demand ever more from you. You will seek new avenues to express your artistic abilities, to test their limits. From keeping a daily journal you might dabble in poetry, then try short stories, perhaps even a novella. If you work in embroidery you will attempt ever more complicated and difficult patterns. The canvas for your creation will expand as far as your imagination and ability will take you, from fashioning a crude wooden spoon to single-handedly building your own massive oak library. The artistic impulse becomes a testing ground for the self, where you are constantly trying to better and expand upon your previous work. This is what I term the “progressive pull” of the imagination, and it usually works in tandem with the intellect to help fulfil your potential. In exercising your artistic self you are progressing as a human being.

Work as art: the artistic laborer

Work is usually thought of as a necessary evil. People work to provide for their families and themselves. Work is set in opposition to play, to relaxation and to enjoyment. This opposition is underscored by an essential aspect of the definition of work, namely, that it requires “a considerable expenditure of effort.” Work is thus something difficult, something which, if it cannot be avoided, must be endured.

The negative connotations associated with work derive from the dichotomy between labour and creative needs. Correcting this dysfunction means harmonizing the two objectives so they are not at cross-purposes. Ideally, there should be a seamless union between the purpose of work and the purpose of existence, the latter being the achievement of our potential.

Too often, however, work is separate from your needs, tied in with artificial economic necessities. Too often, people seek in a job nothing else but financial rewards, the means through which they can achieve their perceived consumer needs. As such, too many people are unhappy or at least dissatisfied with their professional lives.

The multinationals sustain and benefit from the dichotomy between the purpose of your work and the purpose of your being. Portraying work as a struggle, multinationals claim you can be “rewarded” by consuming their products. Ironically, the people toiling the hardest are the