

CREATIVITY CONNECTION CONUNDRUM EXCERPT

from Chapter 3 “PROBLEM”

I tend to credit much of my success as a teacher to *American Idol*, the show that premiered in 2002 and inspired the world with Kelly Clarkson. Audiences rooted for the small town girl who had had no training, no familial support, no manager/agent and no business plan—and their votes would transform her life in a moment. Her performance reflected innocent aspiration and raw talent. The collective voice of the dreamer was heard through Kelly Clarkson and overnight, *American Idol* changed the way we viewed stardom. Idol status could now be attained by the girl next door. If *American Idol* chose ten out of ten-thousand singers to make it to round two (odds that appear better than the one-in-a-million picks from a slush pile at a record label), then some wanna-be pop singer from Paw Paw, Michigan with no financing and no business savvy might just stand a chance at stardom. This would mean contestant hopefuls must sleep on the concrete outside hundred-thousand-seat stadiums while waiting in line for the first round of auditions, but if that’s the new definition of “pounding the pavement” it’s a small price to pay. Being discovered had been “a thing” for decades, only now a television show would light the way.

Aside from Kelly’s talent, it was her charm and vulnerability that won over the masses.

Text-messaging a vote to studio executives renovated the idea of audience participation. The observers could now be active instead of passive, as if the applause meter from the 1950s were installed in living rooms across America. Applause has been a form of power in most cultures dating as far back as Aristotle’s time, when opularity itself was under the scrutiny of the court; conventional wisdom cautioned against garnering support from the lowest common denominator of humanity. No such wariness now. In 2018, instead of the slapping of our palms, we have finger taps and ticks to gauge our reactions, and there’s no dispute that those thumbs-up “like” icons are what it’s all about.

Click! next-scene: *The X-Factor*, *America’s Got Talent*, *Dancing with the Stars*—more yellow brick roads are paved for starlets with sparkle. I live in Los Angeles. I’m surrounded by actors, singers, screenplay writers, producers, YouTube stars, comedians and filmmakers (professional and non-professional alike). It feels to me like life is this never-ending promotional hype in which everyone’s happiness hinges on the *likes* and *shares* of others. Every day, ritually, we count followers and build tribes, re-tweet, snap and #hashtag even before visiting the toilet or brushing our teeth. Perhaps audience reaction has become a preoccupation over actual artistic sensibilities. Some of my students thrive in the social marketing arena more so than the talent arena, but are met with the most popularity because of their online appeal and dedication to fans. She who markets best wins?

This shift in success routes is, I believe, directly responsible for the problem at hand. Our success now hinges on the **external** instead of the **internal**—meaning the content itself is secondary to one’s ability to market. Years ago, it was shameful for an artist to be accused of “selling out.” Today, this couldn’t be farther from the truth as sponsored advertisements on people’s personal Instagram pages are perfectly acceptable

now—something that would have turned stomachs a decade ago. Artists now, in fact, are shamed for being crummy marketeers and penalized for having a following of less than, I don't know, five thousand people. Am I the only one who is not okay with no-talent celebs?

I have two reactions to this obsession with subscribers. On one hand, I marvel at the beautiful symbiosis between artist and fan, while on the other, I want to fend off the prominence of the almighty platform. Clearly, there is an imbalance here when artists emphasize the medium over the message. *Part of me wants to beg Creative people to stop focusing on the external, at least until their internal is developed. It's somewhat like putting the cart before the horse. When did this become okay? Nay, when did this become *thee way* to success?

And in fact, what is success? Making money off of your art? Getting paid to sing? Collecting royalties? There is a delicate interplay between the internal and external, which I refer to as **process** and **product**. This delicate interplay is not mentioned in other Creativity books. You won't find this information in the millions of HOW-TO forums on the subject. I could write a book on how to make money off of your Creativity. That might sell and then *I'd* make money. If I make money, does that mean my Creativity is fulfilled? Does success hinge on the external? What does success look like? Does the Creative project matter less than the Creative marketing? And to what aim? This just may be where the imbalance lies. There is more to this conversation than just the weighing out of commerce-driven Creativity against artistic/soul-driven Creativity.

First, let's look at this interplay between audience and artist. Consider the life of an actor who needs to win a role in a play or a film in order to do the craft—the external and the internal are intertwined. Performing artists have always relied on this exchange. Painters and writers, however, can develop in isolation, and thus may be considered accomplished without being commercially successful. The cliché, “starving artist,” implies that folks are more passionate about their art form than their living conditions. These dedicated few are completely willing to sacrifice everything for their craft, living life at the mercy of the agent or publisher or gallery curator. True artists care about the message; they are deeply connected to their art form. The Creative drive compels the “artist with a message,” and as long as they are fulfilling that drive they feel right. Sure, they want worldly success, but they'd perform, or paint or play, with or without the final product as their motivation. Now, with the hype of audience garnering, the system itself is corrupted. This corruption interferes with the symbiosis of audience and artist.