

# INTRODUCTION

There are a handful of phrases that, when invoked in group discussions or conversations, “grind my gears” (to borrow a phrase from *Family Guy*'s Peter Griffin). One, the loaded and nearly always exhausting preamble at a panel or book reading: “this is more of a comment than a question...” Its close cousin is the raised hand, announced by its owner: “I have a question.” *We know. Your hand is raised.*

But the absolute worst of the worst? *“I’m not creative.”*

I’ve thought a lot about why the phrase bothers me so much. It’s brief, grammatically correct, and yet it sits heavily on my soul when I hear it and made me incredibly uncomfortable to type. After many years of thinking, and starting to combat the notion in individuals across the country, I’ve finally found a way to articulate the reason it grinds my gears so: it underestimates its speaker.

To identify yourself as uncreative is to assume a few things, many of which I hope to challenge in the subsequent pages:

- That the notion of creativity is fixed;
- That it is something people *have*, and

- That you have no chance of finding or getting it.

My response? *"I bet you're wrong."*

Creativity isn't fixed. The late Dr. Maya Angelou agreed, remarking in a 1982 issue of *Bell Telephone Magazine*, "You can't use up creativity. The more you use, the more you have." Although the quote is often truncated here, she went on and shared a key reason why we feel some can be creative and others can't:

We set apart those people who should not be set apart, people whom we assume don't have a so-called artistic temperament, and that is stupid.<sup>1</sup>

So there you have it. Maya Angelou is with me. In that excerpt, she further debunks the second assumption about creative people- that creativity is something that you have. To reap the benefits of what I'll share in the following pages, I'd encourage you to think less about creativity as something one has, and more as something one practices. Cultivates. Learns and assembles from an assortment of other qualities. These qualities, when weaponized in concert with one another and applied to the problems we encounter in our world, make up the creativity you may be convinced you don't have.

And that brings me to the third point listed: to deny your own creativity carries the danger that you've convinced yourself that you can't cultivate a creative mindset. It is my sincere and fervent hope that, through talking about, teaching about, and (yep) writing about creativity, that I can change your mind on this. If you're open to hearing me out, I think we can get you there.

Are you there already? Fantastic. I want you to come along for this journey too. Because once you've embraced your own creativity, I'd like to put you to work. I'd like to put you to work nurturing and incubating the creativity of the people around you. I'd like you to monitor your frequently inhabited environments—your home, your office, your organizations—and to assess their hospitability for the traits essential to creativity. And if they're absent? I want you to take it upon yourself to help cultivate them. Ready? Cool. On we go!

### The Cultivating Creativity Manifesto

In April 2017, I released my Cultivating Creativity Manifesto online, the culmination of speaking and facilitating sessions on creativity across the country. In it, I distill the essential qualities I've observed in creative people, the

qualities of the most creative environments, and the qualities missing from markedly “uncreative” people and environments. Much of this book will be dedicated to highlighting these qualities, what they look like in action, and how you can cultivate them for yourself and your frequently inhabited environments.

The qualities and elements are as follows:

#### **Allies, Advocates, + Activators**

Allies and advisors are the people you want most in your corner, though they may not work on the actual product with you. They are knowledgeable of the circumstances in which you work, and/or are knowledgeable about you and how you work.

Unlike the cheerleaders we all (hopefully!) have in our lives to encourage us and keep us moving forward, allies and advisors are critical as well. They will ask questions that provoke thought, share information that may be discouraging or unwelcome at times, but – and this is important – do so for your benefit and the benefit of the project and idea at hand.

*Let's help you answer:*

Are you an ally, advocate, or activator? Do you have allies, advocates, or activators on your side?

#### **Broadmindedness**

So many of us balk at the idea of being creative because of the assumption that to create is to build something altogether new. In truth, a multitude of creative ideas are simply taking an idea or concept that exists in one space, and applying it to a new space; this competency is the essence of broadmindedness.

Developing an eye toward being able to recognize where this is appropriate, is one of the most essential skills any creative can have. It can be developed by consuming knowledge and news from a wide swath of areas- not just your chosen discipline, but others both adjacent and seemingly unrelated.

*Let's help you answer:*

Are you broad-minded? How can you start to broaden your mind?

#### **Collaboration**

Time now to bust another myth about creativity- despite what we see about

fast-rising entrepreneurs and tech wunderkind, these endeavors are rarely solitary in nature. Even if you have a strong set of allies and/or advisors, you stand to go further with collaborators. More minds on a problem or idea allow for diversity of thought- who does your idea or concept help? Who does it potentially hurt?

Developing a collaborative relationship that can weigh these questions candidly, while also yielding an arrangement that aids creativity, is the best case scenario for anyone with an eye toward solving problems- the best reason to use creativity, after all!

*Let's help you answer:*

Are you collaborative? Who do you work with well, and what elements of the relationship make it work?

**Determination**

*"Never give up on a dream just because of the time it will take to accomplish it. The time will pass anyway." -Earl Nightingale*

Too many of us are easily deterred from success when it will take time and hard work to accomplish. And indeed, the fruits of your creative labor may not surface right away. Results may not come until long after your deadline (self-imposed or otherwise); at, these results may not come until after our tenure at an institution or organization is done. But committing to yielding said results, despite our ability to enjoy the benefits, is a noble undertaking. Determination as a creative means persisting even when it's difficult, or when an element of the process changes (more on that in a moment).

*Let's help you answer:*

Are you determined? How can you develop the determination to continue a project even when fatigue or discouragement sets in?

**Execution**

Personal confession: while I have good handwriting and enjoy hand lettering, I've always balked at drawing or sketching because I don't consider myself to be artistic in that way. (Worth noting while we've hit upon the topic: creativity and artistic talent are NOT one and the same. Cool? Cool. On we go. )

Put another way, execution is what transforms a creative thought into an innovative act or product. Are you able to coordinate the people, resources, and other capital needed to take something theoretical and make it practical/tangible/real? It doesn't have to be perfect- indeed, the fear of creativity can stem from the fear that you'll screw it up. Make no mistake, you will screw it up. But strong execution inclination means that you understand that, and choose to push forward anyway.

*Let's help you answer:*

Are you inclined to execute? Are you prepared to explore what might be keeping you from moving through thought and into action?

### **Flexibility**

To the last point on execution- sometimes you'll get it wrong. Other times, you may not get it wrong, but you'll see where a change is needed. Flexibility is being willing to take that information and internalize it enough to use, but not deeply enough to discourage.

Put another way, flexibility is the competency of creativity that allows you to get up after a fall, brush yourself off, and not just keep moving- but actively work to not fall the same way a second time. Even if these falls are the result of external forces- loss of personnel, funding, etc. – flexibility will pair nicely with execution to adapt and proceed anyway.

*Let's help you answer:*

Are you flexible? What do you do when a proverbial wrench is thrown in your plan, and are you prepared to learn to adapt?

### **Growth Mindset**

There are a lot of assumptions tied up in the use of this term; I want to therefore clarify what I mean when I use it here. Creativity is often treated, oddly enough, like a growth mindset: I either have it, or I don't. But in reality, the skills to be creative can be taught. Believing that you can become creative, as with so many other things, is central to actually being able to do it.

At the risk of sounding cliché, cultivating a creative approach to life is like a muscle; the more it's exercised, the stronger it gets. And just as with any exercise goals you set, you have to want to achieve them to get anywhere.

*Let's help you answer:*

After everything you've seen here...are you willing to learn how to be creative?<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the traits listed above, I'm always quite insistent about adding one more trait for your consideration as you use your creativity out in the world-heart. With every idea you choose to pursue, there are likely to be winners and losers. Who is your idea intended to help? In the process, is it possible that your idea might neglect, marginalize, or hurt anyone? By applying the Hippocratic Oath to your creativity, you'll learn to weigh an idea by a number of other criteria, but also by the degree of heart it shows. The ability to innovate and make a mark on this world is a privilege- keeping heart at the center is critical to ensuring that the mark is a positive one.

*Let's help you answer:*

Are you prepared to center heart in your creative pursuits? What does it take to create with heart?



### How This Book Is Organized

Now that you're familiar with the core tenets of the Cultivating Creativity Manifesto, the first order of business will be to delve deeper into each one. Much of this book will explore why it's an essential element to unleashing your creativity and the creativity of others, how each tenet works in concert with the others, a few examples of where they've been essential to creative success, and some strategies and exercises to assist you in cultivating the tenet for yourself and those you work with and for.

I also want to address the possibility that implementing these ideas will be difficult. You may struggle to incorporate them into your daily life and operations, and others may struggle as you advocate for their introduction to your environment. Later sections of this book will equip you with language, scenarios, and mindsets to overcome resistance to creativity in your surroundings.

But I won't be alone in espousing the value of the Manifesto's traits. I've enlisted the testimony and brilliance of several friends, colleagues, and inspirations. Take it from all of us: the advice, counsel, encouragement, and strategies in the subsequent pages, matter. They matter in the world, and your currency will increase for your ability to absorb and enact them.



### **How to Use This Book**

The answer to “who’s your target audience?” can’t be “everyone.” Such a thing doesn’t exist, unless you’re peddling Nutella or a Styx album. (Strong stance, I know, but I’m taking it.) To that end, here’s the audience for whom I envision this book being most helpful:

*Budding creatives in need of a confidence boost:* As I mentioned a moment ago, I believe creativity is within the realm of possibility for most people. By identifying traits and skills that will help you put your creativity to good use, I hope to empower those who want to implement change and drive innovation. You have what you need to take the next step; if, for any reason, you don’t, it is my hope that the perspective and exercises that are shared here will help get you there.

*Managers, supervisors, and educators hoping to enable creativity:*

Whether you identify as a creative or not, those in the position to lead a team toward a creative mindset and outcome have an incredibly challenging task ahead of them. In *Collective Genius*, Harvard University’s Linda Hill and her research associates sum it up thusly:

“The unavoidable paradox at the heart of innovation is the need to *unleash* the talent of individuals *and*, in the end, to *harness* those talents in the form of a collective innovation that is useful to the organization.”<sup>3</sup>

Even when a space or environment has creative people, environments often need to adapt in order to unlock their creative potential. We’ll talk in the pages ahead about how to do that. What will need to be examined (or reexamined) to ensure individuals have what they need - in resources both physical and psychological - to rethink paradigms and driving meaningful change? This might mean the alteration or dissolution of processes, traditions, and ways of thinking that have permeated the organization for ages. Are you ready for that?

*Skeptics about the power of creativity:* In truth, I don’t think any one volume will change the mind of someone unconvinced about the necessity of creativity in our particular point in history. But here’s what I will do. I will share my experience with how developing this set of traits and skills can help change the face of organizations in meaningful and important ways. I will cite examples of how

creativity has been used strategically to further organizational goals. And I won't be doing so alone- I'll be sharing stories from and interviews with creatives that are deploying their mindset to make the world a better, stronger, and more agile place in which to live.

A few tips on how to get the most of what is shared here:

- **Share it with others:** Between the presence of qualities like Allies, Advocates, + Activators and Collaboration in the "Inside This Book," it should be no secret that I think creativity is best activated when it's a cooperative enterprise. Don't just sit with these ideas bouncing around in your own head. Ask friends/peers/advisors what they think about these ideas. Seek their insight about areas where you excel, and where you could stand to grow. Together, assess the environments in which you work together for their hospitability to these ideas. Where do your organizations or workspaces excel? Where could *they* stand to grow?
- **Complete the exercises:** Yes, even if you think you've "got this" in any one area. As humans who are susceptible to influence and growth, our skill levels can vary and evolve. As you come across exercises in the book, complete them on your own or with friends/peers/advisors. The result, whether you're spot-on in your self-assessment or if you find there's room for growth? *Learning*- perhaps the most essential element to cultivating creativity.
- **Use it!** There's a lot of language that circulates in this line of scholarly work- creativity, imagination, innovation, etc. Here's how I see it. Imagination is the ability to dream of change, creativity is the ability to conceive of how it would work, and innovation is the change it yields when put into practice. Imagination is great, creativity, is better. But innovation is best. Let what you read, learn, and gain from reading this change you. Let it change the environments you have custody over. Let it change the world in which you live. Will it be messy? Most assuredly. But it's worth it.

What am I ultimately hoping to inspire through the thousands of words ahead? The designer Paul Sandip said it best when he revealed:

*"Creative isn't the way I think, it's the way I like to live."*<sup>4</sup>

## CULTIVATING CREATIVITY

I agree with him. I'd like to think Dr. Maya Angelou would agree with him. And it is my sincere hope that by the conclusion of this read, you will too.

### QUESTIONS TO ANSWER AS YOU READ:

#### Allies + Advisors

Are you an ally or activator? Do you have allies or activators on your side?

#### Broadmindedness

Are you broad-minded? How can you start to broaden your mind?

#### Collaboration

Are you collaborative? Who do you work with well, and what elements of the relationship make it work?

#### Determination

Are you determined? How can you develop the determination to continue a project even when fatigue or discouragement sets in?

#### Execution

Are you inclined to execute? Are you prepared to explore what might be keeping you from moving through thought and into action?

#### Flexibility

Are you flexible? What do you do when a proverbial wrench is thrown in your plan, and are you prepared to learn to adapt?

#### Growth Mindset

After everything you've seen here...are you willing to learn how to be creative?

#### Heart

Are you prepared to center heart in your creative pursuits? What does it take to create with heart?

## CULTIVATING CREATIVITY

### References + Resources (Read Some More!)

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