

From Career to Creative Life:  
Redefining Readiness In The Age of Artificial Intelligence

By

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## INTRODUCTION

It's wonderful to join you today in launching this vital conversation about how we can ready our students for a world shaped by automation, interconnectivity and artificial intelligence.

Though I've been engaged professionally in questions of innovation, creativity and human development for many years, I got my start exploring the creative life as a student at San Francisco University High School. As a senior, I came under the mentorship of founder of Dolby Labs, Ray Dolby. Through Ray, I landed an apprenticeship at a recording studio in San Francisco's Mission district called Different Fur, where I worked on records and on the soundtrack to *Apocalypse Now*. My times at Dolby and at Different Fur were the central formative experiences of my high school career—they taught me how to blend art, science, social practice, independent learning, creative vision and collaboration.

These adaptive, innovative worlds were shaped by parameters far different from the hierarchical, standardized, selective, specialized milieu of higher education that I would soon enter, and the life I found in these enterprises was far closer to the one our students will enter today than the stable, skill-based, functionally specialized work for which our education system has been designed. And so, I got my best education outside of school, but that need not be true for our students today.

Our progress toward that which digital pioneer and futurist Ray Kurzweil has described as a trans-human technological singularity represents for educators a profound opportunity to shift from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, institution centered, industrial model that has shaped education for one hundred and fifty years, to an approach that focuses on developing our students' capacities as creative, adaptive, self-aware, collaborative, emotionally autonomous individuals—people who will take the helm in shaping lives that are distinctly and uniquely theirs. We might describe such an effort as cultivating an appetite and a capacity and for lifelong *fluid engagement*.

Wonderful, you say, but we still need to get our kids into college, and college admissions is driven by standard measures of skill and aptitude—SATs, grades, achievement tests and AP scores, and the like. I agree, but we ought not to see these ends as in opposition. We need to create a context in which our students become creatively fluent and adaptively robust, while providing them with the opportunity to proceed on to college, and to appropriate from institutions designed to serve now archaic purposes, what then need to bloom in later life. We must graduate students not only with scores and skills, but also with robustly inquisitive and creatively adaptive attitude and mind.

College admissions and the performance of your students therein is subordinate to and ought to be a by-product of the work of readying your students to lead robust, creatively adaptive lives. It's best seen as a constraint to be satisfied, not an end in

itself. To illustrate why, let me share with you some of my experience working with accomplished folks in mid-life struggling to adapt to new circumstances.

Typically, when I ask such individuals how would they like to proceed, I'm met with a paralytic, "I don't know." It's not the curious sort of "I don't know," on which follows, "but I'm eager to find out." It's a hands, dropped, shoulders slumped defeated, completely at a loss, "I wouldn't even know how to begin to think about that" response, one that comes from folks with Ivy League educations, advanced degrees, lengthy resumes and notable accomplishments in the arts, sciences and letters.

How can that which University of Pennsylvania Professor Martin Seligman calls, "learned helplessness,"<sup>1</sup> be such a persistent personality feature of folks in their thirties, forties, fifties and beyond? Why is it that outside their narrow scope of expertise "smart people" as my friend the late, Chris Argyris said, "can't learn?"<sup>2</sup>

Mid-lifers' blank response does not spring from a defect of character, intellect or courage, but from the manner in which they were educated, a method that CUNY Professor Kathy Davidson calls a deficit-based approach.<sup>3</sup> The deficit model departs from a premise of scarcity (scarcity of time, talent, resources and opportunity)

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<sup>1</sup> Steve F. Meier and Martin E.P. Seligman, "Learned Helplessness: Theory and Evidence," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 1976, Vol. 105, No.1, 3-46.

<sup>2</sup> Chris Argyris, "Teaching Smart People to Learn," *Harvard Business Review*, May-June, 1991.

<sup>3</sup> Kathy Davidson, *The New Education*, Basic Books (New York), 2017.

arrogates prestige to the institution by demonstrating selectivity, rather than by emphasizing learning, meta-cognition, mastery, reflective self-awareness and adaptive robustness. Consequently, bright people are trained to go deep, not wide, to cultivate defensible niches, and to advance in mid-to-later professional life by incremental extension of the knowledge and reputation they have worked so hard to cultivate.

When work, opportunity and desire demand that their lives extend beyond the bounds for which this model prepared them; when stochastic change or radical innovation demands that they find new ways of working, new ways of being their common response is a paralytic, “I don’t know.”

If we want to do better for our students, we need to help them to think of themselves as inquisitive, creatively adaptive people who view “I don’t know,” not as a confession of failure, but as a starting point for *engaged* inquiry. This means deeply changing what we educate for. Though we are trapped in a system of education whose ends have become archaic, the folks who gave our schools shape were revolutionary innovators who would be tackling today’s problems with the same gusto with which they attacked educational reform in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. So let’s take a look the path of innovation that led us to where we are today.

## THE FALSE PROXIES MODEL

During the past 150 years educational practice has been grounded in a selectivity-based model aimed at choosing elites. The system's premise has always been that the markers employed by this system are effective proxy predictors of career success. Responding wryly to this view, George Steinbrenner, a 1952 graduate of Williams College, and long-time owner of the New York Yankees wryly said of his classmates, "The A students became professors, the B students became doctors and lawyers; and the C students found real success."

Steinbrenner's humor aside, our educational system rooted in a cascade of proxies, each one step further removed in its design, implementation and measures of efficacy from that to which it is supposed to contribute. Such proxy-for-proxy substitutions distort curricular design, student evaluation and teaching practice.

The educations bred of these substitutions aimed to solve real problems of the diversifying, increasingly urban and rapidly industrializing 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries—providing common instruction meant to socially and civically unify the population of a nation of; provide a merits based method of selecting and training managerial elites, and delivering instruction in the foundational and specialized skills that matched the needs of industry. Though the model misapprehended the true causes of human fulfillment and social contribution, it, did generate powerful threshold effects, contributing reliable means by which to achieve economic security, professional advancement and some degree of social mobility. While not

guaranteeing a fulfilling life, what is the American model of education promised with some fidelity to cure the economic ills that would render such a life impossible. This is no longer the case.

Professions are disappearing; terms of employment are diminishing; valuable skills quickly lose their currency or are embedded in algorithms that replace human judgment, and the job for which one was qualified yesterday may be gone, off-boarded or shipped overseas tomorrow. The conventional idea of career, to which the education system has been pointed, now fails as a reliable basis for achieving economic security, fulfillment in life, or meaningful social contribution. It has become a poor proxy for the things that really matter to us all.

Contrast the careerist view of success with the classical Greek notion of fulfillment embodied in the expression *K'alos K'agathos*—roughly translated as to be good for oneself and good for society. Education on such terms was education for judgment, character, self-development, initiative and public spirit. Skills were means by which to achieve these ends, not the heart of the training mission.

### *A Brief History Of Educational Innovation*

The system we have is not like the common law, a product of gradual accretion. It is the product of bold, public-spirited innovation. It's in our cultural DNA and educational tradition to innovate just as boldly today. Our radically inventive forbearers would expect no less. Let's look at a few notable examples.

Jump back with me first to 1869, the year of America's educational big bang. In that year, Charles Eliot, the newly ascended President of a college in Cambridge whose founding motto was *Veritas pro Christo et Ecclesia, Truth for Christ and Church*, published an essay in the Atlantic Magazine entitled, "The New Education." Eliot's seminal think piece, based in part on his investigation of European Universities, called for a revolution in university education, shifting college instruction from its clerical roots to a merits-based program that prepared elites for the specialized work demanded by industrial society.

In the long view of innovation in American education this was one of four pivotal events in the shaping the infrastructure we have today, the other three being: the rise of the common school in the 1830s; passage of the G.I. bill in 1944, and the Supreme Court's Brown versus Board of Education ruling overturning the separate but equal doctrine in 1954. Each of these durable and consequential innovations was rooted deeply in a theory of the role of education in fomenting civic culture and the stability of the state.

The common school movement had early roots in Jefferson's belief that education cultivated civic literacy and Republican virtue, and it rose to prominence on Horace Mann's view that universal education was an antidote to the politically destabilizing forces of urbanization and social fragmentation. Eliot's revolution in higher education was yoked to the notion of the research university as an enterprise in



service to the nation, whose graduates were instrumental to the “mak[ing] of the State. The GI bill, passed shortly before the D-Day invasion, democratized higher education in the United States; markedly increased social and economic mobility, provided for tapered integration of returning vets into the job market, and extended civil rights.

Brown’s overturning of “separate but equal,” was rooted in a broad civic and cultural conception of education’s social function. Observed the Court in the gender biased language of the day:

Today, education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments. Compulsory school attendance laws and the great expenditures for education both demonstrate our recognition of the importance of education to our democratic society. It is required in the performance of our most basic public responsibilities, even service in the armed forces. It is the very foundation of good citizenship. Today it is a principal instrument in awakening the child to cultural values, in preparing him for later professional training, and in helping him to adjust normally to his environment. In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms.

What a sharp contrast in scope, ambition and imagination between these ennobling words aimed at cultivating an aware, informed, culturally enriched citizenry, capable of exercising genuine agency, with the deracinated concept of education as simply skills for jobs embedded in the agenda put forward by proponents of STEM, which is a Potemkin proxy for genuine educational reform.

Cultivating readiness for our students means preparing them for life and for civic duty. Reshaping education wisely demands innovation that serves broad public purposes, as did the great formative events in our history of education responded. The foundations for such change lie to a startling extent with the choices available to K-12 educators, not with university administrators whose institutional incentives militate strongly against reform. We in this room have the fortunate occasion to participate in remaking education on terms that are truly well suited, as *The Tempest's* Miranda said, to this "brave new world."

Quoting her more fully:

Oh, wonder!

How many goodly creatures are there here!

How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world,

That has such people in 't!

So how can we best serve the *goodly creatures* in our charge and the society that they will shape? And how can we do so in the tradition of high public purpose by which we have arrived at the system of instruction that we must now boldly change?

I believe that we can do so best by enabling our students to envision accurately the contours of a long and fulfilling life, and the means by which such a life in a complex

and changing world, *through fluid engagement and creative adaptation*, can be achieved. Let's talk then about the long arc of a fulfilled life.

## THE LONG ARC OF A FULFILLED LIFE

When we were growing up, having a career was an aspirational idea. To have a career was to know and to follow one's life's work; to progress along a dignified path, one that carried the prestige and recognition attendant to specialized training. A career was something we reached for; as opposed to a job, which was something one had, but to which one could not lay claim, nor from which could one arrogate social status beyond that of performing one's work honorably. As Camus observed of Sisyphus, "The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart."<sup>4</sup>

Embedded in the notion of career is the premise of a steady track. The word stems from the Vulgar Latin *via cararia*, meaning carriage track, the rutted road that guided wheeled vehicles from the days of the Roman Empire. If one thing is certain, however, the familiar pathways, milestones and carved tracks that have traditionally defined career are rapidly disappearing. Our accelerating rate of that which Clayton Christensen twenty years ago called disruptive innovation, following on what economist Joseph Schumpeter in 1942, the same year Camus wrote "The Myth of Sisyphus," termed "the gales of creative destruction," ensures that preparing students for career alone will fall far short of their needs.

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<sup>4</sup> Albert Camus, "The Myth of Sisyphus" (1942)

Preparing a promising student properly for will necessitate giving this student the capacity to imagine leading a rich, varied, fulfilling, ever evolving life at whose core lies *the art of creative adaptation*. The test of our success in this endeavor seventy years from now they will look back and say, “I have lead a meaningful life; I feel fulfilled.”

A particularly potent means to this end is to examine how successful creators guide, cultivate and nurture such lives. Let’s look at a model I’ve developed which pulls their efforts and life trajectories into focus.

#### ARC AND INTERRUPTION: THE PATH OF A FULFILLED CREATIVE LIFE

The central concept I want to communicate to you in presenting this model is that fulfilled creative lives, travel through a path of *punctuated evolution* over the course of which stages of incremental development alternate with fundamental changes in identity, each transition precipitated by a crisis that puts the self in question. (see figure 1) Such lives, per force, require creative artists to be independent, robust to change, highly adaptive and willing, as Harvard comparative literature professor Susan Rubin Suleiman so eloquently put it, to *risk who one is*.<sup>5</sup>

Any student who has completed high school has already progressed through a scaffolded succession of such evolutions—shifts in identity, structure of meaning, social grammar and vocabulary, priority and purpose. These routinely accompany a

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<sup>5</sup> *Risking Who One is*, Harvard University Press (Cambridge), 1994.

child's transitions from home to pre-school, pre-school to kindergarten, kindergarten to the primary grades, primary school to middle school, and middle school to high school. We expect our students to make these rather dramatic shifts because that is the role of childhood and adolescent development. Until recently, we did not expect adults to do the same. After all they were grown-ups. Our children's lives, in contrast to the famously self-alienated and constrained life of the Japanese *salaryman*, or Henry David Thoreau's "quiet lives of desperation," if they are to thrive, will continue to cyclically evolve.

### *The Recurring Cycle*

Such evolutions move through a four-part cycle.

#### **Progression**

The first phase, the blue segment on figure one, is progression within a stable structure of meaning. In the progressive phase an individual knows his or her social role, is clear about intentions, has a fair estimate of the determinants of success, and through effort, observation and reflective practice acquires skill, opportunity and social capital. By contrast, when a given structure of meaning is spent, modest adjustments conditioned on past production will not correlate closely with subsequent performance. The exhaustion of one's structure of meaning initiates crises.

#### **Crisis**

We enter a creative crisis when confronted with a developmental challenge that cannot be resolved within our existing self-concept, our toolkit, or the grammar,

vocabulary and structural metaphors that shape our world-view. We are thrown into crisis because we do not know how to proceed, and yet, to thrive we must. In some branches of psychology, this is referred to as ego death.

To move on, we must discharge our present self-concept and cultivate its successor. The problem is that our existing conceptual and expressive vocabulary is not adequate to the task. We cannot solve the problem of our own evolution from within our existing resources, even though our egos insist that we must. To proceed, we must seek examples and relevant procedures outside our experience.

Understanding that such crises are predictable, and that the death of our current version of ourselves is not a failure, but a sign of maturation, makes it more likely that we will be able to undertake such evolutions with curiosity, efficacy hope. Educators can foster such understanding by making the evolutionary cycle explicit; discussing the healthy function of crisis in its unfolding; providing stories drawn from biography, literature and drama that illustrate the causes, experience and constructive resolution of adaptive crises that adults face. Inviting students to reflect on their own evolutions as they've developed and to think about how lessons learned might help them embrace future creative challenges can help to shape an agile mindset and a propensity to cultivate poise in meeting the unknown.

### **Transition**

The third phase in the cycle is transition. Transition is a liminal state straddling the boundary between the old and the new. In contrast to crisis, which is marked by

loss, unknowing, conflict and fear, transition has a decisive clarity. Its sharpness arises from our acknowledgement that the old language and methods no longer serve and from the artist's emerging ability to look ahead. During transition we begin to envision the *self* we can be and start to articulate plausible means of becoming this person.

### **Metamorphosis**

The final phase of the cycle, metamorphosis, begins when we actively undertake to establish new sources of meaning, motivation and creative identity. Just as the preoccupations of a third-grade are markedly different from those of a kindergartener, the concerns of individuals who see themselves as actively engaged in meeting the developmental challenge that will define the next phase of their progression will be markedly different than the premises by which they defined themselves and their work in the prior stage. Metamorphosis is complete when an individual has sufficient expressive resources to begin working from a developmentally appropriate revised identity.

A complete evolutionary cycle, then, involves a kind of ego death, the replacement of an old version of oneself with a new, the recognition of a new developmental challenge that will shape life, work and practice for the foreseeable future, and the development of a grammar, vocabulary structural metaphors and a set of methods appropriate to the next stage.

### *The Five Stages of a Fulfilled Creative Life*

So how does this recurring cycle plays out for people who lead consciously creative lives? If recurring cycles of evolution provide the structure of this narrative, its through-line is animated by interplay between *expressive desire and developmental challenge*. Sustained expressive desire drives adaptive response to the series of developmental challenges that arise over the course of a consciously creative life.

If you look at the graphic (figure 2) that outlines the arc of a fulfilled creative life, you'll note that it's divided into five stages denoted by the colored columns, and that these stages are interrupted by four crises which punctuate the developmental process. Look now at the looping line that runs across this graphic, illustrating the recurring cycles of progression, crisis, transition and metamorphosis that shape the lives of artists, writers and other folks with creative careers. If you direct your attention with care, you'll see that the slope of arc rises through the first four stages, then turns down as we enter the final stage. The trajectory described by this line is not accidental. It reflects an important pattern in the paths of artists who experience fulfillment in late life. The first four stages of a creative life, while presenting their own developmental challenges, are part of a larger accumulative process. Successful artists accumulate skill, social connection, reputation, financial and social capital, and potentially a role in shaping the larger field. Artists entering the final stage shift from accumulation to dispensation in a manner which accords with their elder status. Let's look at how they get from here to there.



## **Developing Discipline**

The first stage of an artist's life, *developing discipline*, answers the question, "How do I begin?" It commences the moment an individual makes a concrete commitment to become an artist. An artist in the process of developing discipline is concerned with acquiring the basic skills needed to envision and to develop bodies of work that fulfill their own intentions. Whether the cultivation of artistic discipline demands deep immersion in source material; focused, energetic reflective practice; regular and consistent production of new work, development of a robust appreciative system and fruitful integration of critical feed back.

An artist who develops discipline has taken initial control of his or her creative destiny by developing focus and technique. Eventually, however, the artist will need to move from this training period into the life of a working artist. This transition often precipitates what I call a role crisis.

## ***Role Crisis***

Role crisis arises because the transition from artistic apprenticeship to artist entails a redefinition of self, one that arrives in the form of two questions: What does it mean to enter the social role of a working artist? And Do I truly want to accept this set of responsibilities? New artists are rarely emotionally well prepared to meet these questions. They want to be rewarded for doing the same thing they know how to do well — to be art students: Therein lies the dilemma.

At this juncture, young artists commonly turn the question over to the gods. Rather

than determining to learn what it to be an artist, and then discovering one step at a time how to proceed, they render the determination of whether they will continue to work contingent on events outside their control. “If a gallery that pays my bills picks me up, I’ll be an artist.” “If I get signed by a major label, I’ll be a musician.”

Embedded in this fantasy of being discovered Lana Turner-like in a drug store is the desire to be elevated without effort, to have one’s specialness validated prior to genuine achievement, to pretend that skill and talent alone are enough. This stance situates transitional artists in a developmental limbo that persists until the individual in question refuses to cede determination of his or her creative life to outside agents. When a young artist stops making contingent arrangements and is able to say with conviction, “I am an artist and I will learn to do what it takes,” the next stage of creative development, *achieving mastery*, begins.

### **Achieving Mastery**

To make and share meaningful work, while paying the bills, a newly minted artist must develop capacity for self-management and reflective practice. He or she must also learn how to be a high functioning member of the tribe. Yet, many do not understand that achieving such self-mastery in a social context is a not only a necessary developmental task but a fundamental aspect of creativity, Hence, they approach the development of necessary social acumen with a mix of dismay and overt resistance.

This reluctant posture drains energy, hinders creative progress, and disempowers the young artist. Its logic is defective because it aims low and because it is rooted in

a thin conception of the creative self, one premised on the belief that to survive an artist must inevitably bargain bits of him or herself away. To blossom, the young artist must ask, “What can I do that I might thrive?”

A useful answer must provide a thicker concept of creative identity than that which splits the young artist into a pure self who creates, and a practical persona that secures life’s necessities in self-abasing ways. Such a concept sees the development of social acumen as an aspect of self-mastery, one that expands an artist’s opportunities for creative growth and meaningful contribution. When young artists find that they can adopt *a more extensive view* of their own creativity and that they can develop an authentic, capable, empowered, socially implicated creative persona, they tend to find the premise liberating. It is at this point that they begin to advance in their pursuits.

Eventually though, many artists feel a call to discard the scaffolding of being one artist among many and to enter a new, bolder stage of creative development, one in which they become distinctive voices and true authors of their creative lives.

Achieving this result begins with a struggle for differentiation.

### ***Differentiation Crisis***

If the transition from student to artist is marked by a crisis of *assimilation to a social role*, the jump from working artist to self-authorship, can be understood as a problem of finding the will to develop a *distinctive voice*, a crisis that arrives with the question, “How do I make my true mark?,” a topic that scholar and critic Harold

Bloom discusses with gusto in his classic text, *The Anxiety of Influence*.<sup>6</sup>

While many young artists aspire to create decisively original work, the question of originality only develops practical import when two conditions are met: First, as the late neurologist Oliver Sacks observed,<sup>7</sup> “*imitation and mastery of form or skills must come before major creativity*.” Second, an artist who has achieved the technical mastery that Sacks describes must consistently express this skill as a functioning working artist. When these prerequisites have been thoroughly met and their possibilities exhausted, an artist is prepared to confront the anxiety that attends to creating truly distinctive work. More often than not, however, they do not proceed.

Notes Maria Popova,

Curiously, Sacks points out, many creators don’t make the leap from mastery to... ‘major creativity’...Often, creators — be they artists or scientists — content themselves with reaching a level of mastery, then remaining at that plateau for the rest of their careers, comfortably creating more of what they already know well how to create.<sup>8</sup>

Sacks attributes this failure to an insufficient incubation of ideas. While there is doubtless truth to this contention, it captures only part of the story. An artist’s

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<sup>6</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, Oxford University Press (New York, Oxford), 1973.

<sup>7</sup> Oliver Sacks, “The Creative Self,” in *The River Of Consciousness*, Knopf (Canada), 2017. Quoted in Maria Popova, “Oliver Sacks on the Three Elements of Creativity,” Brain Pickings, 2017

<sup>8</sup> Maria Popova, “Oliver Sacks on the Three Elements of Creativity,” Brain Pickings, 2017.

progression to self-authorship requires a shift from a creative identity couched in terms of one's *role* as an artist, to one structured by a lucid articulation of the nature and defining content of one's true *work*.

Granting oneself the authority to do one's most honest and deeply motivated work comes at high cost. Torn between the call to follow one's bliss and the loss of safety in numbers, artists often freeze.

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Like the artist in role crisis who avoided transformation by making the question of artistic identity contingent on acts of god, artists embroiled in a crisis of differentiation develop wishful strategies grounded in a desire to answer the call without changing the person they are. When this becomes impossible, artists become work avoidant, deferring work on signature projects in preference to activities that are familiar but not distinctly theirs, or cramming their passion projects into small cracks in their schedules. That way, if their project fails, its defeat can be blamed on lack of time, lack of resources, the demands of family, galleries, a burdensome teaching schedule, and so much more.

Artists proceed when they reject comfortable social position in favor of self-determination. When an artist says with conviction, "*I grant myself authority to do my deepest and truest work,*" the crisis of differentiation has come to an end and the real work of self-authorship begins.

## Enacting Self-Authorship

In the self-authorship stage, one's status as artist and one's membership in the community are givens. With these resources in place, the artist struggles to begin producing work that can be the product of no other. Often, this quest unfolds in the context of a quest to produce a defining piece of work, one whose completion initiates a period of sustained product fluency. (A good illustration is songwriter Lucinda Williams' mid-life struggle to produce her masterwork, *Car Wheels on a Gravel Road*. Following the tortured development of this brilliant album, she released a string of records that have firmly placed her in the top rank of American masters.)

Here it is useful to draw a distinction between work that is objectively original and work that is truly self-authored. Artists early in their career are sometimes capable of startling originality, but it is rarely the product of genuine self-authorship because these artists necessarily operate from less than full self-awareness. They are incompletely cognizant of the forces that have shaped their preoccupations, motives, and methods, and they act in response to transmitted values, rather than values maturely selected through conscious reflection.

While work that emanates from a naive artist can be vibrant, forceful, and riveting, it cannot in artistic terms be a definitive statement. To create work that is a defining act of self-authorship, the artist must go through a complex and often harrowing process of self-engagement, revelation, and selection. There is no shortcut.

In struggling to complete signature work, artists are forced to come to terms with the past and find the mental resources they need to advance beyond it. They must also end relationships and find allies who are capable of supporting them in the full expression of their creative intentions. These tasks completed, the artist becomes capable of generating and consistently producing signature work.

### ***Extension Crisis***

Some self-authoring artists arrive at a point where engaging exclusively in primary practice is no longer fully satisfying. Often they become concerned with exerting influence on the shape, direction and practices of the field. Others find such opportunities are thrust upon them.

The arrival of a call to eminence and the citizen and leadership duties it entails, is an invitation to *extend* oneself, and by implication one's creativity, into a mature social role. While the drive toward (or pressure to assume) a prominent socially implicated role and the responsibilities it entails may be intense, artists heading toward eminence frequently experience the thought of satisfying this urge as a betrayal of the self-authorizing identity that they have fought so hard to achieve. Until this conflict is resolved either on behalf of a return to relatively autonomous production, or the adoption of the role of prominent citizen, the artist is caught in what we might call a *crisis of extension*.

As with previous creative crises, the torn artist is negotiating between a desire for something more and an older conception of self that cannot satisfy this yearning. To resolve this conflict in favor of eminence, an artist must forge an identity no longer defined exclusively by the products of his or her own voice. The artist who chooses in favor of eminence works now *on and for*, rather than simply *in*, the field.

### **Attaining Eminence**

Creative eminence is not simply an elevated status; it is a kind of performance. The artist moving from self-authorship to eminence adopts a plural motive structure, one that extends beyond the warrior's determined insistence "I will" to the leader's concern with *who we are* and *where we must go*. Eminent artists begin to think in terms of a duty to craft because they are aware that their work speaks not only for themselves but also to and for the field. For the eminent artist, making one's best work is no longer a response only to personal desire; it is now a citizen duty.

An artist remains engaged in the process of working from a position of eminence so long as his or her primary concern is with cultivating influence through citizen contribution and the production of work marked not only by its excellence, but its influence on practice. Eventually, however, the attractions of pursuing artistic influence and the rigors of producing exemplary work can begin to wear thin. Often this occurs when an artist becomes powerfully aware of the finitude of life, an awareness that gives rise to disquieting questions—"How do I continue, and on what terms?"



### ***Continuation Crisis***

A fulfilling resolution to these questions can come as a release of stricture and a loss of anxiety that brings fresh energy for creative work. Such keenness can manifest as a consequence of novel subject matter, or fresh methods, as exemplified by Matisse's "cutouts." But how does this late life existential boost come about?

During earlier stages of the artist's career, meaning was defined by the *accumulation* of discipline, skill, social connection, reward and reputation. In later life, the process of accumulation becomes less relevant. Rather than gathering, building and standing out, the artist who thrives in later life finds meaning by relaxing into the moment, discovering humor in the limitations of one's smaller *self*, connecting with and channeling the larger *Self*, and in bestowing wisdom on those who seek it, qualities warmly displayed in the late poet Stanley Kunitz's book, *The Wild Braid: A Poet Reflects on a Century in the Garden*.<sup>9</sup>

To accommodate the work of dispensation, the artist must develop a quality of wry self-acceptance, and a creative identity that embraces, freedom from the inhibiting burdens of the past and engagement now with life as it is. Such an artist, alive to the moment, and working from a place of love, is fully awake. But the turn to brightness does not come easily.

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<sup>9</sup> W.W. Norton (New York), 2007.

It is not because older artists lack for models of creators who have thrived later in life, Matisse, Monet, Georgia O'Keefe, Martha Graham, and Gordon Parks come easily to mind. It's not that we are unable to fathom their progression; it's simply profoundly difficult for us to grant ourselves permission to step into the shoes of our beloved elders

An artist unready to accept the implications of elder status, despite a yearning to operate differently, stretches, strains and struggles to remain "relevant," or falls prey to listless depression. This dysphoric pattern continues until this individual's inner dialogue shifts and the artist comes to embrace the freedom of great age and the art of *crafting legacy*.

### **Crafting Legacy**

Crafting legacy is an active practice that establishes continuity between an artist's creative work and that which lies beyond. It is a process that animates and informs creative expression, not simply a means of attending to the future care of our work. An artist committed to this process announces, "I'm no longer building a creative career; I'm finishing the journey. I have nothing to prove, but I'm happy to share what I've learned along the way. I want to work now from my heart and to follow the call of my spirit." Artists engaged in the art of crafting legacy develop and

express what renowned psychotherapist Carl Rogers termed, “underlying confidence in themselves as trustworthy instruments for encountering life.”<sup>10</sup>

Such artists are free, vital, unencumbered and engaged. They accept fully that they don’t know how things will end, but see the openness of the situation as a shaper of priority and as a spur to action. The sage artist understands that the art of creating legacy is informed, but never governed, by accumulated experience. Legacy as practice then is a means of working intentionally and astutely from the heart, accepting what comes, offering what one has, and producing what is needed. Proceeding from this awakened state, sage artists foment the prospect of producing work that sparkles with vitality, pulses with humor, shines with love, and perhaps finds transcendence. And that is why *fulfilled artists never stop working*, because for them, *legacy is practice*.

To close I’d like you to imagine with me how, having prepared your students well for fulfilled, fluidly engaged, adaptively robust lives, you might encounter them at their fifth and 25<sup>th</sup> reunions.

#### FROM STUDENT TO ACTOR: THE FIFTH YEAR LEAP

Five years from now, many of our 2018 high school graduates will be freelancers working in the gig economy, artisans or entrepreneurs, or working in short-lived,

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<sup>10</sup> “[Toward Becoming a Fully Functioning Person](#),” Carl R. Rogers, *ASCD Yearbook, Perceiving, Behaving, Becoming: A New Focus for Education*, 1962.

rapidly changing jobs, they will have to apprehend and fully embrace the need to develop self-management, and social and business skills that were entirely unnecessary in their student roles. To truly thrive, they will engage productively with social institutions and operate effectively within the automating economy, and they must see the development of these capacities as integral to their success and happiness, rather than as an unfair and unwelcome tax on their lives.

If they exit high school knowing this, and if we encourage them to develop a plan for college that will help them not only acquire knowledge and skills, but seek help in visualizing a plausible path from student to real world actor and embrace the process of becoming the next version of themselves, we will see some very happy folks gathering at their five year high school reunion.

One simple thing you can do is encourage them to find mentors who are thriving in fields that they find attractive. Students actively engaged in learning about practice and who form council of advisors are far more likely to find success than those who simply graduate and look for ways to continue operating in much the same fashion they did as students. That's why I began my remarks by talking about my experiences at Dolby and Different Fur. The musicians, engineers and record producers I met and worked with as a high school senior gave me direct experience of the grit, adaptability and resilience needed to negotiate complex and shifting work situations. The lessons learned there have served me my entire life.

## FROM MASTERY TO SELF-DETERMINATION

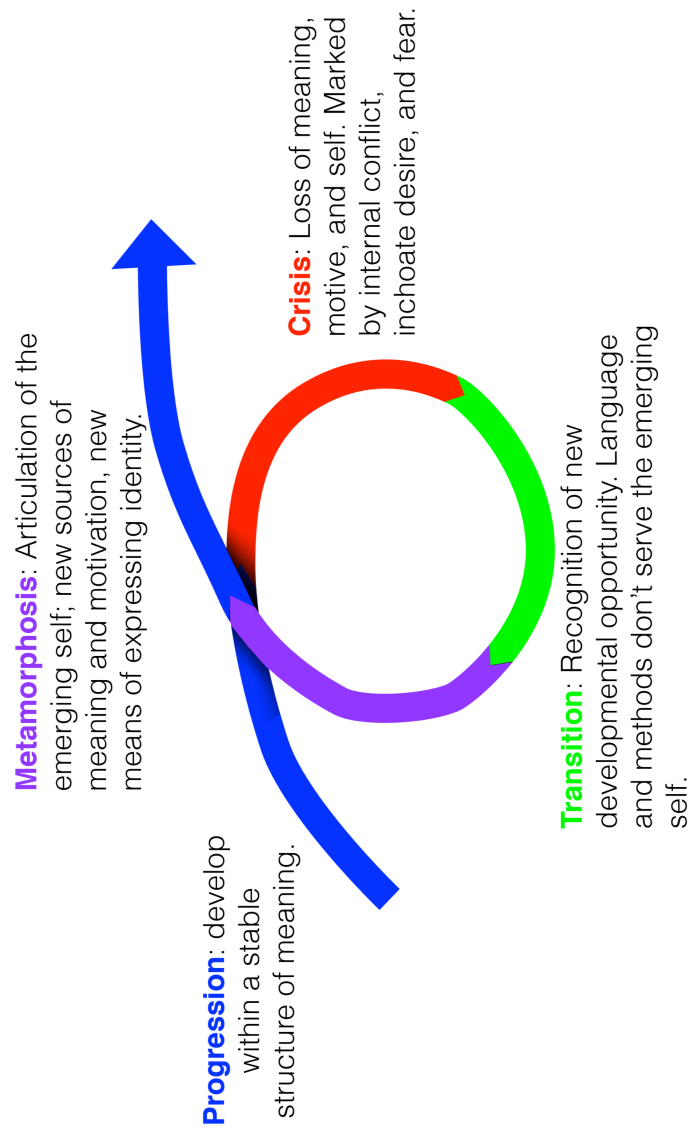
Let's jump now to our students' 25<sup>th</sup> reunion. If we've taught them well, they'll return vibrant and engaged, full of stories about the surprising paths they've taken, and lively enthusiasm about what the future holds. When asked what that future will be, in sharp contrast to the frozen folks in mid-life I described earlier, they'll say, "I don't know, but I can't wait to find out." They'll be enthusiastic because we taught them to take confident charge of their lives and to embrace the evolutionary challenges we assured them would be coming, and because we told them when they left our care that we'd be thrilled to see just how they would evolve, and we meant it.

They'll also be well poised to complete the process of mid-life individuation that can lead them to their truest and deepest work. They'll be prepared for such progression because we've taught them about the repeated cycles of evolutionary change. We'll have taught them to see such development, perhaps through biographies and other stories or experiential exercises, as not only natural, but as liberating.

Contrast that with the learned helplessness engendered by the rutted view of adult life embedded in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century job and career model that continues to dominate educational practice. By framing readiness for our students as poise, a cultivated ability to fluidly engage, to evolve, and to confidently explore what they don't know. By staying in touch with our students and sharing with them lessons drawn from

the rich lives of their fellow alums, we can enhance their prospects for returning at the 25<sup>th</sup> happy and well adapted. We can be optimistic also that the causes of their success at mid-life will be sound predictors of lives fulfilled during the second half of their journeys.

# Cycle of Growth



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Figure 2: The Art of a Fulfilled Creative Life

