The Mystery of Making Stuff Up

Most creatives can’t explain how they do what they do. Formulas escape them. The mysterious process occurs somewhere between the prefrontal and motor association cortex.

Apart from the mechanics of syntax, color, structure, template, perspective, and story arc, creators are at the mercy of something no one but God understands. Like little children at supper, they say grace over it but can take no great credit for its existence. It’s something that causes emotional tremors from time to time. It causes lack of sleep, lack of time, brief moments of tunneling when all relationships temporarily vanish, frustration on the behalf of spouses, and the inability to focus on other people and things during moments of artistic production.

Most artists have low self-esteem even though some may appear egocentric. Their low self image is rooted in emptying one’s self to make room for things that come through them, but not from them. The best creative work is found in hiddenness. This hiddenness allows the reader, audience, viewer or listener to feel as if they, themselves are in the experience created by the artist. It’s why lovers love love songs. And mourners need poetry. They walk into the art and adopt it into their own personal narrative. In this way the artist becomes a concierge of the human experience. Great art always gets personal.

There are moments of unrestrained yeses. Everything is yes in the creative process, before the murdering of darlings- those little things in the work that mean much to the writer and little to the reader. The writer must scatter themselves to the four winds of the delete key. They are at the mercy of the muse because they don’t know how the muse works. I use the term “muse” but I’d rather not. It’s the spiritual cosmos that

is unseen and neutral until the forces of divine consequence appear. Artists do it but don't understand it any more than most people understand the inside of an MP3 and how it produces sound from digits.

But when it happens they are as close to God as Genesis 1:1. "Created" is a verb coined by God Himself. There is nothing new under the sun, but the artist will fight tooth and nail to disprove it.

All good gifts come from God but not everything artists write or say is God breathed. Not in the least. But there are those times when the Spirit moves, the clouds part, and glory speaks. The artist stands trembling with a little flicker called an idea. The artist enters the process like an East Tennessee snake handler in a church with signs following. It's risky but it's when the artist feels most alive. Ideas are best seen in caves of solitude and often express themselves in seismic yearning. Painters paint, musicians compose and writers write because they can't help themselves any more than one can stop a sneeze, and often just as messy.

Some artists give meaning to mythos and mysteries but find it hard to iron shirts or complete an online form. They dance between the county lines of catastrophe and bliss, often in both at the same time- a fact proven possible in quantum physics.

How does normal life work? Why is everything so desperately broken? Why do I feel so alone? These are questions that creatives struggle with but never conquer. (And woe to the artist that thinks she's figured everything out.) The name "artist," like the name Israel, means STRUGGLE. Struggling is a virtue, not a vice. It stands poised for the angelic fracas until the blessing is spoken.

The mortality rate for creatives is much lower than the general population. Their brain's tread-life is much shorter.

They are stripping gears to dig deeper. And for that we should all be thankful. We need them down there in the threshing floor.

So the nervous, emotional artist continues to do what he can’t put his finger on, for an audience he doesn’t know and a debt that he didn’t owe when he started. He or she lives in a state of panic or grace, totally dependent on God or some infinitely lesser being to survive.

Not all crazy people are artists, but most artists are crazy people and we need them. Bruce Cockburn puts it so simply, “Pay attention to the poet. You need him and you know it.” We need them in our homes, churches, universities, seminaries, and kindergartens. But don’t hand them the keys. They’ll lose them.