

Wisdom of the Creatives, curated by Alan Lake



"Sax Toast" photo concept/art direction by Stephen Sayadian

*Long perched upon my living room table is a book gifted to me by an old friend called *The War of Art*, a play on Sun Tzu's *Art of War*- only geared towards the creative process. Glancing through it once again this New Years Eve, putting it down I resolved to seek more inspiration in my life. Which in turn makes me more creative in my own life. "In pursuit of joys untasted" from Verdi's *La Traviata* sums it up nicely. With this in mind I thought it might be interesting to ask some of my more creative friends their viewpoint on the subject. Impulsively, phone calls were made and emails were sent to a group of people that make my life richer with their presence- musicians, inventors, photographers, chefs, record producers, authors, filmmakers, scientists and then some. Tasking them to give me a comment/thought/impart wisdom about creativity-their responses are below.*

I'll start:

I love when concept and execution are simultaneous- when I think of something to play and am already doing it. A musical moneyshot. Creativity is like a muscle, the more you use it, the bigger it gets. No guarantees on meeting the muse, but if you keep showing up, after a lifetime your chances improve. Creative disciplines are similar in that way. Most people draw like a child because that's when they stop drawing. As a musician and chef, people often ask me about my cooking, which reminds me of my music and parallels it so naturally that I made up my own word to describe it. "Jazzfood" - solid technique coupled with tasteful improvisation. That would be me.

Next up, a formidable cast of creative characters weighing in with their thoughts on the subject of creativity.

Stephen Sayadian (aka Rinse Dream) - filmmaker, creative director, set designer, writer, satirist, surrealist. Besides winning a dance contest at my bar mitzvah his work includes directing Cafe Flesh, Dr. Caligari and Nightdreams and production design for the 90's television series Silk Stalkings. Stephen was fêted with a retrospective of his work at the L' Étrange festival in Paris a few years back.

Creativity, n. The essence of life. When it's over, you're dead.

Jerry Stahl - novelist, journalist, screenwriter... Stahl's work includes Permanent Midnight, Perv, A Love Story, I Fatty, Happy Mutant Baby Pills, Alf, thirtysomething, Moonlighting, Twin Peaks, CSI, NY Times, Esquire, Playboy and winner of The Pushcart Prize for fiction. This clip of him from the Moth says it all: "https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ql_ECykkulg."

Creativity is what artists have to keep from blowing strangers' brains out - or their own.

Larry Kopald - Larry has been an Executive Creative Director for some of the world's leading ad agencies, working with Nike to Coke to McDonalds and Mercedes. Today he heads up Kopald/Stranger in Los Angeles, a change agency that helps companies and governments create positive social change while achieving their core objectives. He's done environmental communications for the Olympics and the United Nations, serves on the board of the Museum of Broadcasting, is a member of the Television Academy, and has been nominated for Grammy and Emmy Awards. In Jr. High there were 3 drummers. Larry and I were 2 of them. His family owned Dad's Root Beer here in Chicago and the word "mensch" has a picture of him in the dictionary.

Wikipedia defines Creativity as "a phenomenon." James Michener says it occurs when you "stare at a blank sheet of paper until drops of blood appear on your forehead." My guess is most creative people would agree with both of them. Anyone can come up with a creative idea once in awhile, but doing it consistently means drawing blood. It means hours or decades of experimenting, studying what's already out there in the big world to make sure you're not replicating, and building up such trust in your internal pathway from your head to your heart that you let the car go back and forth on its own. It's an

immensely, intensely personal achievement. Kind of like being all alone on a deserted island and finally reaching that itch in the middle of your back. Ahhhh...

Mark Panick - musician/singer/songwriter from Bonemen of Barumba, Razorhouse and Black Friars Social Club. Here's a link to a video of his I quite like: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QzI-ZFZYxOc>"

My inner 12 yr old is in charge of my creativity. He's not always amenable to company but I try and create an environment he feels comfortable in. Hoping that he'll show up more often than not. The whole fill the well and then disgorge the well allegory works for me. And as long as I am moving my skills forward, the rest seems to fall into place. Having some discipline certainly helps too.

Victorrio Giustino - writer, poet, historian, media commentator, radio talk show host knower of all things Chicago.

Lord lift the creativity of the child in my heart, head in hands, not be chained by adulthood. The clock of creativity never stops. Don't let outside forces steal your creative spirit. Season creativity into the soup of life so those that taste it will grow.

Robert Smyth - inventor/engineer/developer of power supplies for aircrafts, submarines, missile launchers, M1 tanks and my favorite, a solar powered boat he built in his garage and tested in his pool. When one of the submarines he worked on surfaced at the North Pole radioed back "On top of the world" his reply was "Then steer South". A poignant, decadent, mofo t'is he.

I think creativity is something born out of an aberrant brain condition, as I notice that the majority of people are not creative They just do what they are taught to do and nothing more. As an engineer, most of my creative ideas are born from observation and laziness combined. I see something and sense that there is an easier way to achieve whatever it is. Most of all, to be creative you need to have imagination with no boundaries.

Hegina Rodrigues- [Brazilian outsider artist](#)

My quest is to paint intangible feelings- to illustrate the inner distortions of our emotions.

[Patrick Leonard](#) - pianist, songwriter, record producer, childhood pal and suggester of the book that inspired this piece in the first place, The War of Art. Pat has worked with a who's who of rock and roll that includes Leonard Cohen, Bryan Ferry, Madonna, Elton John, Roger Waters, David Gilmour, Jewel and Rod Stewart.

When my old friend Alan Lake emailed to ask if I could write a few thoughts on "Creativity," I suddenly felt less creative and more confused than usual. First there are questions: are we born creative? Is creativity a qualitative attribute? Does creativity relate to art and, if so, what does that relationship look like? Is a creative person necessarily an artist? Is art always creative? Is it possible to be ultra creative and not

be an artist, or to be an artist without possessing any creativity? When a child is "created" are its parents then creative? Is the child art? A photo is snapped on an iPhone and edited to a striking sepia tone on a free app... creativity? Someone downloads music software, then drags and drops their very own selection of "loops" to a player, hits the spacebar, and "music" emerges from the computer. Is this creativity or more like birth, sans the beauty?... these are questions that come to mind.

My personal definition of creativity has become very blurry in the last decade or so, and I don't expect that it will refocus itself anytime soon. It seems that egalitarian creativity has become a new truth, and it's sheer folly to expect mankind to redefine the word in the name of justice for at least a hundred years or so. An apology to my fellow man, but we know how we are. This poor old word is failing to mean anything and, though it's a noble and worthy cause to revive it, the result would inevitably be only as good as our iPhones would provide. Maybe it's best to wait for the iPhone 6, or what I'm sure will be the even greater, iPhone 7.

Bottom line: without some creativity your food is bland, your house is boring, your music library came complete with your iPod and your sex life sucks... but your children are still beautiful. What a world.

Bill Bartolotta - Bill is the principle of esam I.I.c., a firm that delivers mighty solutions through multiple mediums. In addition, he keeps awake by doing creative direction/ stage design for Tedx Midwest and Chicago Ideas Week and is creative advisor to the Museum of Contemporary Art's events and entertainment. He's also a badass musician.

5 on creativity- i attempt to say them as me wishing i offer them differently enough to be worthy of someone's time to read them:

1. creativity is an urge to express one's singular understanding of a soul or of a specific incident whether person creature plant mineral or other art is a byproduct of a successful urge delivery

2. ion charges for creativity impression aspiration perception conception

3. assuming creativity - who we are is our best gift to the universe - our best gift from the universe - we may choose who we are - igniting our intention to seek the multitudes within us accepting intuition while listening to the multitudes imagining the possibilities we may evolve to acting upon those which unfold our purpose lead us to understanding our selves - understanding who we are offers the best of our best gift to the universe - understanding who we are is the best of our gift from the universe - acting on who we are allows us the opportunity to consciously bring our genius to enjoy each and every day which in turn extends joy to all

4. method of creativity express do not inform

5. secret of creativity good working thoughts exceed the mysteries of faith

[SANDRO](#)- a photographer and filmmaker whose editorial work has been featured in The New Yorker, Time, Forbes, Wired, GQ and Newsweek, and winner of the Saatchi and Saatchi Best New Director Award at the Cannes International Festival of Creativity. Nikon gave him a new camera to test and told him to put it through its paces to see what it could do. Here it is: <http://vimeo.com/36345294>

Creativity to me is like a heart beat, without it your dead!

[Jon Langford](#)- a Welsh expatriate residing in Chicago, Jon is a musician (Mekons, Waco Brothers) a Bloodshot Records recording artist and a painter.

Sometimes great ideas just fall out of the sky, songs appear in a matter of moments fully realized almost like somebody else wrote them BUT you'd be a fool to sit around waiting for that to happen. The creative process is hard work, a constant and rigorous conversation or physical interaction with the people and ideas in the world around you. Shun all solitary navel gazing. There are always tricks and techniques to get creative muscles to flex and when the juices flow the faucets may not be easy to shut off. Keep a pencil by the side of your bed.

Jonny Stax- founder and president of Jonny Stax, Inc. His primary interest is supporting people in the creation process of new businesses, art works, social justice campaigns, and educational curriculum. Clients include Chicago Children's Theatre, Test Positive Aware Network, Chicago Department of Public Health and Chicago Public Schools.

I think it's important to look at the root of creativity, which is creation. The creation process is making something new out of what exists. This happens in every field and not just the arts. I see actions as either creation, execution, or evaluation or making something new, making something happen again, or learning from something that was made.

Don Hall- storyteller, cultural organizer, events producer, provocateur, podcaster, actor, director.

Creativity is a habit. The "unicorn dust" theory of creative thinking is that if you clear your mind and wait, inspiration will come. Which is horseshit and merely fodder for self help books. There is no new idea on the planet so making the combinations happen as a habitual practice guarantees that eventually you will "see" inspiration in the constant wash of crap. Diamonds in the rough; needles in the haystack.

Jason Vincent - exec chef/co-owner Giant, Chicago

creativity can be measured by the life cycle of a cronut. or, more specifically, by the life cycle of the idea of a cronut. you have a moderately cool idea, the right people say that it's a better than average idea, the masses say that it's brilliant, the universe continues to exist when your next moderately cool idea is moderately cool. my point isn't to hate

on cronuts...i'm just saying that creativity is the one drug that you need a host and a partner for. if you're creative and alone, who gives a shit? you need someone else to tell you that what you've created is amazing or else you won't want to do it again. but, when a few people tell you that what you're doing is great...all the common sense in the world won't help you. no matter how many little angels appear on your shoulder to tell you that "it could be better. it's not your best work. it sucks." that little fucking devil telling you not to worry about it. what's next? what's new? creativity is a pr stunt. i'd rather see the forest.

[Ian McDonald](#)- musician, multi instrumentalist, songwriter, producer, founding member of King Crimson and Foreigner. “ McDonald wrote [In the Court of the Crimson King](#), and [21st Century Schizoid Man](#), both revolutionary for their time. The sax in T Rex’s Bang a Gong? That’s Ian also. The guy virtually invented a genre of music with a few of his friends. A huge influence on me musically, it’s been an honor to work with and call him friend.

Creativity is discovery: finding something that wasn't there before...

Mike Nagrant- Chicago food writer and critic, contributor to the James Beard award-winning Alinea cookbook.

Creativity is mostly about discipline, the discipline to sit down, the discipline to think, the discipline to avoid doing stuff other people have done a hundred times. There's not as much genius in creativity as there is the mark of really hard work.

JC Brooks- lead singer of Bloodshot Records soul band JC Brooks and the Uptown Sounds, and a trained actor. Here’s their excellent cover of the Wilco classic I Am Trying To Break Your Heart <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZK6VILyHVDE>

For me, creativity is a really specific mind-space that it can sometimes be hard to enter. When I'm there I'm constantly inspired and I can apply my creativity to almost any discipline, but when I'm not, my challenge is trying to find an in-road to it --almost like a self-hypnosis or guided meditation, but it can be tricky and doesn't always take... I guess my biggest challenge sometimes is just being okay with waiting for the state of creativity to settle into/onto (?) me again without pushing too hard to get there. If I really push for it I just get frustrated and pretty-much insure that I won't get there. This all only applies when I'm working alone... when I'm working with a partner or in a group it tends to come more easily.

Subha Das- Associate Professor of Chemistry, Carnegie Mellon University, creator of The Kitchen Chemistry Sessions- a course that uses food and molecular cuisine to teach the concepts of chemistry and science.

Creativity is the ability to conceive and realize the juxtaposition or combination of disparate things in a new, often unexpected way. The creative concept or act is

spontaneous or organic but (I believe) arises from and belies at least a fair amount of mastery over what is traditional or the norm.

[John Sinclair](#)- poet, writer, political activist and Radio Free Amsterdam disk jockey (where he resides). Sinclair managed the MC5 and led the White Panther Party. John Lennon [wrote a song](#) about him when he was sent to prison for giving 2 joints to an undercover cop.

I just try to do the best I can with what the spirits give me to work with.

Jason Brock- award-winning writer, editor, filmmaker, composer, artist.

In its most essential form, creativity is making the divine out of the mundane. It is taking the fundamental life force of the human spirit, and resolving that unfocused energy into something akin to the spiritual. Shamans were often catalysts of this nature in pre-religious contexts. In more organized societies, religion has attempted to channel energy of this nature with decidedly mixed results, often heaping upon the creative impulse the added burdens of castigation and humiliation, lest the individual attempt to take their (rightful) place amongst the gods.

Just as one need not believe in a godhead to live a moral and righteous life, one can be a creative without the insufferable tyranny of an organized gathering of impotents taking umbrage at every word written, every stroke painted, every dish prepared, every frame captured.

We are the authors of our lives, and the masters of the final outcome, not the politicians or religious leaders of the moment. To understand that takes courage, passion, skill, talent, and inspiration, otherwise we are all doomed, in the words of Thoreau, to lead "lives of quiet desperation." And then the grave, followed by the unknown.

Why not take one's life and steer it, rather than listen to the protestations of less valiant persons hiding from the possible?

[Karen Page and Andrew Dornenburg](#)- authors and winners of 2 James Beard Awards for The Flavor Bible and Becoming a Chef. Here's a [link to an interview](#) I did with them a few years ago.

People describe a certain dish as "creative," when what they really mean is "eccentric" or "unusual." Are fruit-flavored caviar-like spheres really "creative"? We'd argue that true creativity not only expands the boundaries of what came before it, but does so in a way that adds value.

In summation I think it's safe to say that a creative's worldview is different than most. One can do worse than "having an imagination with no boundaries" or doing "the best with what the spirits give" you to work with. Lots of golden perspectives here. May they

inspire you to create your next masterpiece (or three). And don't forget to "keep a pencil by your bed.

Alan Lake is a chef, musician, writer, reprobate and lover of all things beautiful and delicious. Author of ["The Garlic Manifesto"](#) and the soon to be published "Home Cookin'" he's also won numerous awards, professional competitions and distinctions. Friends describe him as talented, tough, comical and egotistical with a mushy center that often smells of garlic. He views his food as he does his music and writing, and has been known to bust a pout if subpar in any way.