



At Creation's Heart © Cathy Johnson

Originally written in 1999 for *Watercolor Magic Magazine*, now *Watercolor Artist*—this was my very first column for them.

Creativity. That word has as many meanings as there are minds and hearts to express it. And that is as it should be. As it *has* to be.

At its heart, creativity is intensely personal, a uniquely human activity that belongs to each of us. No one has a corner on it, and I'd feel safe in saying no one is devoid of it, either. We just need to learn to trust our own vision—the mentality of creativity.

This is something that cannot be copied by rote from someone else, or it ceases to *be* creative; it is our own delicious filtering of experience into vision. It is our own brand of alchemy. It is a dance—a joyful one at times, tentative at others, vital and exciting. It is magic. No wonder it is such a satisfying undertaking. When you touch the very heart of creativity, you are present at the beginning of the world.

And what else do we have to work with but the raw material of our own lives, our experience? Beyond the mechanics of medium and equipment and painting surfaces, beyond artistic considerations of hue and value and composition, we have to find what it is we want to say. What is uniquely ours, what we *need* to say that no one else can. The thing that makes the endeavor worthwhile, more for ourselves than for others.

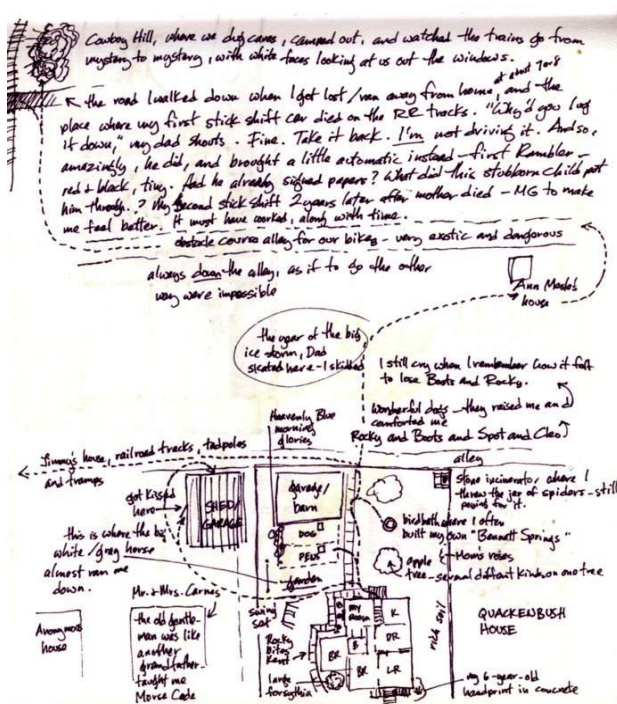
There are times when we all feel there is nothing worth spending our small reserves of time on, or that we have nothing to offer. Creativity is not always valued in these materialistic

times. Life gets busy or stressful, we have responsibilities, and taking time for such things appears impossible--or at the least self-indulgent.

Nothing could be farther from the truth--creating, taking the time to express ourselves in this way, even for a few moments, is truly what separates us from the rest of the animal kingdom. Each small bit of true creativity lays the groundwork for more, and makes possible a process that connects us to a world, and a way of thinking about it and experiencing it, that is far larger than our day-to-day one.

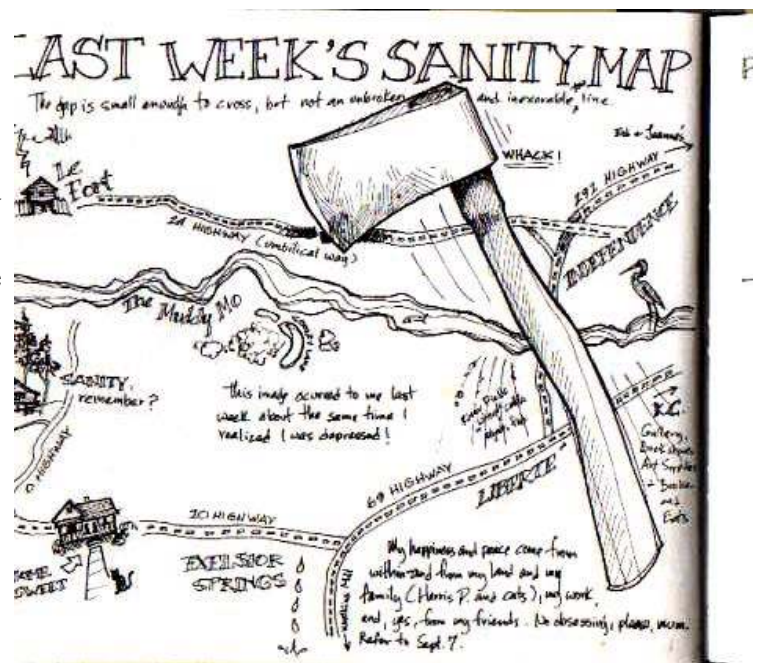
At one particularly long dry period in my life--and we all have them!--I attended a lecture on creativity. I knew I needed it, knew I needed to take the time to create, but had been so busy I had almost forgotten how. The lecture was intended to kick-start my creative juices--and did it ever. As I sat listening to the speaker I began sketching her in my journal, just letting the images flow, bouncing ideas off her words. It was a revelation! I actually had fun with it, which I had not allowed myself to do for some time. And it opened the floodgates, letting me experience life in a way I had not in a long time.

Instead of making conventional paintings of conventional subjects, I began to draw and paint aspects of my life I'd never thought to explore with my art--my past, my present, even my future. I made a "map" of my childhood home and its environs, and paid special attention to those parts of it that had been especially mine when I was young--the back yard apple tree where I spent hours with my beagle dogs; a



particular place under a spreading forsythia bush where I could hide unobserved, as children love to do; the window in the attic that opened out onto a porch roof that was my special observatory. I spent many hours on that roof, dreaming and reading and watching the world go by—and I had completely forgotten it until I took the time to explore it creatively with my map. It was fascinating to see the things that had shaped the person I had become, and I would have missed the connections completely if I had not taken the time to explore them in a new, fresh way.

That worked so well that I did the same thing with a current situation in my life that had caused me a great deal of tension and unrest. I drew it out on paper and labeled it my Anxiety Roadmap. But rather than just explore the darker aspects and my feelings of being trapped by it, I used the image of the axe I used to cut firewood at my cabin to cut the “road” that had held me tied to a situation that no longer satisfied.



And I made sure that I drew the other alternatives in my life, as well—other ways to go, other possibilities. Somehow being playful and creative with all of this—and it did make me laugh!—let me begin to free myself from the situation. Creativity to the rescue!

Give yourself this kind of permission to create—and to be playful with it, and to have fun, if that’s what it takes—and you’ll be amazed at the images that result. No one else could have created them, because they are a mirror of your own experiences and thought processes.

The is obviously not the time to worry about whether the work you are producing is

saleable. You won't work on a commission, or think about what might go well on your gallery wall. This is the time to simply find your own well of creativity and let it flow. It's quite possible that out of that may come powerful representations that have great appeal to others, on any number of levels—but don't let that enter into your considerations when trying to open your mind to the process. Just begin.

Sometimes our art—our creativity—can help us explore and understand parts of our lives, to see them through new eyes—even to transform them. It is as though by paying attention to those aspects, or seeing them through the eyes of creativity, we can finally see their meaning.

A friend of mine began exploring what it was like being a woman in her family—she has three daughters, all quite different, and all of whom are creative young women in their own right. She began a very large iconographic painting of herself, her mother, and each of her daughters, with a portrait of each. Included, however, around the larger composition, were small vignettes from each life—little images that expressed a part of each personality, their loves and fears, their experiences. It really is rather like a medieval icon in its overall design and effect, as well as in its symbolic purpose—and it is a work in progress. I don't know that she will ever finish it; it's large enough to allow room to continue to work and add new images as things occur in each life.

How can we prepare for this sort of creative inspiration? The answer is different for each of us, of course. We all must find our own way, for it to have the most profound effect. But here are a few suggestions that you may find useful.

Take time to just be—to absorb and reflect. There's no need to jump right in.

Allow your mind to make any connections it will, no matter how odd they might seem at this time. There is a reason they occurred to you.

Process the images in your own way, at your own pace. Don't all hurry or pressure to enter in.

Let yourself be open to inspiration, wherever it may come from—music, poetry, a flower, a conversation—even an argument may spark images that speak to you. Just let images rise to the surface.

Don't judge the images that come—analyzing can kill creativity. There's plenty of time to harness the windstorm later--just let it come, at first.

Don't worry about what anyone else might think or about what has gone before. This is your life you are interpreting through your art. No one else can know what your own personal associations are.

Choose your favorite medium, or one that most easily allows you to express the thoughts you are having. This may not be the best time to try to master something new—though that can spark creativity as well. To begin with, use those mediums that you love and are happiest with. For me, that is drawing and watercolor. The latter seems particularly suited to fresh images that capture the truth of what I want—and need—to say.

And most importantly, trust yourself and your own special brand of creativity; it is there, and it is worthwhile. Relax. And enjoy.

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