

Stay Awake

Graduation Address, Art Center, Pasadena

The speech I'm not going to give today is sitting on my desk at home in Connecticut. It's my complete Unified Field Theory of Creativity. When I was asked to speak to you today. I thought, This is my chance to say something big, to set down every loose thought about creating and consciousness and being that I've ever had.

Fortunately for you, a few weeks ago I ran into a filmmaker friend who has a business filming commencements such as this one. He's heard more uplifting speeches than anyone should ever have to listen to, so I asked him what was the best speech he'd ever heard. He said, Senator George Mitchell, Colgate University, 1997—7 minutes!

Come on, I said, surely the measure of a good speech isn't its brevity.

Oh yes it is, he said.

So I came to my senses, and I put together a simple little talk. About your art, your work, and your sanity. And if you pay attention it could save your life in the future—which starts next week.

I'll start by telling you the ending. It's the only bit of real understanding I've ever had, and I learned it by stumbling around and making lots of mistakes. As it turns out, this is the way everyone does these things.

I pass it along to you, knowing you're going to forget it. That's alright, I did too. But when you need it, it'll be there in your future, waiting for you to show up.

So is here my big insight: Making your art is making your life. It is identical to the process through which you continually become yourself. When your Art emerges from your consciousness, it's bigger than your consciousness. It's smarter and deeper than you. And after you make it, you are smarter and deeper than you were. It's not going too far to say that this process is nothing less than your taproot. And if you cut off this taproot, something in you will dry up.

And even knowing all this, you will neglect that taproot. Don't worry, everyone does. I did. And you will need to revive it, just as I did. The great thing is that it revives in an instant and goes right back to work for you as though nothing had happened. This is because making art is a part of you, more like an internal organ than an activity you can choose to do or not.

You might think it rather soon to talk about renewing your creativity, today of all days. But really it's the perfect day. The past is past and the future is balanced and still for the moment. It's a great time to look things over, before they all start to fling themselves at you again.

So—let's look.

I began the work of the artist at birth, but I wasn't precocious. Everyone starts the same way, including lawyers, statisticians, actuaries, car salesmen, engineers, and accountants (though of course no one calls it art then). That's because the peculiar alchemy of art right away leads us to discover things beyond what we can imagine. Of course, since the newborn mind is a blank, this includes pretty much everything.

And instinct pushes the infant to start filling his blank slate. He squints and twitches his fingers, and reaches for passing blurs. And by this the wiring starts to connect. He begins to find things out, then leverages those small awarenesses to find out more. This is the beginning—and its also pretty much the way things go from then on. And the results that really matter are not the motions and gurgles, the grasping and sitting up, but the awareness that comes from learning to do them.

You don't actually remember doing any of this, of course, but if you think about it you'll see that you traveled an astonishing distance in your early years. And if you look back at it now you can see how your learning process was basically what artists do.

I want to describe this process briefly. And in doing so I know I risk sounding like an article for Discover magazine that hasn't been fact-checked. But here goes. What I think happens is that our brains, child or adult, perk up and notice whatever is new. Faced with a new thing, the paths in the brain organize to accommodate it in short-term memory and pass the phenomenon around for a look. (Slow. Hands) Axons and ganglia mysteriously orient toward each other, synapses get more chemically ready to fire, impulses pass along. If the thing seems really fascinating, like the furry barking thing that turns out to be a dog, the brain responds by encoding it into long-term memory. Curiously, this is not like putting a book away on a shelf. It's more like pulling the pages apart and flinging them all over the library. But that's the way the brain works, (sort of the way I work too). And when this burst of awareness is all done, the brain settles down again—until something else new comes along.

But the thing to note is that the structural changes the brain made to deal with the new event don't fully dissipate, and we are now able to recognize a dog with a lot less brain work. Our brain has been changed by its experience. And it gets a reward for its doing this learning, a little squirt of the chemical dopamine. So the experience of learning is now tagged with a pleasant association.

(It seems that the feeling of the reward mainly is what we remember, more than the exact details. In fact, every time we reassemble the details of a memory we put them together a little differently, leaving out some things, putting in others. This might explain why we love a book but find we can't recount the plot a few months later. What we remember is the feeling of being moved by it.)

Now, I didn't figure all this out. It is my representation of the work of a neuroscientist named Antonio Damasio, who, among other things, wrote a book about consciousness

called *The Feeling of What Happens*. These events change us, he says, and “we become conscious when the organism’s representation devices exhibit a specific kind of wordless knowledge—the knowledge that the organism’s own state has been changed by an object.”

Now Damasio is not talking about just seeing art. Other things that change our minds include lies, toothaches, first love, political speeches, humid nights down South, Italian opera heard through an open window, and bad love songs. Every new thing changes us, a little or a lot.

Still, making art seems to be the perfect tool to capture experiences that can’t really be analyzed. Like love, for example. The Frenchman philosopher Jacques Lacan said that love was giving something you don’t have to someone who doesn’t exist. But love is very real, as we know. And art is exactly the tool to investigate it, as is witnessed by 3/4 of literature and all of country music.

Now, let’s talk specifically about how an artist uses this change of mind to make artwork. First he has to have the change. And then the work has to embody it. And if it does, the energy of the change is reflected to anyone who sees the work. I think maybe this change the thing that makes good art good. If the artist doesn’t have that change, the work can still stir things up, serve as a practice, a chance to learn. In fact, most of our artwork is practice. There is a story that Piet Mondrian was painting on some old canvases he had lying around, and a friend reproached him for painting over perfectly good pictures. “I’m not trying to make paintings,” he said, “I’m trying to find things out.”

So that’s a longish description of the way art works in the brain. The poet Charles Wright said it more succinctly when he said, “I write to find out what I have to say.” When I heard this I knew at once what he meant. It was what I had been doing all along.

When your work first surprises you and tells you something you didn’t know, it is fantastic, as all of you here have experienced. The first sort-of-good picture I ever took held a mystery, what Diane Arbus called “a secret about a secret.” I knew it the moment I saw it. And it was my secret. I was 23, I didn’t think I even had secrets then, just things I didn’t want people to know. But this was different. This picture cut the through my fog and revealed a new view, not so much of myself but through myself. This picture came from inside me, and while I was not profound, this picture was, or at least more than I was. This was a kind of miracle. And as I gazed at this thing, a question began to form, and it was, “I wonder...could I do that again?” That’s how it started for me.

So life as a developing artist is lived in the hope that things like this will happen, even though you have no solid reason to think they will.

But is this really a whole life? At some point you get this gnawing feeling that there might be more to life than miracles. For example, you might want a car that starts—every time. You might want a house, health insurance, a spouse and children, what the Greek writer Nikos Kazantzakis called “The full catastrophe.”

And we hear someplace that there are jobs that are called “creative.” “Aha!” we think “Could I get paid to do what I want to do?” And the answer is—sort of. A would-be novelist might write ad copy or annual reports. A painter might study design or become an art director. A photographer who set out to learn new things might fall easily into advertising, as I did.

Is this a devils bargain? No. It's not bad or wrong, it can even be honorable. We all participate in the economic organism and its best to do it with awareness.

Now I know that some of you here are studying fine art, and perhaps you are thinking, “This has nothing to do with me.” Well, think again. Try dealing with a gallery, or publishing a book, or finding some way to fund an ambitious installation. The whole world of fine art has a grammar of its own, and it is actually a lot harder to figure out because it is a secret grammar.

(For example, my dealer in New York happily handles my silver prints, but won't sell my inkjet prints. I pointed out to her that Chuck Close and Jim Dines inkjet prints fetch prices that I can only dream of, and she said, “Well, they're artists.” You see, a secret grammar. And the thing is I know exactly what she means.)

So, wanting to earn your living at least in the vicinity of your art you headed for a place where art and commerce meet, and, to make a long story short, here you are, fortunate to be this extraordinary place, Art Center, founded to conduct its teaching in that balance. For 20 years I taught at Parsons School of Design in New York, which does the same thing. Many of my students have gone on to careers that span business and the arts.

And, like me, they find themselves fumbling into the gulf between the two.

Here's why:

There's a absolute fundamental difference between art work and commercial work.

The artist sets off on a journey with no idea where in the world it will end. Plans crumble quickly, as they should, and in that moment of falling apart the change of mind happens, if it is going to, and what emerges is better than anything you had in mind. Everyone here has had this happen. Honestly, every one of my good photographs looks as though someone had borrowed my camera for one frame.

Contrast this with “creative commercial” work, in which someone tells you at the very beginning exactly where you're supposed end up, how you're supposed to get there, and when. It can be a photograph, or a website or illustration or a brochure, it can be a design for a car or a coffee pot. The way is chosen by whole committees of people, most of whom are not artistic in the way that you are. If you come up with a better idea as you work, about 90% of the time it will be rejected. This is so counter to the way artists operate. We want to get to a better idea.

So it's not just you alone with your purity any more.

Reminds me of the joke. Creatives and the Lightbulb.

I talk as though there's something wrong with this, and there is, especially when it happens to me. And yet if I went into a restaurant and ordered from a waiter, who then brought me something completely different because he thought it was better than what I wanted, what would I do? I might even try it, but most likely I wouldn't be eating there again.

So big news here (if anyone is still this naive): applied art isn't really capital A art. On the other hand, it certainly isn't assembling a kit either. So what is it?

It is Design in the broadest and deepest possible sense of that word. In design the goal is a given, and it usually involves clarifying something and making it functional and compelling. This goes far beyond just arranging the givens esthetically. A designer friend of mind said that when he starts a project he has to pull the entire thing apart, look at the pieces, and as they become clear to him, his mind shifts and he sees the design and then he puts things back together in this new way. So you see, there is that change of mind again. And it is that change that brings Design and Art together.

Can this work be rewarding? Can it have meaning and bring value to the world? Of course it can. Done right, done for balance and the world, it is deeply satisfying. Not everyone trudges off to work wishing they could just chuck it all and paint again.

On the other hand, when you always know where you have to go, what gets lost is that agonizing and delicious not-knowing. You're no longer looking for the heart-stopping insight that takes you beyond yourself to that "secret about a secret."

And that is what you were after at the beginning, not a job, not a grade. You did it to find things out and to scare hell out of yourself periodically. You didn't even really decide to do it. You just did.

And if you stop, something in you will leave.

But this doesn't have to happen, not in a few years, not ever. You can keep it all going, and I'm telling you now not to wait until you're frustrated to do it. Do it for what it brings you right now.

Imagine that your creativity is a large room with doors on all sides. You chose one door a while back, as I chose photography. And in time you come to find that that door, the painting door or the design door, has gotten clogged with bad ideas, misconceptions, things you didn't hear right, projects that ran out of gas, flat-out mistakes, and down under all that mess some really good things.

So do you fling your self at this jammed door again and again? The point, after all, not just to insist on using the same old door, it is to get back into the room.

So here's a better idea. Walk around to another door, any door, give it a little push, and walk in. If you're a painter, sing. If you're a musician, paint something, paint music. Do it seriously, and you begin at once to spend time in that room again.

I have switched doors a number of times now, and each switch changes everything else I do.

Most recently, I returned to my early roots in theater and took a class in improvisation. I did it because I'd come to a point where my pictures have to come out...even if I'm just taking them for myself. I find it nearly impossible to set aside this photographer I have become, to step in front of my lens and see.

But in this theater class I had seconds to come up with an idea, get up and start acting it out. And there on the stage I'd meet someone with a completely different idea. And then we had to figure out what on earth the new dance was and how to do it together. There was no particular way it had to come out, so it was constantly surprising. Fantastic! This was creation, pulled right from inside us... where it had been all along. I had the taproot again.

And it was so much fun and so transformative that I have continued taking classes here and there. After doing a scene, one teacher said to me, "So do you want to do this?" and I thought—Do I want to try to get an agent. Do I want to go to cattle call auditions. Do I want to wait by the phone to hear if I got the part of a pair of singing underpants in a TV commercial?

And I said, I don't want to be an actor, I just want to learn things. I want to stay awake.

This works. It did from the beginning. Just don't do it to improve your photography or whatever it is you do (although it almost certainly will). Go looking for that anxious moment of not knowing where you're going, and the thrill of getting there. Think of that moment in the cartoon when the coyote chases the roadrunner off the edge of the cliff, and runs out onto the air. That's it, that's your moment. Don't look down. Keep running.

Remember this.