

Julia Cameron On How To Get Out Of Your Own Way by Maria Popova

“No matter what your age or your life path ... it is not too late or too egotistical or too selfish or too silly to work on your creativity.”

“Art is not a thing — it is a way,” Elbert Hubbard wrote in 1908. But the question of what that way is, where exactly it leads, and how to best follow it is something artists have been grappling with since the dawn of recorded time and psychologists have spent decades trying to decode, outlining the stages of creativity, its essential conditions, and the best technique for producing ideas.

In 1978, a few months after she stopped drinking, artist, poet, playwright, novelist, filmmaker, composer, and journalist Julia Cameron began teaching artists — by the broadest possible definition — how to overcome creative block and get back on their feet after a “creative injury.” What began as one-on-one lessons with a handful of artists became a larger workshop, then a course, which Cameron was invited to teach around the world, and eventually *The Artist’s Way* (public library) — a seminal, much-beloved handbook on the creative life, exploring its gateways, its obstacles, and how we can get out of our own way. It’s at once a practical set of techniques and a timeless philosophical meditation on the quintessential human impulse to create.

Art by Sydney Pink from [“Overcoming Creative Block.”](#)

Writing in the introduction to the 10th anniversary edition, Cameron adds to the most beautiful definitions of art:

Art is a spiritual transaction. Artists are visionaries. We routinely practice a form of faith,

seeing clearly and moving toward a creative goal that shimmers in the distance — often visible to us, but invisible to those around us. Difficult as it is to remember, it is our work that creates the market, not the market that creates our work. Art is an act of faith, and we practice practicing it.

Indeed, while there is a strong spiritual overtone to the book that can feel off-putting to those of us skeptical of organized religion, Cameron takes care to invite the broadest possible definition of spirituality, echoing Flannery O'Connor and pointing out that it need not be one aligned with religion at all. She writes:

Think of it as an exercise in open-mindedness. . . . Remind yourself that to succeed in this course, no god concept is necessary. In fact, many of our commonly held god concepts get in the way. Do not allow semantics to become one more block for you. When the word God is used in these pages, you may substitute the thought good orderly direction or flow. What we are talking about is a creative energy. . . . There seems to be no need to name it unless that name is a useful shorthand for what you experience.

Art by Vladimir Radunsky from Mark Twain's "Advice to Little Girls."

That creative energy, Cameron argues, is part of our core nature. Rather than learning it, we simply need to unlearn all the techniques we've acquired for blocking it in the course of living our Serious Adult Lives. She writes:

No matter what your age or your life path, whether making art is your career or your hobby or your dream, it is not too late or too egotistical or too selfish or too silly to work

on your creativity. . . . I have come to believe that creativity is our true nature, that blocks are an unnatural thwarting of a process at once as normal and as miraculous as the blossoming of a flower at the end of a slender green stem.

Like T.S. Eliot, who extolled the mystical quality of creativity, Cameron recounts her own journey of learning to unblock that natural creative flow — the life-force Dylan Thomas memorably called “the force that through the green fuse drives the flower” — and considers the nonjudgmental mind necessary for true creative work:

I learned to turn my creativity over to the only god I could believe in, the god of creativity, I learned to get out of the way and let that creative force work through me... I learned to just show up at the page and write down what I heard. Writing became more like eavesdropping and less like inventing a nuclear bomb. It wasn't so tricky, and it didn't blow up on me anymore. I didn't have to be in the mood. I didn't have to take my emotional temperature to see if inspiration was pending. I simply wrote. No negotiations. Good, bad? None of my business. I wasn't doing it. By resigning as the self-conscious author, I wrote freely.

This concept of surrender seems closer to Eastern philosophical teachings about the unity of the universe than it is to the Western notion of divinity in the religious sense. Cameron writes:

If you think of the universe as a vast electrical sea in which you are immersed and from which you are formed, opening to your creativity changes you from something bobbing in that sea to a more fully functioning, more conscious, more cooperative part of that ecosystem.

Art by Lisa Congdon from ‘Whatever You Are, Be a Good One.’

And yet, with a hint of Wattsian distinction between belief and faith, Cameron makes a case for the “spiritual electricity” implicit to the creative process and writes:

The heart of creativity is an experience of the mystical union; the heart of the mystical union is an experience of creativity. . . . Creativity is an experience — to my eye, a spiritual experience. It does not matter which way you think of it: creativity leading to spirituality or spirituality leading to creativity. In fact, I do not make a distinction between the two. In the face of such experience, the whole question of belief is rendered obsolete. As Carl Jung answered the question of belief late in his life, “I don’t believe; I know.”

This circular relationship between creativity and spirituality, Cameron argues, is paralleled by the techniques and practices of her “unblocking method.” In a wonderfully reassuring passage, she writes of the “spiral path” toward creative recovery:

You will circle through some of the issues over and over, each time at a different level. There is no such thing as being done with an artistic life. Frustrations and rewards exist at all levels on the path. Our aim here is to find the trail, establish our footing, and begin the climb.

But despite the spiral nature of the path, Cameron draws on her extensive experience of working with artists to outline several stages of the creative recovery process — stages strikingly similar to those of grief, perhaps because the process itself necessitates that we let go of the attachments and psychoemotional habits that stand in the way of our contact with creative energy. Cameron writes:

While there is no quick fix for instant, pain-free creativity, creative recovery (or discovery) is a teachable, trackable spiritual process. Each of us is complex and highly individual, yet there are common recognizable denominators to the creative recovery process.

Working with this process, I see a certain amount of defiance and giddiness in the first few weeks. This entry stage is followed closely by explosive anger in the course's midsection. The anger is followed by grief, then alternating waves of resistance and hope. This peaks-and-valleys phase of growth becomes a series of expansions and contractions, a birthing process in which students experience intense elation and defensive skepticism.

This choppy growth phase is followed by a strong urge to abandon the process and return to life as we know it. In other words, a bargaining period. People are often tempted to abandon the course at this point. I call this a creative U-turn. Re-commitment to the process next triggers the free-fall of a major ego surrender. Following this, the final phase of the course is characterized by a new sense of self marked by increased autonomy, resilience, expectancy, and excitement—as well as by the capacity to make and execute concrete creative plans.

If this sounds like a lot of emotional tumult, it is. When we engage in a creativity recovery, we enter into a withdrawal process from life as we know it. Withdrawal is another way of saying detachment or nonattachment, which is emblematic of consistent work with any meditation practice.

Illustration by Lisbeth Zwerger for ‘Alice in Wonderland.’

But Cameron's most salient and empowering point is about the direction of the withdrawal:

We ourselves are the substance we withdraw to, not from, as we pull our overextended and misplaced creative energy back into our own core.

What stands between us and that return to our core is the chronic perfectionism against which Anne Lamott so eloquently admonished. Cameron writes:

We are victims of our own internalized perfectionist, a nasty internal and eternal critic, the Censor, who resides in our (left) brain and keeps up a constant stream of subversive remarks that are often disguised as the truth. . . . Make this a rule: always remember that your Censor's negative opinions are not the truth. This takes practice. By spilling out of bed and straight onto the page every morning, you learn to evade the Censor.

In the remainder of *The Artist's Way*, Cameron becomes the trusted sherpa on "an intensive, guided encounter with your own creativity — your private villains, champions, wishes, fears, dreams, hopes, and triumphs" — the kind of experience that will "make you excited, depressed, angry, afraid, joyous, hopeful, and, ultimately, more free." Complement it with Lamott's indispensable *Bird by Bird*, Neil Gaiman on making great art, and Anna Deavere Smith on what creative confidence really means.