

Tending the Fire: a podcast about creativity. Episode 1: An Introduction

I'm your host, Andrew Tsao. Thanks for joining. Sometime around a million years ago, our ancestors lived in small groups that were nomadic by nature. Since farming and cultivation was many eons in the future, moving from place to place to find food and fresh water was essential. Imagine now one group that has traveled to an area they believe has plentiful animal life, fresh water and safe places to abide. Having been driven out of their previous home by rival tribes and poor hunting, they had sent scouts out to discover their next dwelling site. The group settles first in the crags of a large rock formation near a stream at the base of a mountain, and everyone gets down to the business of survival. Scouts are sent out again to find a more secure living space for the long term.

Skins are laid on the ground, wood is cut for fire and, most importantly, the fire tenders begin the serious work of building a fire. They take the glowing coals from the traveling hamper and place them in a rock ring along with tinder and kindling. The traveler hamper is made of hardened branches and shaped like a large teardrop. Leather thongs bind the curved branches together at the top, so the hamper can be carried together at the top so the hamper can be carried. Pebbles, small stones and ash are placed in the bowl at the bottom, carved from fossilized wood, stiffened skins are carefully placed around the supporting branches to prevent the wind and moisture from getting at the coals. One person can carry this hamper by inserting a pole through the tied leather at the top, securing it tightly then slinging it over their shoulder like a yoke. Another person is responsible for carrying the kindling sticks and charred wood chunks which would be fed into the coals in the hamper on the journey to keep the portable fire burning. Another person carries the most important of the tribe's belongings in a leather pouch tied to their waist. This is the flint and striking stones that would make the sparks needed to start a fire.

The first order of business at the new campsite is to create a fire pit by digging out a hollow in the ground, lining it with stones and then carefully setting the kindling and tinder in the pit. The coals are then carefully brought out of the hamper and placed in the pit. Along. With gentle breaths and fanning of the hot coals, the fire soon comes to life. Each time this happens, the entire tribe stops to take in the sight and sounds of the new fire, every one of them appreciating the warm glow and crackling wood. The rising smoke tinges the air. Fire, like fresh water, was life. They know they owe their very existence to it. They owe their very existence to it.

Most dictionaries describe creativity as an act that focuses on originality, problem-solving and inventiveness. The use of this word in regards to the arts tends to emphasize a

process and a methodology resulting in a work of art. Of course, creativity is not only about the arts, but is regarded as a human act that can encompass a wide range of actions and endeavors. One can be creative in almost any human endeavor. Tending the Fire is a podcast about artistic creativity and how, throughout life, one needs to nurture it, protect it, evolve it and, most importantly, develop a strong working relationship with it. If the making of art is something important to you, however, even if you're not a career artist, keeping your creative fire alive will, without a doubt, enhance your life. Fire alive will, without a doubt, enhance your life.

I've spent most of my professional life involved with creativity in some form or another, first as a theater director, then a television and film director, then a professor of drama, and now as a writer and producer. While my experience with creativity is neither unique nor particularly earth-shaking, I can claim a long and sometimes fruitful, sometimes frustrating, relationship with the creative act. Like most relationships, my partnership with creativity has been, and continues to be, fraught with complications. It is, and has been exhilarating, exasperating, humbling, frustrating and even debilitating at times. However, in the end, I don't regret a moment of dedicating my life to creativity. It has turned out to be a long and treasured companion, the wellspring of who I am and a daily inspiration.

The idea behind this podcast came to me after reflecting on my years teaching, acting and directing at the University of Washington School of Drama. I was head of the undergraduate drama program for a while, and I taught in the professional actor and director training programs as well. Reflecting on that time, I've been thinking a lot about the difficulties I had teaching creativity. I wondered whether such a thing could even be taught. Was it perhaps just an instinct or a gift, a matter of talent? Perhaps just an instinct or a gift, a matter of talent? Well, since I've left the university, I've continued to mentor and advise young artists and found that, without a clear understanding of what creativity really is and the actual process behind it, no amount of skills, techniques, self-help books or therapy seems to be of much value to any of these people.

I also come to the conclusion that creativity is inherent in every human being, regardless of background, opportunity or even desire. I believe creativity is bound in our DNA and we all have a creative spark in us. Some of us are encouraged to enable that spark. Some are discouraged from it. Some feel the spark and recognize its presence. Some need to have that spark kindled along the way. Look, the world we live in is not a conducive one for nurturing creativity, and it never has been.

While we laud creative individuals, we tend to emphasize what we think are necessary skills in the present moment. In educating our youth, this emphasis often stifles the creative impulse as an unintended consequence. Coming from a traditional Chinese

family, I know this all too well. As the old joke goes, the Chinese father says to his hopeful son no, no, you're pronouncing it wrong, son. It is not pronounced actor, it is pronounced a doctor. That is what you mean. What you mean.

And now for a news bulletin. Since less than 10% of students who hold Master of Fine Arts degrees will make a living wage in their chosen career in America, I can't blame parents who want their children to have a roof over their heads and food on the table for steering their offspring away from a career in the arts. See, a life in the arts is not for the faint of heart or those who yearn for material comforts. While, yeah, less than 1% of artists become millionaires, household names, billionaires, the vast majority struggle to make ends meet for most of their lives. Vincent van Gogh only sold one or two of his over 900 paintings during his lifetime. That being said, artistic creativity is also the thing that enhances our other needed skills. Children who learn creativity develop a more sophisticated approach to problem solving, critical thinking, analysis and leadership. They become better human beings. Now, I'm not going to get into the question as to who benefits when creativity as an impulse is stifled intentionally and citizens are encouraged to be as predictable as possible, but you can read history and look at current events and figure that one out for yourself.

But this podcast isn't about art and commerce or art and education. It's about the creative spark and how to tend it as a fire. It's about your relationship to creativity, whether you're hell-bent on making a career in the arts or just dabbling in creative pursuits on weekends. See, creativity is something that makes us distinctly human. It offers fulfillment, brings us joy and can be a life-affirming activity. But again, what is this elusive concept? Is it a method, a technique, an instinct, a character trait? Well, yes, it's all of these and more.

A spark can be nurtured into a fire. That fire must be fed, protected and tended to to survive and thrive, just as our imaginary tribe a million years ago was doing. We can learn lessons about our relationship to creativity by treating it like a fire that needs our constant attention in order to exist. The tribe we're following dwelt during the epoch when fire was literally the difference between life and death, and they knew how important it was. They knew how to nurture the flame, how to protect it, how to find the tools to make it if it went out. If it did go out for too long, oblivion was not far behind. Now, for those of us who, at some point in our lives, recognized that the creative fire within us was demanding attention and is a central part of who we are, we need to become skilled fire tenders, just like our tribe. In the following episodes, we're going to examine the nature of the creative fire, determine its importance to a thriving and fulfilling life and deal with the consequences of it being extinguished. If creativity is something you feel is important to your own life, you need a methodology or approach in order to help it thrive. Well, we will

explore various methods for nurturing the creative fire and ensuring you can do just that. And now for the tough love segment of this introductory podcast episode.

There are myriad of factors that unintentionally or worse, intentionally, seek to put the creative fire out in us. We're under a great deal of pressure to disregard our creative selves, to focus on seeming practicality, the pressures of everyday life and its responsibilities, societal and cultural attitudes, demands of family and career, etc. The problem is, human beings that have been disconnected from their own creativity become docile, easy to sell to, seduced by trends, and predictable. They can be manipulated, conned and become reactionary, even dangerous. Pursuing a life where creativity is central to one's fulfillment is often seen in our culture as indulgent, irresponsible, selfish and a waste of time and money. But this stifling of creativity is in fact hypocritical. See, creativity is the fuel of innovation, which in turn is the engine of progress, advancement and freedom. When asked what gave him the idea for the first desktop Apple computer design, Steve Jobs famously answered that it was a Japanese calligraphy class he was taking that opened his eyes to a design for a practical tool that was both efficient and aesthetically desirable. He credited applied creativity for the concept.

Cultures and societies that disregard and de-emphasize the creative impulse in its citizens do so at their own peril. People who lack developed critical thinking skills, problem-solving abilities and the ability to create new ideas too often end up living lives of drudgery, robotic repetition and monotony. Repetition and monotony worse. Lack of creative thinking among a citizenry which instills self-confidence and the ability to think for oneself, too often throughout history has led to authoritarian oppression, mindless obedience and dangerous tendencies in the world.

Now here's the toughest part. I can tell you that in my over 30 years as a creative professional, I've learned how to tell the difference between a true creative spirit and an imposter. All I have to do is ask the person who comes to me for casting a class or advice why they want to be a creative professional. Unfortunately, the most common answers are 1. I want to be a creative professional. Unfortunately, the most common answers are one I want to be famous. Two I want to be like my idol. Three I want to make a lot of money. There's also another set of unsaid but just as clear answers I usually can glean from imposters. Answers I usually can glean from imposters. One I want people to pay attention to me. Two I want to be validated. Three I need my ego to make me feel really good about myself all the time. There's no more important question to ask yourself than why you want to pursue a life of creativity. If you're honest with yourself and any of the above answers feel familiar, this should probably be the last episode of Tending the Fire you listen to. Now. Why would I be possibly driving listeners away from my own podcast? Because I need to make it clear right now that I'm not the only one who's going to be.

The creative act has to be an end-all and be-all in itself if you want to be successful at it. The simple truth is you have to treasure the creative journey itself, because there is no way to predict the destination. The creative process is the reward. There's no magic formula beyond that. Process is the reward. There's no magic formula beyond that. Now, if, after thinking about this for a bit, and you can honestly say that you need to live a life with creativity in it, then welcome. So the creative individual in a society bears a great responsibility to uphold the unimpeachable value of a creative mind, to practice creativity with a sense of purpose and to be visible as maybe a splash of color in a sometimes gray and forbidding world. After all, artistic creation is inherently about making work that speaks to the common humanity in all of us.

Before we close this episode, let's revisit our tribe, who's made camp in the rocky crag below the mountain. They wait for the hunters to return with food and the scouts to bring news about their surroundings. Fresh water has been found, warmth has been created and essential chores are done. After a good meal of fresh game and a favorable scouting report of a large cave that appears to be uninhabited, about a half-day trek from them, the tribe gathers around the fire and recounts their day's adventure. At some point, the elders swap stories about times gone by. As the younger members of the tribe listen attentively, one youth in particular is inspired by the myths and legends he hears, and he quickly volunteers to take the night watch until dawn. Now, this is a position of great responsibility, for the whole tribe will be asleep, and whoever tends the fire all night must keep it going and be sure not to nod off themselves. The tribe agrees to allow the youth to take the night watch and they all settle down for the night. Somewhere in the distance there's a sound of thunder and the youth notices that he cannot see the stars because the sky seems to have clouded over. He feeds a little more wood into the fire, gathers his fur cloak around his thin shoulders and looks into the flames. There he can see a universe of things, but most importantly, he sees himself as a tribal leader in the years to come, respected and adored. Then he sniffs the air and catches the scent of rain on the breeze. Should he be concerned?

In the next episode we'll take a look at what I call the first spark, that moment when one realizes they have a deep desire to live a life where creativity is central. This raises a lot of questions, whether one recognizes this spark at age 7 or 70. What do I do with this spark? Is it real? What happens if I just stifle it and do what is expected of me? Can I integrate creativity in any career choice or lifestyle? How Can I get better at being creative? I'll finish here with a couple of little administrative notes. Our website is at TendingTheFirePod.com. There you can find episodes, reference materials, some good resources about the creative process, social media links and even a few surprises. Finally, the stories I tell you in this podcast are both truth and fiction, sometimes a little bit of both. After all, I'm trying to be

creative with this thing. Thanks for listening to Tending the Fire, a podcast about creativity. I'm Andrew Tsao.