

Tending the Fire, a podcast about creativity. I'm your host, Andrew Tsao. Thanks for joining. This the full transcript of Episode 2, the First Spark

My mother trained for a time as a soprano and enjoyed a somewhat successful semi-professional career singing opera. Of course, she left music behind and went on to graduate study in the dietary sciences, becoming a clinical dietitian, marrying my father and leaving the world of opera behind. That was expected of her as a daughter in a traditional Chinese family. However, I recall my mother sitting at the family piano, accompanying herself as she sang some of her favorite arias in our little music room. She sang some of her favorite arias in our little music room. She enrolled me, my older brother and younger sister in piano and violin lessons at an early age, only to discover that none of us had inherited any of her musical talent. Still, I loved listening to my mother sing and play. Though I didn't understand the Italian arias at all, I was entranced by the power and beauty of those famous pieces. They stirred something in me.

Then I received a remarkable gift one Christmas. It was a record album. I've forgotten the actual name of it, but it was a classics for kids record with little excerpts of famous classical pieces. What made it unique was that there was a narrator who would introduce each piece with a little story of what inspired the composer to write it. One particular piece described how Edvard Grieg borrowed the songs of local forest birds he would hear on his walks and transform them into musical themes. The record had a snatch of actual bird song, then the piece that Grieg wrote inspired by that song. I listened, listened again, listened again and listened even more to that example.

I don't remember my exact age, but I was probably eight or nine when this event occurred. I can recall obsessing over the phenomenon of what Grieg had done. He heard a bird and made a symphony out of it. What, how? Symphony out of it, what, how? I had to understand what this magic was all about. Is this what artists do? Is this what they call creativity? Is this what art is? Is that why the arias my mother sang bring me to tears, even though I don't understand a word of them? In the years to come, I would discover Bach, Mozart and Beethoven. The artistry of that triumvirate left me changed forever. It was the same with the Beatles and Bob Dylan. Later, it was bands like the Sex Pistols and the Ramones that would inspire me to pick up a guitar and dive into the wild world of rock and roll. During my rock phase, I used to live by Bob Dylan's lyric from All Along the Watchtower, all I've got is a red guitar, three chords and the truth. I'll confess that even today, I still only play those three chords.

Well, philosopher and psychologist John Dewey wrote that true art was a creation that transcends the conscious mind and delivers what he calls an experience to its audience. And delivers what he calls an experience to its audience. The conscious mind

is silenced, along with its criticisms, analysis, biases and conditioning. This leaves the reader, viewer or listener with an experience that is about recognition, transformation and awe. There is nothing to say, only the experience itself. Recall those moments in your own life, whether at a concert, a museum, reading a great book or encountering any artwork so well-crafted that you just had to stop and take it in. That was an experience.

For now, let's focus on another, yet related experience. If you're keeping up with this podcast, most likely you had an experience, like I did with that Classics for Kids record. At some point in your life, the first creative spark was ignited. You might have chosen, then and there, to dedicate your life to nurturing that spark, or you might have decided that being creative was simply a part of who you were and it was worth cultivating to some degree. Faced with is just how to nurture that spark.

Now, I don't think we should follow the examples of the rare geniuses who appear in history and blaze brightly across the firmament and create with almost godlike power. They are anomalies who are, by their nature, creative forces, who burn with rare intensity and often burn out in tragic ways. They can inspire us, but I don't think they can teach us much about the day-to-day creative process. In fact, if you look closely at most of their own words, most of them will claim they just do what they do and don't know the why and wherefores of how they do it. Instead, we're going to focus here on creation as a discipline. Muses, inspirations and creative flashes are all well and good, but it is the discipline of creativity that most of us need to learn. It is the discipline of creativity that most of us need to learn.

Let's take a journey now into the deep jungles of Sri Lanka in the early 1900s, then known as Ceylon. Dr Ananda Kumaraswamy is examining some ancient sculptures and icons. His background as a writer, researcher and aesthetic philosopher, led him to embark on an exhaustive study of Southeast Asian art. Dr Kumaraswamy was a disciple of theorists and founders of the British arts and crafts movement, Ailliam Morris and John Ruskin. Dr Kumaraswamy eventually coalesced his studies and concluded that the making of art was a universal human endeavor that was crucial for societal evolution and progress. The arts and craft movement was a social response to the perceived dehumanization of culture via the Industrial Revolution, and it advocated for maintaining human processes in the making of everything. They were anti-machine and anti-automation. I wonder what they'd think if they visited us now, in the age of AI. What they'd think if they visited us now, in the age of AI? Dr Kumaraswamy and some of his fellow art researchers made some useful observations on the nature of art in both Eastern and Western cultures. I'm going to paraphrase him and some of his colleagues here. So apologies to any scholars of art aesthetics right now. So apologies to any scholars of art aesthetics right now.

However, we need a tangible, simplified frame of reference to begin our journey into the actual creative process. Indeed, this statement encompasses the philosophical totality of this entire podcast. So if you completely disagree with it, well, at least I laid my cards

on the table at the get-go. Okay, here it is. The big thesis Art is the deliberate arranging of things into forms to create symbols, the best of which are new.

What I want to do now is connect this phrase with the idea of the first spark. That spark is the desire, instinct or need in us to gather or make the things. Do the deliberate arranging decide on the form, consider the symbol itself and articulate it with a thorough, disciplined and serious method of work. Think of creativity like a forge, where nothing can be truly created without fire. This fire is necessary because the work of artistic creation requires a great deal of constant and renewable heat. We need to understand how to maintain that heat if we hope to create art, and what to do if your fire is in danger of being extinguished. What is convenient about this proposition is that only you know how much creativity matters to you. If you disregard the fire, let it go out or simply walk away from it, that's your personal choice. None of this is really a matter of life and death, so it is always up to you. However, if you believe that creativity is important to your well-being, listen on. Now let's break down our big thesis.

Art is the deliberate arranging of things into forms to create symbols, the best of which are new, deliberate, careful consideration, thoroughly thought out, slow and unhurried. Arrange to sort order sequence, combine or design with forethought things. Objects, items, concrete entities, ideas, sounds, images, that which is distinct and identifiable as such. Forms, a configuration, shape, structure, a resulting combination of things, ordered, elements with purpose. A symbol, a representation, a stand-in, a suggestion of something else, that which signifies a sign, new, original, recently coming into existence, not yet experienced, unique from what came before.

Let's get back to the first spark. In the beginning it's a feeling, an urge or an instinct. It compels you to create. Sometimes it manifests itself in the simplest of ways, like that time you looked in your refrigerator, took out a few things, arranged them after some deliberation and created a meal from your own inspiration. Sometimes it takes a more sophisticated form. You add a few scraps of wood, some paint and some simple tools. Taking stock of what was available to you, you measured, cut, assembled, sanded and painted and created a damn fine bookcase of your own design. It even had beveled corners and a decorative scroll effect on the edges.

Whatever the case, you recognized something about creativity that was unique to all your other endeavors in life. If you were lucky, you were encouraged to pursue this instinct and that was all that was needed for you to begin tending your own fire. If you weren't, you had to find ways to do that. If you were unfortunate, you were scolded and redirected from the frivolity of creativity. The lesson here is that if you want to turn your creative spark into a flame, you need to seek out tinder and kindling. You seek it from almost anywhere. Anything that burns will serve.

Almost every musician began by learning the songs of others they admire. Fine artists spent time in museums doing pencil copies of great works. Writers read and wrote small pieces. Chefs cooked, carpenters cut and nailed. The list goes on and on. Often we find

that cooking led to painting, drawing led to music, writing led to acting, music led to a number of other pursuits. It didn't really matter what people used to encourage their creative spark. They lit the fire first and learned how to keep it going.

I'm going to focus now on one specific word in our big thesis. That word is deliberate. The funny thing about the creative spark is that it doesn't grow unless there is deliberation. No amount of tinder and kindling or other tools help the creative spark grow unless there is a concentrated, focused and time-based effort involved. In essence, creativity requires discipline. It requires a person to shut everything else in the world out and make the entire universe the creative task in front of them. This is getting harder and harder to do as our society continues to evolve. Short attention spans, the demand for immediate gratification and the vanishing of patience and the tolerance for failure all conspire to prevent us from concentrating on the task at hand. Think of it this way Mindful meditation teaches us that sitting still and focusing on your own breath for a period of five minutes is a very difficult assignment for most people is a very difficult assignment for most people.

What we call the chattering monkey mind or the endless flow of thoughts that pervade our minds, make just sitting A challenge. You've probably experienced the difficulty of trying to quiet your mind for an extended period of time. So how can we help ourselves with this problem? Since creativity requires a clear, focused mind, how can we even begin? The key here is to work in steadily growing increments of trial and error in time. In steadily growing increments of trial and error in time. Ten minutes of focused, creative work will soon become half an hour, then an hour, then more. The point is to keep your focus on the process itself, not the outcome.

One must embrace failure as a part of the creative process and not pay attention to your inner critic who constantly nags that each failure is proof that you have no creative ability. Great chefs have thrown out countless dishes. Great writers have torn up thousands of pages. Great artists have all filled dumpsters with their failed attempts. If any of them had succumbed to their inner critic or become discouraged from the process, they would have quit. When Michael Jordan arguably the greatest basketball player of all time was asked why he was so confident in making game-winning shots as time expired game-winning shots as time expired he said it was because he had taken thousands of those same shots and missed many of them in practice. That, in a nutshell, is what creativity is A practice, a concentrated, focused, uninterrupted practice in growing increments of time, a practice that is about trial and error and, ultimately, repeated failure.

Before we close, let's return to our prehistoric tribe and see what the early morning brings. Now it is just before dawn. The wind has picked up, so our youth has added more wood to the fire. To keep it robust, he decides to place a couple of branches in the ground upwind of the fire and stretch his fur cloak across them to create a shield from the wind. As he sits back down and shivers in the pre-dawn cold, he hears something strange above him A deep, rushing sound. Far up in the mountains, a rumbling. The

sound then grows in intensity. An earthquake, a rock slide. He gets up and peers up at the darkened mountain looming above. Some in the camp are stirring as well. They rise and look about them confused. The sound steadily becomes a low roar. Then they all know what is happening. A flood is coming.

Not knowing much about this new area, they made camp. They chose a crag that serves as a runoff channel for stormwater. Far above them, rain has been falling on the mountaintop. Now the mountain was shedding this water with a fearsome power. Panic sets in. Everyone grabs what they can and begins to run.

The youth picks up the pouch with the fire starter, stones and flints. The youth picks up the pouch with the fire starter, stones and flints. Mothers clutch their children to them, while men pick up various items as they run. But it is too late. Out of nowhere, a giant wall of water bursts into the crag, which now has become a funnel, increasing the force of the stormwater. In a flash the campsite is swept under the precious fire. The traveling coal hamper and everything else the tribe owns is washed away.

Then, just as suddenly as it began, it's over. There are screams and cries for help. The youth who was tending the fire finds himself thrown against a pile of stones bruised but alive. Some are not so lucky. Out of nearly 30 members, 10 have been killed and three are missing. The youth realizes the fire starter pouch he had seized is nowhere to be found. It has been carried away along with everything else. The dazed tribe sits shivering and devastated in the cold light of dawn and considers their fate. The youth weeps uncontrollably. He blames himself for not warning the tribe in time. He curses the fact that he let go of the fire starter tools in the flood. What would they do now? How would they survive? Thanks for listening. I hope you'll join me in Episode 3 of Tending the Fire, a podcast about creativity.