

CHAPTER TWO

Big Creative

Being part of a piece coming to life—participating in its journey from the spark of an idea into form—offers one of life’s most exciting (and possibly addictive) sensory and psychologically rewarding experiences. You’ve felt it, right? That fantastic, sparkly rush in your gut, the whole-body shower of goose bumps, the smile that won’t leave your face as you realize: Something is happening here! I like this piece—it’s working! This is going to be really cool! When we’re in that gorgeous moment of certainty, of confident creating, we are true believers. We are on fire, connected, grounded and flying at once.

Other times, we feel a million miles away from inspiration or brilliance. We’re certain we’ve never done anything significant, and worse yet, we never will. We wonder at the time we’ve already wasted on the whole thing.

Or maybe we think we’re onto something exciting, and we suddenly fall flat. We discover that our most recent brilliant idea is already in progress in someone else’s artistic life. (Google and I have had some heartbreaking moments with that one.) A wayward word from a confidante leaves us deflated. Or it’s less obvious than that, more internal, as if our unfolding inspirational flow somehow got cut off and abruptly the powerlines went down. We feel cold, flailing, awkward, doubtful. Worried. Alone.

How can we strengthen our resolve for a lifetime, not just the next project (or this afternoon’s session)? How do we fill our energy reserves with the real stuff, not just temporary fixes or hopped-up highs that leave us quickly crashing and depleted again?

It’s tempting to believe we can muscle our way to insane levels of discipline, to force ourselves by sheer will into models of productivity and inspiration, but let’s be honest. Haven’t we already tried this method? Haven’t we jacked ourselves up on whatever we thought might work in the past and found that it still let us down? All the caffeine, sugar, alcohol, drugs, schedules, deadlines, inspiring quotes, goal sheets, and artist groups in the world can’t keep us going indefinitely.

Some people seem to always be creating; they’re having a blast, doing great work, allowing one project to lead beautifully and organically to the next, and all with a spring in their step. They mention amazing coincidences and fun synergy. Their processes look easy, almost effortless; statements like, “I just had an idea, and I did it” come up frequently (much to the chagrin of those struggling at the moment). Furthermore, they gather rewards and attention that so many of us crave.

What’s their secret? There must be something more, something really special, that invigorates and strengthens these models of kick-ass creativity we admire and envy and aspire to be. Were they born this way, into a charmed artistic existence? Did they have all kinds of advantages growing up that allowed their full potential to come to life? Do they have some secret habits or tools (special vitamins? a qi gong master? a supersweet, lightning-fast laptop?) that keeps them on this higher creative plane?

Maybe you’ve gotten close to breaking through to this powerhouse kind of energy, but feel you’ve still missed the mark. You may have gotten to the point where you can bop out of your seat with physical vitality, feel mentally sharp as a tack, and know you’ve got great friends and a wonderfully centered, content existence, yet still sense that there is something critically important missing in your life, pulsing somewhere deep beneath the day-to-day maintenance and pleasantries. This is the call of our fullest potential, and I think most of us desperately want to embody it, as frightening as that path might sometimes seem.

The path of finding this potential asks that we open up and connect our intimate, immediate self with our highest one. We can find that elusive “something more” and expand it into something huge and thrilling in our very own lives. We can start listening, and honor the call of Big Creative.

The Fountainhead of Inspiration

Within each of us is a consciousness that is both human and divine: this is the energy of the soul. We are more than tumbling atomic particles, more than instinct and evolution in action. We are awake to our being, which makes us rich with both possibility and responsibility. We hold the ability to plan, to design, to imagine, to intend. We can feel. We can choose. And we can focus, directing our attention to that which we seek and allowing the rest to fall aside. We can invite the higher power of our choice—and understanding—to journey with us or come to our aid.

When we’re open to this higher power, this source, we become channels to great brilliance, to ideas beyond our own scope. It’s here that our spirits are fueled and that energy takes on both a distinctly personal and universal tone. One might call this source God, the Universe, our Expanded Self, the Great Creator, even just Source with a special capital S—anything you want, really. Use any term or understanding that feels right for you and go with it in a way that hopefully leaves you free of any baggage or unproductive associations. (This is about connecting with your highest, best self, not any certain philosophy or dogma.)

I believe that the real adventure of art-making, that intricate combination of leap and surrender, begins on a wondrous tide of energy and ideas that springs eternal from the Great Source, the river of radiant potential. It’s larger than life, grander than us, yet we have access to it anytime we chose: it’s Big Creative. Big Creative is the massive current of inspiration that is available to us anytime, anywhere. Big Creative gushes with thrilling ideas, moving art, and brave new innovation. Big Creative welcomes us to dip in with hefty cups, take a deep drink, bathe in it, love in it, delight in it.

When we are in open contact with Big Creative, we are meditation in action—wakeful and calm, but with our hands or mouths or whole bodies knowing what to do. Our spirits lift, and we bump up against the divine, bridging the gap between the world of ideas and the world of the physical. Often the result of this meeting of worlds is brilliance.

Big Creative fills our tanks like no other fuel imaginable. And the best part is that there’s no lack, no competition—there’s plenty of everything for everyone. There’s not even a skills or worthiness requirement before one is allowed to tap on into Big Creative. There need only be a few things, and they’re already parts of our everyday lives.

The first is focus.

WTF? (“What’s the Focus?” That Is)

What does it mean to focus?

For our purposes, it means putting our awareness and attention squarely on what we want, whether for our creative projects, the world, or ourselves. It means consciously choosing not to linger on what we don’t want, or to spend our time and energy on worry, blame, or anything else that makes us feel like crap. It also means getting honest and noticing what’s not working so we can start moving toward what we do want, since it’s positive focus that opens us up to Big Creative and keeps us connected to the highest sources of inspiration and energy.

Next we’ll want to bring in desire, feelings, alignment, and allowing.

You know how desire basically works, right? It starts with a feeling. You decide (often subconsciously) that you want a certain feeling, and then you direct your actions toward getting the thing, person, or experience you imagine will bring you that feeling. Desire is like our destination—it’s where we’ve decided we want to go.

Feelings act as our compass as we move in the direction of our desire. They're like a GPS device guiding us to what we want, and they're calibrated by the qualities of our emotions, good and bad. Feelings give us immediate feedback on how we're progressing. Good feelings tell us we're getting warmer—that we're hot on the trail toward the things and experiences we want. Bad feelings, unfortunately (but helpfully), tell us just the opposite. Along with the specifics of the sadness, anger, or frustration we might be feeling, negativity also indicates that we're moving away from that which will bring our deepest joy.

Alignment is like fuel for our journey; it's what gets things moving fast and powerfully. How do we align ourselves with what we want? What do we do to get aligned with Big Creative in our lives? We find real alignment when we get into the full feeling state of our desires, creating really fun buzz and excitement as we imagine the sensory sides of what we want.

Allowing is the state of relaxation and disengagement that asks us to step back for the sake (not detriment) of our desires. In our little journey metaphor, allowing would be the wisdom that pries our cramped hands off the wheel and lets our partner drive for awhile, so we can make better time and get there safely. It's the trust that we don't need to do everything ourselves in order to get where we want to go.

These five elements—focus, desire, feelings, alignment, and allowing—are the most powerful tools we have for making over our energy. They can be the best energy amplifiers and most daunting drains, so we'll need to use them properly and skillfully. We'll look at each one in depth, along with some other helpful techniques, in the next several chapters.

With these tools, we'll navigate the roar and thrust of Big Creative, which will allow it to carry us to places we could never reach on our own, even if we were to paddle diligently for years. Regularly connecting with this awesome Source will get you more of what you want out of all your creative endeavors. As with any powerful force, it helps if we work with the current rather than against it, so let's explore the dynamics that govern Big Creative.

Go with the Flow

How do we know when we're plugged into Big Creative? Do our fingers suddenly leave sparks on the keyboard? Does the pen tingle in our hand? Do we hear voices? (Maybe! But probably not.) Most of us have probably felt the power of Big Creative intuitively sometime in the past, but how can we tell for sure?

One of the best signifiers of a strong connection to Big Creative is the experience of flow. Flow is a state of elevated focus and satisfaction, marked by a sense full engagement that allows us to lose track of time and our environment while taking part in an activity. Many people instinctively find themselves in states of flow while taking part in favorite activities—pastimes such as reading, sports, cooking, gaming, and gardening all can stimulate flow. But flow can also be developed, beckoned, by the way we structure our creative work, according to Mihály Csikszentmihályi in his seminal book on the topic.² In order to best create the opportunity for flow, our goals should be challenging but attainable. When we're required to stretch, using all our faculties to solve a problem or work on a task, we reach a level of optimal stimulation; we're fully, but not overly, extended. We find a perfect balance of fascination, ability, and motivation, which leads to suspended time and self-awareness. We find the exact sweet spot where tasks are difficult, but not frustrating—doable, but not boring. Deadlines, new media or genres, and the unfolding of different stages within the creative process help stimulate this state of motivated concentration for many artists. The combination of skill-based work and effective pressure creates just the right combination of confidence and uncertainty for flow to occur.

Additionally, flow thrives in an atmosphere of clearly defined steps and direct, immediate feedback. Knowing what to do next in a project allows us to move forward at a pleasing pace. We edit scenes of our film one after another, then go back and watch them in context to make sure the story makes sense and is unfolding properly. We combine, cook, and spice our food, using several senses to make sure each part of the meal is cooked properly. We sing in a group, listening closely to make sure we're on pitch and on the proper beat.

So we can look at flow in two distinct ways. In its most spiritual context, flow is the touch of the divine, which allows us to suspend our individual consciousness and open to the realm of a bigger, higher creative source working through us. On the physical level, flow is a psychological state of heightened focus in which self-consciousness dissolves, leaving us free to work at the leading edge of our ability in exceptionally fulfilling and effective ways. Either way, it's very good for our creative lives.

Identifying areas of flow—in the past and present—helps us define the richest mines of creative payload. When we fully immerse ourselves in an activity, we are released from the limitations and assumptions of our day-to-day reality. Flow can also serve as a shortcut to just feeling good and getting better aligned with what we want when we feel upset or off-track.

Flow can also help us deal with negative emotion or environmental chaos. As a kid, I loved playing the piano and writing songs, which happily led to music becoming my adult profession. Before I imagined I would pursue it as a career, however, music served another purpose for me: it held a pattern of positive reinforcement that had nothing to do with approval or material reward. It allowed me to find flow on a regular basis. When playing, I got caught up in the rhythms and melodies, and I lost all track of everything else. I relaxed. I calmed down. I released thoughts of competition or self-consciousness. My mind lifted out of the occasional spirals of frustration that left me depressed and drained. I had found a way to get myself into a more powerful feeling state, which not only made things feel better, but also shifted my personal energy in such a way that things started actually getting better.

Several years ago, my parents' great home burned down in a furnace-related fire. The grand piano I'd played since I was about eleven years old went down with the house, and upon rebuilding, my folks decided not to replace it. Whenever I'm home now in the "new," but incredibly similar, house, if I feel a little stressed, I'll find myself wandering in the direction of the room where the old piano was—just to play for a few minutes, relax, and take some time for myself. And of course the piano isn't there anymore! So along with the intensity and pandemonium of a big family, holidays, and lots of activity, I also now find myself without my favorite on-ramp to flow! It makes things a little trickier than they used to be when I need a break. (Helloooo, egnog!)

As a kid, I had stumbled onto a shortcut to the state of flow, and playing the piano gave me some solitude in a lively, chaotic household. I imagine most of us experience beneficial perks—like flow or solitude—from our work. I think we find unique, pleasing benefits from the process of our art that serve us almost as much as the official fruits of our labor. Whether conscious or not, I believe most artists actively seek these process perks as much as the works themselves. Maybe we crave the quiet, or the escape from stress, or reconnection with a sense of identity that we lose in the busy rhythms of children or business. We seek something important in the work itself, something immediate that is not explained by many of the rewards of the finished product. Perhaps our craving includes the longing for flow and the energizing touch of Big Creative.

Inviting Big Creative into our process requires that we're open to the concepts that we are stewards for something bigger than ourselves, and that we can welcome this relationship more fully into our lives. We can let go of the exhausting idea that we need to do everything by ourselves, and in this state of surrender, find that our work often shines brighter, comes faster, and resonates more powerfully. This discovery can be strangely disconcerting.

The moment we truly embrace the concept that we are vessels for inspiration, not originators, an interesting thing happens: our egos start fighting, hard, for the right to take credit. I did this, the ego says. I noticed these parts and put them together. I earned this. Perhaps we'd be wise to reframe our sense of entitlement to acclaim; perhaps we'd do better to deny the claim that the brilliance was ever ours at all. Instead, we can take full pride and credit for showing up, doing our part, and placing our hands in the starting position, even when we had no idea where it would lead us.

There's no need to publicly give credit to a greater source. (Thankfully, it's not necessary to bang from the rooftops, "Hey y'all! It wasn't me! I got a sweet hookup to Big Creative!") But we can still internally choose to view our creative role from this slightly separated view. If we close off the ego from the creative process, we free ourselves from some of the weight of responsibility that wears us out on these journeys. If I'm not feeling connected or flowing, I can work on that, rather than beat myself up for not producing spectacular stuff today. I can rest, feed myself better, meditate, or shift in a dozen other ways. Prying the ego away from the process also leaves less personal, residual static to cloud the work itself. We release the litany of voices in our heads that occasionally tell us it's no good or it's been done or who are you to try this? and let the light shine through us. We can just, as they say, do it.

Woke Up This Morning, and I Wrote Down This Song . . .

When we're connected with Big Creative and creating in an optimal state of flow, work sometimes comes especially quickly and easily. It might feel like taking dictation more than writing. We feel our limbs moving, almost guided, to the right places. The work seems to fall out of us, fully formed, with little need for editing or reworking.

In these moments, flow allows us to access the "finished" version of a piece before we've actually hammered out the details. Michelangelo talked about releasing the statue from the stone. He believed the piece was already there and his job was to merely uncover it. James Taylor speaks of it in his song "Fire and Rain." He sings: "I woke up this morning, and I wrote down this song." He didn't say, "I hemmed and hawed and tried about fifteen different rhymes 'til I finally found some good lines and wrenched this song out of my gut." He says he wrote down the song. It was already there somehow. He heard, he heeded, and we now have one of the most popular songs in western music.

Grammy-nominated songwriter Beth Nielsen Chapman talks about sensing details of a finished piece long before it's even clear what's forming. While writing, she often hears the sounds of the words as they come through to her; this sense requires her to keep boxes of "song embryo" tapes that she records during the process—bits and pieces of lyric or melody that will someday find a home. She remembers sounding out pieces of the lyric to her song "Sand and Water," having no idea how it would resolve. "Solid stone is just sand and water," she recalled writing. "What does this mean?" she thought. "Where is this going?" But she kept writing, kept listening, kept getting down the pieces. The lyric later came together to create her hugely impactful and moving song about grief.

That, dear artists, is faith. Faith keeps the portal to Big Creative wide open, and the most amazing artists I know have it in spades. The willingness to get a glimpse of inspiration into form, even when it doesn't immediately make sense, is what separates the kick-ass creators from the plodding ones. Cultivate faith that Source is informing the work, and trust that your job is not to muscle it. Your job is not to pound and stretch and hammer disparate bits into submission and sense. Your job is to write it down. Get it into form. Allow your hands to piece things together. Good stewardship of inspiration is sometimes just getting the hell out of the way to let the Great Creator work through you.

Have you ever seen chefs in a kitchen when a knife falls out of their hands or gets bumped off a counter? They swiftly jump back out of the way. They're trained to do this early on so as not to make the mistake of trying to catch the knife or be stabbed in the foot by it. I'm not in the habit of thinking of creative inspiration as falling knives, per se, but inspiration does move fast and is worthy of our respect. When something shining and exact drops into your process, get out of the way and let it land.

Who are the models of kick-ass creativity in your life? Are they members of your family or social circle? A contact in your profession?

1. List up to five people you admire, and after each of their names, note why you see them as so creativity potent.

2. When do you recall experiencing flow while growing up? Were there times when you remember a parent or teacher calling you “back to earth” because you were so engaged in an activity?

3. Down the left-hand column of a piece of paper, make a list of the activities or projects where you have recently experienced flow. Across the top of the paper, make column headings for “Location,” “Time of Day,” “Solo or with Whom,” “Food/ Drink/Water, Rest,” and “Other.” For each occasion of flow, mark down what you recall about the elements around you. Note where patterns emerge, and integrate helpful elements into your sessions.

* Bonus Kick-Ass Challenge: Come up with a thirty-second “beckoning ritual” for invoking the experience of flow and an open, clear connection to Big Creative. Involve gesture, breath, candles, visualization, chakras—anything that speaks to you. Complete your ritual upon waking and before work sessions for the next seven days.

Opening the Flow

Project Rec: Make contact with one or two of your model creators and ask if you can schedule a conversation about creativity, whether a brief phone chat or meeting for a coffee or lunch. Share that you consider them a creative model and would like to know more about how they work. Most creative people will be flattered that you’re interested in their journey and opinions. Write up ten or so questions in advance. Afterwards, adopt an element of their creative process (or try on their whole approach) as you work on your own pieces for the next few sessions. See how it feels and works for you, and integrate it into your own process accordingly.

Crazy-Easy Route: Focus your gaze on wherever you imagine Big Creative to physically reside (I like the big open expanse of sky, myself), and ask it to open on up for you the next time you’d like some help on a project. Be direct: “Yo! BC! I need a hand here, please!” Or be formal: “Dearest Big Creative, if you’d be so kind as to send down some lovely inspiration, please, I’d so appreciate it.” Your approach doesn’t matter. Just talk to the source of inspiration as if it’s waiting for you to invite it into your process. (And know that some people insist that’s exactly how it works.)

². Csikszentmihályi, Mihály. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2007.