

# the creative way

## artists discuss the process...

How does the creative process actually work? How can we be more creative in our life and work? Our author talked with some "down-to-earth people" who allow creativity to be a focal part of their lives to discover the answers — and the benefits.

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Sue Hara, Victoria potter and garden designer, feels "Creativity is a way of living. Whether it's making gardens, pots, tea, or a home, you can do it with an artist's eye—you can place things in a special way." She grew up in Britain with that attitude, instilled by her mother who wrote poetry and had a column in the local paper. After two years of art school in London, she married a potter and found herself surrounded by pottery—physically, socially, and emotionally. In the rush and bustle of raising a young family, clay was accessible to her. She gravitated toward porcelain.

"Art is an evolutionary process. You start with tiny teapots, then larger ones, then suddenly you find you're somewhere else, and later you're somewhere else again." Inspired by Japanese culture, Sue studied Oriental brushwork with Jack Wise, whose profound sayings often come back to her. For a time, she used Chinese brushwork on many of her pieces. Now she uses coarse clay, oxides and primitive firing techniques to produce bird baths and garden planters which have a natural stone appearance.

When Sue goes into her studio, she begins by doing something familiar, such as making coffee mugs. This repetitive work will take her into a place of meditation where she begins to ask, "I wonder if..." or she may see a particular curve that takes her off in an unprecedented direction. One thing spins off another. "You always want to make the perfect piece and you never reach that place. That pushes you to do another, and then another.

"As potters we do months of work before we see a finished product. Every piece dries several times before it's finished. You make it but then it has to dry. You fire it and a spark is rekindled as you glaze it. But then it waits for enough pieces for another firing. Maybe it needs more glazes. You rekindle your connection to the piece at each stage in the process."

Sue wants her ceramic pieces to be soul food versus more 'things' for our materialistic culture. "When I work, I come from a place of spirit. Maybe not every mug I do comes from such a place, but that's my intention." She feeds



her spirit by gardening. "It's in the garden, collaborating with nature, that I feel most creative. Many potters are also gardeners, we love working with the earth."

In the last few years, Sue has begun to bring her two loves—working with clay and gardening—together. She's helping people design small, low-maintenance gardens and find budget-conscious solutions to difficult areas because she feels, "In modern cities we need gardens more than ever, to provide a sanctuary from the stress of everyday life. The garden is a quiet space for contemplation and privacy, a place where nature and art can come together...mega soulfood."

**D**orothy Velasco has lived with stories all her life. Her grandmother in Newfoundland was a storyteller who evoked trolls under the bridge and could make you hear calls from the sea. This playwright and marketing professional in Springfield, Oregon says, "Creativity is fun. Everyone can be creative in whatever they do, such as in starting a small business."

After earning an M.A. in drama, Dorothy spent eight years in Guadalajara, Mexico where she married and had two children, wrote for an English-language paper and taught theatre, Mexican folklore and Indian culture. She

founded and directed an award-winning theatre group and wrote plays in English which were translated and produced in Spanish. Inspired by history, Dorothy's first play was set in a medieval nunnery, while *Open House*, which took the "Best of Fest" award in the Playwrights Festival '88 in Portland, is about the pioneer spirit of four generations of women based in one house.

Generally, Dorothy's plays begin with a thought or an idea that acts as a magnet drawing other ideas to it. When there's a big jumble of ideas, a sorting process takes over—frequently in long showers. Or she may wake at 3:00 am with some pattern or theme that's emerged. She outlines where it's going, what the climax will be, how it will end. Often characters come before the story and she develops them by writing detailed biographies. There's a constant process of adjustment—as she writes, she learns more about her characters.

After writing a first draft, she rewrites it seven to ten times, then invites actor friends to read the play in her living room. "They give important feedback—maybe they don't understand their character, they think it's off the wall, or aren't sure what I was trying to do." After more rewriting, there may be another reading, semi-staged with 20–30 people watching and discussing it. This requires a thick



skin because some of these people will be very negative for reasons that have nothing to do with the play. For Dorothy, a play is never finished, even after it's been produced.

Mornings are for writing, afternoons for Dorothy's half-time marketing job. When she worked full-time, she used lunch breaks, nights, and weekends for writing. Commissions—being paid for a project—can be a great stimulus. She had a grant to write and co-produce *Railroad Women*, a half-hour documentary shown on PBS in the states and BBC in the UK. It won the Silver Award in Houston in 1988 and continues to be shown in colleges and community centres in North America.

**"T**o be creative is to blow life into something." Janet Stewart, opera singer and Assistant Dean of the University of Oregon's School of Music in Eugene, began singing as a three-year-old doing housework alongside her mother. Growing up, teachers encouraged her singing and she convinced her parents to let her study music at college. They were dubious about her being able to earn a living. Janet's ambition was to be a public school music teacher with six children. After marriage and a master's degree, she began singing regionally, winning awards. While teaching, she auditioned for the Denver Lyric Opera; her first big role was playing Leonora in *Il Trovatore*. She began to win national competitions.

The death of her only child opened a huge chasm, becoming the watershed of Janet's life. At 33, she felt she had nothing to lose; she needed to sing. She quit a tenure-track position in the Southeast and moved to New York with no financial support. Under New York management, she performed in many fine regional opera companies.

"As actors who sing, we deal with words." If a song is in English, Janet skims it, attends to the range, notes whether it's fast or slow, follows the



much soul-searching, she decided to give up her singing career while people still wanted her and to see who else she could be.

Despite her demanding full-time university job, Janet finds time to sing solos and help direct a choir, "It's an amazing outlet, a sort of coming back home. I'm coming back to singing, not as a horserace but as the great love in my life." She is currently developing a one-woman show called "Yearnings and Passion Channelled through Singing."

Carol Priamo, an architectural photographer who produces promotional materials for artists and small businesses in Victoria, feels that, "Limiting factors often produce greater originality than a field of all possibilities. For example, Matisse's great collage cutouts developed because he was bedridden, plus he was at a point in his creative process where he was simplifying to colour and shape."

Born and raised in Guelph, Ontario, Carol spent much of her youth on the ice as an award-winning figure skater. She went on to get Masters degrees in Art History and Museum Studies and to write books on Canada's architectural heritage. She has documented historic cities and towns of Italy, Scotland and England in drawings, paintings, and photographic images. In her latest



PHOTO BILL PORTEOUS

melodic line, discerns the feeling tone—happy, sad, complex, legato. Then she looks at the notes and sings the words, listening to how poetry and music meld. If it's in a foreign language, she looks up words and confers with a native speaker. She researches the composer's life—why he wrote the piece. She explores, "What does this have to say? Why do I want to say it? What insights do I bring? What colours and tombres are required? How does it fit with other pieces? Can I relate to it? Is it difficult? fun? serious?" All of this creates the colours in her voice.

"Singing is about expressivity, about delving into what the composer meant and lifting it off the page. We have to be sensitive. We exaggerate to portray emotions that the audience may not have felt. Then we come back to the real world where people fear expressing feelings."

Singing was Janet's joy. It was an opportunity to create a world of beauty and participate in something larger than herself. But the voice is a physical thing—it reaches a prime, as does athletic performance. In her late forties, Janet had reached her optimum voice. She observed friends in their fifties who were still hanging on, waiting for their big break, whose apartments were covered with performance posters but who had nothing else in their lives. After

project, Carol has produced paintings of medieval life on wooden furniture, boxes and panels.

Carol's process begins with an initial attraction to something—a colour, a theme, a piece of furniture, a town in Italy—an awareness that "I must do something with this." She collects information and related objects which form images in her mind and the vision becomes more particular and specific. It becomes a decision and then a plan. As the energy rises to meet the plan, she readies her workplace and materials and becomes absorbed in reaching the goal. "There are constant adjustments, trials and errors, substitutions and effects I never expected. Time and place are suspended. As everything flows out from me, the work responds and begins to breathe a life of its own. At this point I feel I must leave it alone and let it be.

"Sometimes when I take this break I experience doubt, anxiety, procrastination or fatigue and I temporarily

lose faith in the process and in myself. I force myself to face the work again, this time with objectivity, calmly asking, 'What is working and what isn't? What does it need?' I use all my knowledge, experience and inner resources to do the best job I can. Energy returns and the process flows toward completion. I may in fact begin to overwork what I've done and have to step back and let it go. I finish with a feeling of exhausted exhilaration. Happy to let others see and use it, I'm eager to get started on the next 'creation.'"

Carol believes, "Creating requires discipline, concentration, courage, patience and faith—precisely the same things as loving requires—so creating is an act of love as loving is an act of creation. In both we are changed and change the world around us."

Susan Detroy, print artist, has a freelance art business on the west coast. For her, "Creativity is the

ability to transform things. It begins with an intuition, having ideas. Things come out of you that you didn't know were there. It's a lot about trust. It's not material stuff, but the ability to think outside the limits of a situation." As a young person she went to the movies at least twice a week and devoured magazines such as *Life* and *Look*. Despite her attraction to photo images, she majored in Spanish at college.

Susan's work is often tied to nature; she has taken graduate courses in biology, botany and systematics. She does



not pre-visualize—she gets an idea, thinks about how it might work, and does it. When she was learning photography and took her first infrared photos of her dog, Isabel, it touched something inside her and a large series flowed out. Later, she got a freelance contract to do photos of an insect collection she found unusual. It triggered, "maybe I'd like to do something with that." She developed a series of black and white photos, cards, and Polaroid transfers out of that experience.

More recently, while undergoing chemotherapy for breast cancer, she saw an aboriginal painting from Australia in a friend's house. Returning home, she started making fanciful ink drawings, depicting mythical animals in a colourful Folklorico fashion. Obsessed, she found herself playfully (and therapeutically) drawing night and day, producing over thirty drawings from which she's made photographic prints in varied sizes.

Victoria travel writer and Shiatsu therapist, Cheryl Coull, doesn't use the word 'creativity' a lot. "The word 'creative' can put up a block that leads to banging my head against the wall. I think more of being connected, inspired, open. When I'm working on something, I strive for a sense of spaciousness that allows for a flow of ideas."

Cheryl began writing stories in first grade, fascinated by being able to interchange hare and rabbit. Writing in a diary every day when she was 14, "kept me out of trouble." Courses at University of Victoria with Sean Virgo and Jack Hodgins introduced her to



poetry, short stories and fiction. Later, a job with the Ministry of Tourism led to writing for *Beautiful BC* magazine, a great match because it involved all her interests—writing, history, geography. She became founding editor of *Beautiful British Columbia Travel Guide*.

A period teaching English in China and studying Shiatsu therapy in Toronto allowed her to shake off the 'writer' label with its connotations of "Margaret Atwood and always producing brilliant perfect words."

By moving back and forth between writing and giving Shiatsu, she is able to choose writing tasks which interest her, usually involving B.C. history. Recently her quest "to know who I

am and where I am" led to a project for White Cap Publishers: *A Traveller's Guide to Aboriginal B.C.* Researching this book took her all over the province interviewing First Nations people. A three-year labour of love, every piece was sent back to aboriginal bands and tribal councils for changes, clarifications, and final approval.

Inspired by her subject matter, Cheryl begins to dream it and to visualize places. As she connects characters to location, she searches for the storyline, piecing the facts she has with her own understanding of why we're all here until something resonates as true. She talks to people and incorporates others' thoughts until she feels connected by spirit to them and her subject. "When the process is working, I open a channel between myself and all that is—words and images come. When it's not, I write three words, then delete them." This is when she recalls Sean Virgo's edict, "You have to know when to go fishing."

Creativity may be fun and satisfying to the creator, but it can also benefit humanity and our environment. Creative solutions to the economic and environmental issues facing the Pacific Northwest

will come from people who love fish, birds, people, trees, and water as passionately as Dorothy Velasco loves stories. They will come when individuals immerse themselves as deeply in these realities as Cheryl Coull does in B.C. and First Nations' issues—or are as obsessed with finding solutions as Susan Detroy is with drawing mythical animals. They will flow from having the kind of meaningful connection to the environment that Sue Hara has to sanctuary gardens. The discipline, concentration, courage, patience and faith Carol Priamo puts into her creative projects is available to all of us. When we are playful and open toward these matters, we may find ourselves, a la Janet Stewart, blowing life into forest lands and coastal reefs.