



## Class in Creative Reincarnation

*Want to Come Back as an Artist?*

I looked at the class list for a workshop that was just days away and nearly fainted. A “Master Class for Masters” it was called, but these *really* were masters—accomplished, smart, curious and some of the best artists around, photographers, filmmakers, book artists and writers. *And* all teachers. What authority did I have to ask them to drop what they knew and become beginners again? Certainly that’s the way to reboot our creativity, and doing it was the central point of the class, but could I

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convince them? At some point in our early development, we turn from intuition toward analysis (prompted, perhaps, by the predilections of the educational system), and the training of our creative ability gets set to the side. But it will wake up again, and I have figured out some ways to make it do that, and

wanted to show them to others, teachers in particular. This special workshop was my chance.

In my first teaching job, I taught students to make photographs. Then I realized that if we worked a bit upstream from photography and aimed at creativity itself, photographs would happen, and much more besides. Over time lots of people who wanted to go beyond making pictures of interesting things joined. One of the most moving workshops was with a group of women with serious illnesses. They had limited experience with photography, but their photos were so strong, so intuitive, that it pointed to internal creative powers coiled within them just waiting for release. That experience affirmed, for me, that anyone’s creativity can revive fully, even if it has been set aside for years.

In a real sense that long-ago class turned into one continuous lesson, and I have learned more from it than anyone.

Recently I found myself contemplating mortality. I realized that if I were hit by a bus all the methods and exercises I’d

gathered, and my subsequent reading about the workings of creativity, would be lost. So I resolved to give the whole approach, details and all, away to other teachers for them to use, run with, torque and change completely.

This past summer, the Maine Media Workshops offered, to its faculty, the “Master Class for Masters.” I wasn’t sure I could hold up my end of that title, but the photographers, filmmakers, writers and book artists who signed up certainly held up theirs.

Now, most of us in communications are thought of as “creatives,” of course, but are we? I don’t mean coming up with an idea for a client, I mean a state of awareness that literally changes how we think. In comparison, much of what I do at work feels like shuffling the deck to find some new way to say what’s already been said. What is missing from that task—mostly—is truly new insight. It is like rummaging through a bag of old thoughts as though they were old clothes, looking for whatever will fit and isn’t too worn out.

I don’t mean to denigrate our profession. It is part of the world’s, and my own, economy. However when we search for predetermined outcomes, something goes missing, and we stop seeing the full, gorgeous range of what is around us.

Real creativity, on the other hand, wields a much broader power. It works best when we aren’t searching for outcomes but are simply allowing them. The great pioneering neurobiologist Antonio Damasio describes the process as the brain rewiring to accommodate each new thing it encounters. The process can look like children spacing out, but in fact it is how a baby goes from cooing to talking.

Not knowing is where we naturally start in infancy. From there we make our way to speech, to knowledge, to delight and love, to making an entire life for ourselves, and to communicating. It opens a way to what we might feel, to the miracle that we feel it at all, and to the mechanism by which we can tell others about it.

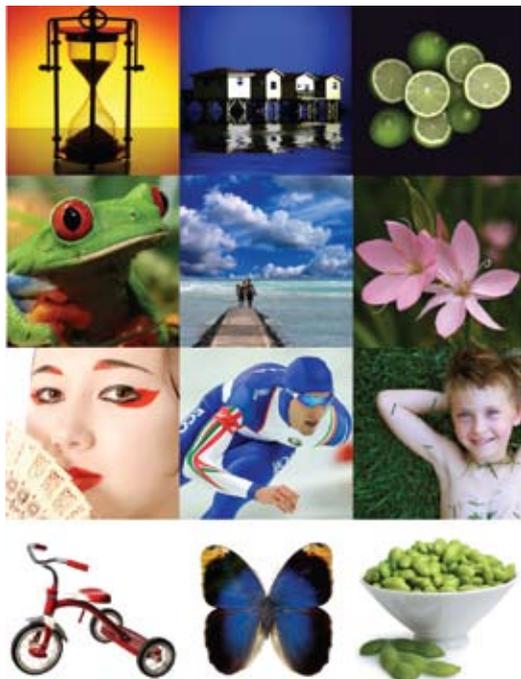
This sounds a lot like the artist’s process, but in fact it is *everyone’s* process. And more important than the result is that the act expands the vessels of the mind. *Doing* grows every one of us, from artists to scientists and everyone between.

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Unfortunately, there's a trap: If we focus our creativity exclusively on producing the known, we forget what else it can do—unimaginable things like writing *Moby Dick* or Beethoven's 9th Symphony. Our very intentions can become limitations.

So my first question about these people in the Masters class was, could they look beyond intention? This is not at all easy to do. But from the first meeting they jumped right into the deeper work. I was thrilled.

To begin, we set aside the idea of specific results. We weren't after photographs, we were after presence and openness, *and* ways to get to them.

To do it we used simple, concrete and artless tasks. Walk across the room four times with a different visualization each

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time, and perceive the difference. That simple.

*And* we didn't interpret while we were doing. Of course we all travel on the two legs of cognition and intuition, but cognition has become an overtrained muscle, and the wrong one for creating.

Instead we invoked spaciousness in our minds, a kind of Buddhist emptiness full of

potential. We didn't try to fill that spaciousness, we just let it fill on its own. After the exercises we would talk, but even then we stayed away from the "how" of our experiences.

Years ago I came across this wonderful quote from poet Paul Valery: "Seeing is forgetting the name of the thing one sees." It suggests the ability to hover between seeing and categorizing to absorb the fullness of experience. Afterward we can render something that is a wider and more subtle view, chords and not just notes. That view lies out beyond what we know and, if we want to convey our experience, we need to *have* it fully in the first place.

Habits break hard, and it can be tough to convince some folks that one way to do something better is to set aside intention. But the exercises we used demonstrated the principle at once, very directly.

However we do it, we need to empty our minds (and our schedules) and leave room for what arises. That is how creative work is done, but the waiting is incredibly hard. We are simply addicted to action, to sorting, to thinking. In order to change, we have to stop rooting through old brain junk and start actively watching without narrating everything into concepts. Hard work!

It helps to understand the way the brain responds to anything

## design issues

new—it perks right up and pays attention. It's like your first walk in Paris, or that moment when you step through the gate and see the Taj Mahal, or look up, see someone and fall straight into love. At such a moment, you stop your inner chatter—because you are intensely and wonderfully fully present. (And if you're smart, you stay that way for as long as you can.)

The experience of creativity can be lucid, but it's impossible to talk about, because it functions beyond concepts, and is only made visible through doing—the way that otherwise invisible neutrinos leave traces of their passage in a device called a cloud chamber.

Here is the first exercise we did to expose it: I sent everyone out to write a short biography of a stranger—on the spot, *without* approaching or speaking to them. I said not to worry about the writing itself, just to note impressions gathered from looking at the person. Notes or words or sentences were all fine, even doodled lines, anything to bring what they intuited back to the class.

Having to write spooks non-writers (writers too), but if they're told to forget about the writing it frees their awareness, and the imagination can just roam through both the visible world and the world that we can't see.

The next morning the class gathered to present their observations, and it was way beyond expectations, fresh, keenly observed, evocative. They read like first notes for short stories.

For example, rather than physical description (“He is about 70, gray hair, halting walk”), someone took flight and wrote something like, “When he tripped on a paving stone during the Hungarian Uprising in '56, he got up and stumbled forward on a twisted knee into a new life. It would lead to a factory job in Lowell, to an empty retirement, to a seat on a bench by the Rockport Harbor. Wife gone. Work gone. Soon he'd be gone too.” It was about the life that was implied, and the sketch formed by just letting images swim in the imagination.

The exercise was quick, but by its end people had clearly experienced creative seeing. Our workshop suddenly felt like a writers' group testing story ideas. Ironically, the work was far better written than it would have been had we made writing the point.

How did we make this marvelous thing happen? First, the task was a surprise and that surprise trumped habit and took people into a kind of unmediated state. The unexpected task swung these visual artists into a 90-degree turn that woke them up. And from there they worked clearly, directly and without fuss.

So that was the first lesson for these teachers: Shifting the task in surprising ways can ignite a strong creative experience, at once.

All week we kept these surprises coming—theater games,

### Here are some things you can do on your own to wake yourself up:

- Take a class in something new.
- Crack jokes, especially wordplay.
- Keep a notebook.
- Visit museums regularly.
- Give yourself empty time, nothing to do.
- Allow boredom.

### Or here's my favorite:

- Go to a bar you never go to, in part of town you never visit, order something you never drink, pull out a piece of paper, look around and write for 45 minutes.

music, movement—sending us into new states of awareness again and again. And each exercise revealed how we could draw on what we already knew.

Some other exercises:

We spent a day working with choreographer Alison Chase, a co-founder of the famous dance company Pilobolus. She had us rolling on the floor, passing big physical gestures up and down a line of people, leaning on each other as we walked across the floor, things like that. It wasn't about dance. She put us squarely into our bodies and let us extend from there.

Another day we worked on an exercise from music teacher William Westney's Un-Master Class that involved simply crossing a circle and handing someone a ball of crumpled paper, moving in a style prompted by music, which incidentally kept changing—tango, ballet, swing, chant. With each change, people shifted their way of moving easily and exactly.

Years ago I intuited that the kind of learning through doing I'd picked up in my early theater days would be a way to provoke a state of creativity, not just in artists but in anyone. So it has proved, and recent work in neuroscience and brain imaging shows a lot about how the phenomenon actually works.<sup>1</sup>

Disrupting habitual thought takes us to our unconscious mind where memories and knowledge are stored, work is done and decisions are made without concepts or language. Caltech neuroscientist Richard Anderson “explored how the effort to plan a movement forces cells throughout the brain to work together, organizing a choice below the threshold of awareness.”<sup>2</sup>

It can feel quite alien, but there is also an exhilaration that overrides the strangeness and carries us forward. On the other

hand, if our creative work starts getting too comfortable, it is probably time to shake ourselves up again.

Actor and director Alan Arkin spoke recently about using acting techniques in his workshops as a means to get people “out of their own way so they can flow, with the understanding that underneath the crap there’s something that is better than anything they can bring to it.” So, of course, we used a number of theater games. The point was not to act, it was to get people to set aside intention and just react directly to whatever was in front of them.

This kind of work, done without conscious awareness, can change us deeply when it finally emerges into consciousness. The eighteenth-century author, Samuel Johnson, wonderfully called it, “the unexpected copulation of ideas.” The point where they become conscious is the point at which we *know* them. Before that we might have a dim sense that something is going on in some chamber of the mind, but not know what it is. Neurobiologist Antonio Damasio called this awareness “a specific kind of wordless knowledge that the organism’s own state has been changed by an object.”<sup>3</sup>

I used to try to wrap up a week’s worth of insights and meaning for a class, but these days I just turn people loose with their experiences and let them go off to work it all on their own. Someone once asked a painter how he knew when a painting was done. He said, “When it doesn’t need me any more.” That’s how I end every class, this one included. However if I were to attempt a summary, it would read something like this:

1. Creativity is a profound and basic process in our lives, a means of discovering/creating ourselves.
2. It functions outside of consciousness—and must be left there. Knowing about its workings helps us to harvest creativity, but not to initiate it.
3. We can provoke creativity by setting aside knowledge, control, security, outcome, comfort and limits, thus making room for learning and creating to resume.
4. The best exercises are simple and involve no special skills.
5. The class helps us give up control, lifting us over barriers by surprising us. New perspectives open because there is no preconceived notion of what to learn or how. Necessary learning happens differently in each person.
6. We only grasp the results when we become aware of them (when we “name” them), but by then the real creative work is done.

Outcomes of this process are individual and unpredictable by nature. It is not like, say, a portrait or landscape class, where you’d certainly expect to end the week with some new portraits or landscapes. I think everyone walks away with a handful of

tools. And everyone in every class uses them to make his or her own outcome over time.

My hope going into this special week was that other teachers would make something of these experiences and extend them. In a follow-up meeting, I heard about a few things people had done since: Elizabeth Opalenek had come out of the class, taught a workshop a few weeks later and got the comment, “For me, your workshop was transformative”; John Paul Caponigro extended and exhibited a work he began in class, in which he had viewers scatter flour onto an image beamed into a dark room, thus manifesting the otherwise invisible picture in the cloud of flour; and, on the other hand, Greg Heisler reported that, in spite of the way we explored creativity, his students still wanted to see just how *he* took portraits, where he placed the camera and so forth.

And so the class continues and goes where it goes.

Ending this article summarily seems no more possible than ending the class. I don’t think I need to say what it points to, though I urge you to look.

Anyway, if you don’t mind, I’m just going to stop writing and let whatever thoughts it raises go where they go.<sup>4</sup> CA

*Author’s note:* There is an MP3 of the welcoming talk available at [www.seankernan.squarespace.com](http://www.seankernan.squarespace.com).

*Editor’s Note:* After attending one of Sean’s classes, I walked out inspired and eager to put aside my rational mind and explore.

—DK Holland

#### Notes

1. The *Wall Street Journal* (June 27, 2008) reports that Dutch researchers led by psychologist Ap Dijksterhuis at the University of Amsterdam recently found that people struggling to make relatively complicated consumer choices—which car to buy, apartment to rent or vacation to take—appeared to make sounder decisions when they were distracted and unable to focus consciously on the problem. The term “sounder decision” usually refers to a rational process, but what it describes here is quite intuitive.
2. Ibid.
3. Damasio, Antonio. *The Feeling of What Happens*, Harvest Books, 2000.
4. The class list: Arduina Palanca Caponigro, John Paul Caponigro, Sean Harris, Greg Heisler, Russell Kaye, Tara Law, Jay Maisel, Elizabeth Opalenek, Dee Peppe, Sandra-Lee Phipps, Jeanne Reilly, Alison Shaw, Matthew Smolinsky, Alan Vlach, Virginia Hastings, Maria Bartrum.