

Tending the Fire, a podcast about creativity. I'm your host, Andrew Tsao. Thanks for joining.

This is Episode 3, Fanning the Flame.

Our tribe has moved away from the mountain crag where they were flooded out. They have relocated to a hilltop nearby amidst the copse of trees. However, they know they are somewhat exposed to wild animals and other tribes, so they need to make some important decisions quickly. It is decided that their two best warriors will go in search of Flint to make fire. The rest of the tribe will head to the newly discovered cave, about a day's trek away, and wait for their return. Everyone knows there's a chance. The warriors will never come back. The new terrain, uncertain landscape and unknown dangers out there make the mission a treacherous one. Still, fire must be found as the warriors prepare to leave.

The youth who was tending the fire when the flood hit speaks up. He declares that he will go with the warriors, but the elders resist saying his inexperience and youth will make him a hindrance. Resist saying his inexperience in youth will make him a hindrance. The youth passionately argues that he must learn the ways of fire-seeking and scouting in order to develop into a useful member of the tribe and maybe a leader one day. He also insists he bears some responsibility for the disaster that befell the tribe. The dead weigh heavily on him. After much debate, the elders relent and give permission for the youth to join the warriors. As the warriors and the youth head off to the horizon on their adventure, they stop, turn back and look at the survivors of their tribe slowly moving off in the direction of the caves. They will be safe there, but if the needed fire-starting tools are not found, they won't last long. With grim determination, the warriors and the youth head off across the plain into an uncertain future plane into an uncertain future.

Once we've identified our creative spark and decided it is something we are compelled to nurture, we need to find a method to make sure this happens. In the last episode we

explored the very nature of art and art making. We now know that creativity is a practice and that it must be performed with great discipline. Without discipline, we cannot apply any method or hope for success. In this next section, I need your imagination to work with me a little harder. It's the clearest way I know to describe a real working method and approach to practicing creativity.

Imagine a small two-story house in the woods. This is where your creative self lives. Let's call her Alice. It is simple and practical, yet sturdy. Maybe it has a chimney on its gabled roof. There's a front door on a little raised porch, sash windows on both floors and maybe a small fenced-in garden in the front yard. There is one well-worn path leading to and from the house, and Alice needs to use it to go to and from her creative work every day.

Inside the house there's a living area, a kitchen and a dining nook on the first floor. Upstairs there's her bedroom, which has a view of the pathway in front. There's also a door in the kitchen that leads to a basement. The thing about this basement is that it is massive, deep and labyrinthian. In fact, it is so vast that, even though Alice has lived in this house for many years, she's only explored a small part of it. There are chambers, hallways, secret passages and tunnels that lead off in many directions. There are also more stairways that head down further than Alice ever dares to go. Sometimes she hears strange sounds down in the depths.

Now imagine with me that this basement in the house is Alice's subconscious. The first and second floors are her conscious mind and the path outside is her connection to the world. Now there's a lot of debate about whether each of us does in fact have a conscious and subconscious mind. Sometimes we call the subconscious the unconscious mind. Sigmund Freud first used the phrase subconscious mind to describe his observations on human behavior and his analysis of human actions and responses to the world. Carl Jung, a student of Freud's, took this idea a step further and proposed there is a collective unconscious shared by all humanity which harbors our deepest memories and behaviors as a species. This was his way of explaining why ancient

human cultures shared the same kinds of myths and origin stories without ever having come in contact with each other. Later, Joseph Campbell defined this common human story instinct as the monomyth. He described the shared aspects of human myths in his landmark book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. This book became so influential among writers and storytellers that George Lucas credited it with being the inspiration for *Star Wars*. In any case, let's continue with our story about Alice's house and the seemingly infinite basement.

Each day, Alice prepares for her encounter with creativity. She understands that there is a great deal of discipline required to do her creative work. She has a hearty breakfast, packs her belongings and heads out the front door determined to get to work in a focused and quiet state of mind.

However, Alice has a problem. As she takes the path from her house to her creative workshop, she encounters a giant ugly troll. This troll lives in the woods and each time he hears Alice coming he steps out onto the path and tries to prevent Alice from going to work. Alice knows that if she is not confident and filled with purpose, the troll will either frighten her back home or shake her resolve and break her focus, so she won't be able to create. Even though this troll cannot physically attack Alice, he is very powerful and possesses many magic tricks and spells to prevent Alice from getting by. His most devastating weapon is to taunt Alice by telling her she has no talent, has no business trying to be creative and that everything she creates is worthless. Alice must shut these taunts out and patiently wait for her chance to slip by the troll.

The troll then moves on to other weapons. He reminds Alice that she is selfish, indulgent and wasting her time. He points out the many responsibilities she has behind the silly creative work she does, and she should turn her attention back to things that really matter. Alice shuts her eyes and puts her hands over her ears. Finally, the troll resorts to telling Alice that she will never succeed as a creative person, that no one will acknowledge her work and that failure will eventually destroy her. No one will

acknowledge her work and that failure will eventually destroy her. This is a hard one for Alice to shut out for. Even though she tightens her hands over her ears, she hears this and shudders a bit. If I'm not going to be successful, why am I doing this? Then she reminds herself of the most important truth of all I create because it is who I am. Whether anyone cares or not is unimportant to me. Having spent years coming to terms with this truth, Alice has the strength to shun the troll's insults and, with a smile, walk confidently by him down the path. The troll shouts after Alice that he'll be waiting for her when she returns home.

Once Alice gets to her workshop, she gets down to work. She leaves her cell phone outside the door with her lunch, she locks the door behind her. She readies her workspace and takes a few deep breaths. She makes sure she is present and focused. It takes her a few moments to let the echoes of the troll's words dissipate from her mind. Then she gets to work. As she begins arranging the things she's trying to turn into a form, she remains fixed on each small task. Perhaps I will put this thing here, perhaps I will put this other thing next to it. Maybe, if I alter their configuration, the form will be more like the symbol I am trying to create.

Alice wants to make something that suggests to the viewer a specific idea she has been obsessing on, but as a symbol or metaphor, for that is how art truly manifests itself. As Hamlet said, the purpose of playing is to hold as t'were the mirror up to nature: to show virtue, her feature, scorn her own image and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure. At the end of her work session, Alice carefully packs a few items from her work table and takes them home with her. As she walks down the path to her house, the troll steps out and blocks her path again. The troll looks at the items she is bringing home and laughs. He declares that the work she has done is poor, wasn't worth her time and will never amount to anything. Now Alice doesn't even need to cover her ears this time. She knows what the troll is doing. He scoffs at her and then tries to make her feel guilty for spending time on her creativity. He accuses Alice of neglecting her real responsibilities and shirking her duties to career, family and doom-scrolling on social

media. In that case he's probably right. Alice waits for the troll to finish, then steps past him and heads home. The troll is frustrated and lets out a low growl. He reminds Alice that he will be there on the path tomorrow, the next day and the next until she stops this creative, self-indulgent nonsense. Now, when Alice gets home, she takes the items she brought from her workshop and heads into the giant, dark basement. At the base of the stairs. She places the items on a small table. Then she goes back upstairs, makes dinner, enjoys a movie and finally settles into a pleasant slumber, enjoys a movie and finally settles into a pleasant slumber.

Early the next morning Alice goes down to the kitchen, as she does every day. To her delight, the items she brought home yesterday have appeared on her kitchen table, except that they are different. They have been arranged in a different form, much closer to what she had imagined the final work would look like. With joy, she packs the items up, grabs her lunch and heads out of the house on the path to her workshop. She can't wait to continue working on her project. She's also looking forward to showing the nasty troll what she got from the basement, for she knows the troll usually is much more subdued when confronted with creative confidence.

See, in this fable I didn't tell you about the elves who live in the basement. They are industrious, clever, wise and patient. They abide in the shadows and wait for Alice to bring her work home to them. At night, while she sleeps, they mull over the items, scurry around in their various rooms and chambers looking for solutions. They take out their tools and they get to work. They work diligently and without disturbing the sleeping Alice upstairs. They work diligently and without disturbing the sleeping Alice upstairs. Just before dawn they tiptoe up the basement stairs and place their finished work on the kitchen table for Alice. Then they withdraw again to the basement to await the next delivery. They ask for no pay. They don't need to be fed or clothed. They do their work and they do their best. Some days the elves aren't able to offer Alice much of anything worthwhile, but since Alice has been delivering items on a more frequent and regular basis, they too have been better at responding. It seems the more items that she places on the table in the basement in the evening, the more rearranged and improved items

are found on the kitchen table the next day. Alice remembers when she first discovered the doorway to the basement, when she moved her creative self into the house. At first the door was stuck, rusted and wouldn't budge. But Alice was eventually able to get the door to function properly and soon she began delivering her work to the elves with regularity.

You see, your unconscious mind, of course, is the basement. It is a remarkable creative force. We all know and perhaps use the phrase let me sleep on it, in other words, let my subconscious work. We are aware that our subconscious is a powerful aspect of our being, yet we don't know much about how it actually works. There is a famous story that the great chemist August Kekule once dreamt of a snake eating its tail, which led him to solve a complex puzzle about the shape of the benzene ring, a landmark moment in chemistry. In chemistry, creativity is a total body experience. It requires conscious discipline to attend to the process. It demands the regularity of practice, like Alice's daily walks to her workshop, but it also requires the participation of the subconscious mind. With regular practice, your subconscious will respond to your creative endeavors with suggestions, solutions, questions and answers that elevate your work.

Now I want to get back to the role of the giant troll in our fable about creativity. You can give this troll many names Arrogance, ego, pride, fear, guilt, shame, insecurity, overthinking, the inner critic, etc. Etc. The troll is always there. It is there on your way to creative work and it is there upon your return. It will not be silenced and it will never go away. One must learn how to hear what the troll says, take it in, then disregard it and move on.

This is one of the most difficult elements of a creative process. Time and time again, we let the outside world, our negative thoughts, our insecurities, our inner critic impede our journey towards a true creative methodology. We're even unable to practice it daily simply because of the overwhelming sense that it's futile. The other element in our story worth noting again is the stuck basement door. If left unused for long periods of time, access to the basement becomes restricted. For most of our daily lives, we leave our

house, come home and go about our business without even looking at the basement door. But if we want to unlock our creative selves. We need to use the basement door frequently and with purpose.

That which you bring home from your creative workday must be the product of deliberation and focused attention. Only then will the elves take it seriously. They tend to ignore items delivered to them shaped in laziness, brief periods, scattered attention or haphazard arrangements. Creativity thrives with routine. As I've said before, if that deliberate and disciplined period of creativity is 10 minutes at first, so be it. The extension of that time will take care of itself. Go confidently in the direction of your workplace and deal with the giant troll in your path. You'll have to hear from him and you can't escape him, but in the end he's powerless to prevent you from working. If you are disciplined, when you finish your work, believe that the troll will be there again to prevent you from bringing your work home, but don't let him stop you. Be sure to offer your work to the elves in the basement. How? Return to your daily tasks of living: Sleep, meditate, go for a run or a walk, cook a meal, hang out with family and friends, dive, divert yourself. You will be surprised at when and how your subconscious offers solutions to ideas. The term shower thoughts comes from this phenomenon.

Often our best inspirations come while we are engaged in activities that have little or nothing to do with being creative or forcing an idea. Now, what happens if your creative house becomes filled with obstacles? What if the troll is just too powerful? We all have personal problems that often prevent us from living a fabled life like Alice. Physical suffering, emotional suffering, personal conflicts and unforeseen circumstances can often make it feel like your house is about to collapse. Around you, we are pushed to our limit. Just surviving the troll on the path brings allies like pain, financial pressure, family pressure and more. They make you feel as if it is not possible to get past them and go to your workshop at all. You retreat to your house only to find that the roof is leaking, termites have moved in and the furnace is broken. How can we create under such dire conditions? Broken? How can we create under such dire conditions?

In his landmark book on creativity, the *Courage to Create*, Rollo May proposed that creativity is literally an act of courage and perhaps more importantly, an act of courage in the face of obstacles, he said. In the face of obstacles, he said courage is not the absence of despair. It is rather the capacity to move ahead in spite of despair, our band of three tribesmen are now atop a high crest surveying the terrain around them. Some distance away they spot a dark patch of ground at the base of a ridgeline. The two older tribesmen fix their eyes on the dark patch and squint in the midday sun.

The youth asks what it is they see. One of them looks back at him and tells him they believe the dark patch is a scree of firestones, the black flint that sparks when struck correctly. They may have found what they are seeking. Encouraged, the three of them move off towards the dark patch quickly. What they don't see is the gang of bandits watching them from a stand of trees nearby. As our trio heads off towards their goal, the gang moves out of the trees and follows them with murderous intentions. Thanks for listening to Episode 3 of the *Tending the Fire* podcast, *fanning the Flames*. Special thanks to my supporters and listeners who've been following the show thus far, and you can leave me comments or questions on our *Tending the Fire* podcast Facebook page. See you soon.