



**Creativity, Trauma Healing, & Storiez**  
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**1. DEFINING CREATIVITY**

How do we define it? There are multiple definitions of creativity in the literature.

A graphic with a green and blue background featuring circular patterns and a white circle containing text. The text inside the white circle is as follows:

**ROTHENBERG  
(1990)**

“BEING OPEN-MINDED AND FLEXIBLE AND ARRIVING AT USEFUL OR NEW SOLUTIONS TO WORK OR LIVING PROBLEMS.”

“THE ABILITY TO CARRY OUT ANY TYPE OF TASK- BE IT COOKING OR TENNIS, OR EVERYDAY WORK- WITH A CERTAIN TYPE OF ELEGANCE AND AESTHETIC GRACE.”

“THE ABILITY TO GROW AND DEVELOP AND CHANGE ONESELF IN RELATION TO INNER AIMS AND OUTER REALITY.”

“THE PRODUCTION OF SOMETHING THAT IS BOTH NEW AND TRULY VALUABLE.”

**2. CREATIVITY: PRODUCT OR PROCESS?**

- “Productivity- the mere turning out of large quantities of things is not the same as creativity...the result can be a large quantity of worthless material” (Rothenberg).
- “Creativity is not an ‘acclaimed creation...[but] it is a coloring of the whole attitude to external reality” (Winnicott).
- “One should also keep in mind the difference between being ‘creative’ and being a member of a ‘creative profession’ ...Not every writer, painter, or musician is truly creative” (Goldberg)
- “In a search for the self the person concerned may have produced something valuable in terms of art, but a successful artist may be universally acclaimed and yet have failed to find the self that he or she is looking for” (Winnicott).



### 3. DEFINING THE CREATIVE PROCESS

How do you define the creative process? Are there common elements that unify artists' processes across mediums?

- Ancient Greek culture attributed creative expression to the god Dionysus (also known as Bacchus). Verenyi describes Dionysus as “god of life, generation; god of blissful transfiguration, joy and ecstatic terror, wildness; healer, benefactor... raw-devourer, frenzied killer.”
- The Romans also sought to understand the origin of creative processing. In my search through the literature, I came across the concept of Janusian theory. Janusian theory is based in the mythical Roman god, Janus. Janus was the Roman god of doorways and archways (entrances and exits, peace and war). He is depicted as having two faces—each looking in a different direction. Janusian theory suggests that part of the creative process means living with opposing concepts. It defines creativity as the ability to allow contradictory concepts to co-exist in the same space without trying to fix it.
- There is variability in the literature about how one engages in the creative process. Some sources felt that a few sequential steps can be consistently observed across creative processes. Other sources renounced the idea that creativity can be constrained to a list of steps. Some referred to the creative process as an experiential, emotional journey and others as a rational exercise grounded in hard work and skill.
  - “Not by inspiration alone but by perspiration, the labor and sweat of the brow, does art come into the world” (Portnoy).
  - “When the artist gets deeply involved with the work in progress things inevitably happen that seem out of his control” (Safan-Gerard).
  - “Too much knowledge may restrain creativity” (Dietrich).
  - Goldberg suggests that there is no specific formula for the creative process but that there are essential ingredients in order for creativity to occur. These include: salience, novelty, the ability to relate old knowledge to new problems, generativity and mental flexibility, drive and doggedness, mental wandering, mental focus, iconoclastic frame of mind, resonance with central societal and cultural themes, social grace, and a favorable cultural milieu.

### 4. INDIVIDUAL CREATIVITY V UNIVERSAL CREATIVITY

- There is controversy regarding whether or not there are distinct qualities that separate the creative from the uncreative. Some even suggest that creativity is not relegated to an elite few; rather, every individual has the capacity to be creative.
  - “Creativity is grounded in ordinary mental processes” (Dietrich).
  - “[Creativity] is not a function of exceptional cognitive capabilities but is inherent in the normal generative capacities of everyone’s cognitive processes” (Westwood & Low).



- Every individual has the neurobiological foundation for creative thinking. It means that although our culture exalts the talents of an elite few, the capacity for creativity lives and breathes in every one of us (Corrado).
- “It is true that a creation can be a picture or a house or a garden or a costume or a hairstyle or a symphony or a sculpture [or] a meal cooked at home...The creativity that concerns me here is a universal, it belongs to being alive” (Winnicott)
- “Even in the most extreme case of compliance and the establishment of a false personality, hidden away somewhere there exists a secret life that is satisfactory because of its being creative” (Winnicott).
- “If we look around...we see people everywhere snatching bits of beauty, feeling that their life would become intolerable without it, like the prisoner’s life without the one beam of sunlight in his cell” (Sachs).
- “[Creativity] is present as much in the moment-by-moment living of a backward child who is enjoying breathing as it is in the inspiration of an architect who suddenly knows what it is that he wishes to construct” (Winnicott).

## 5. WHY CREATIVITY MATTERS

- Why does creativity matter? We live in a world filled with dissention and conflict. Terror and trauma and fear. Political division. Social injustice. Why does creativity matter?





- “Compliance carries with it a sense of futility for the individual and is associated with the idea that nothing matters...It is creative apperception more than anything else that makes the individual feel that life is worth the living” (Winnicott).
- “Creativity and freedom are inseparable. Freedom...lays the foundation for creativity. Mental health hinges upon both” (Wenkart).

## 6. CREATIVITY AND TRAUMA SURVIVORS

Why is creativity essential in work with trauma survivors?

- A. Creativity matters because it allows individuals- communities- to grapple with the uncomfortable paradox of creativity and destruction. Trauma survivors have endured life-altering experiences. Their narratives include fragmentation, loss of self, impaired relationships, changes in their mood, changes in their thinking. Yet at the same time, trauma survivors demonstrate incredible resilience. Despite the harmful ways life has knocked them down, they find a way to get back up again. To survive.
  - Winnicott and Nitsun both speak to the idea of “creative destruction.” This concept suggests that in order for something to be created, something else must be destroyed. Nitsun states of this phenomenon, “the threatened destructive ‘collapse’ may contain the seeds of survival and growth, generating and regenerating the constructive potential” (17 p. 159). Sternberg & Lubart propose that we need barriers in order to create, “Creativity...thrives in the face of adversity. To be creative you need an obstacle to push against” (8 p. 251).
- B. Creativity matters because it gives voice to experiences that trauma survivors don’t even have the words to express. A container for experiences that survivors’ daily lives have no space for. Harris speaks of the concept of “speechless terror.” Traumatic experiences leave individuals, families, communities speechless. The parts of the brain triggered in traumatic experiences prevent survivors from translating their experiences into words. Trauma survivors are literally and figuratively scared out of their words. And we need words to process what we have been through.
  - As stated by Dr. Sandra Bloom, creativity transforms “trauma and terror, pain and grief”...”into the joy of performance, the creation of beauty, the healing rhythms of dance and song, story and poetry. Not forgotten, but changed and changed together.”
- C. Creativity matters because it gives trauma survivors hope. Hope that just as their creations can survive despite the barriers, challenges, and destruction that they endure, the trauma survivor themselves can also do the same. That although experiences have left them broken, confused, disoriented...although all of the broken pieces don’t fit back together again, they can use them to create something new.
  - “The artist has the courage to destroy because he trusts that he can ultimately make it right, and that the work will survive. At these moments,



all the artist has is the courage to destroy in hopes that the creation survives” (Safan-Gerard).

- “The immortal work of art...is living proof that the artist himself has stayed the course of havoc and has himself made life come out of dust and confusion” (Rickman).

## 7. CREATIVITY IS...

- Creativity is a person turning a box into a bed. Creativity is rhythmically turning two ropes and jumping in. Creativity is a broken milk crate hammered to a piece of wood to make a basketball hoop. Creativity is overturned buckets and sticks transformed into a drum. Creativity is ducking and dodging bullets and making your way to safety. Creativity is allowing your imagination to transport you to another place- a place that is safe; a place where you are no longer afraid. Creativity is using the spices in the kitchen and the little food that you have to make it to the next paycheck without being hungry. Creativity is finding a reason to live when you want to die. Creativity is taking a teddy bear and a few candles and making a memorial. Creativity is growing a garden in a community surrounded by concrete and bricks. Creativity is coloring with broken crayons. Creativity is using your fingers to paint. Creativity is a raspy voice singing out of tune. Creativity is a dance that flows from the depths of your soul. Creativity is an intricate hairstyle with colorful beads at the bottom of the braids. Creativity is a composition book with scribbled words and feelings; a place to express yourself when the world doesn't want to hear what you have to say.
- Creativity is...everywhere. Where there are stories of trauma, there are always stories of strength and resilience...of creativity.

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