The Creative Essentialist: How to Up-Level Your Creative Competency

Presenter: Mel Luthy Henderson

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All right, hello. I'm Mel Henderson, excited to be here talking about my favorite subject, which is creativity.

My training is in creative writing. So a lot of the examples I'm using today are going to be related to writing, will be writing examples, some of them. But for me the next level after—for grad school was undertaking this research mission of my own into creative theory and that has been a multiyear delight for me. It takes you everywhere, like into systems theory and sociology and anthropology and neuroscience and spirituality. And it just is the funnest. It's like a sparkling galaxy of amazing things. So the whole landscape of creativity is a—it's a really big landscape, right? But we're going to talk about some specific things because in the course of all of that delightful research, I started kind of creating a tool for myself that I call creative essential ism, which is a practice that we're going to dive into here a little bit. This tool kind of helped me to leverage applied creativity. So whether it is in trying to work—create a creative product project I'm working on, or whether I'm trying to create results in my life because something I've learned is, these two things are intrinsically connected. And I would invite you to entertain that as a possibility in the time that we have today, that no creativity operates independent of any other creativity. There's no such thing as separate spheres. So wherever we can access creative power in one realm is going to bleed into the others in the best ways. That's a weird metaphor. So there we go. All right. And here's why this matters. I want to talk about ...

Oops. We're going to share the screen first is what we're gonna do. All right. Here we go. Creative essentialism. And ...

All right. Here is what, think ... The stakes are high, right, if we don't learn how to be in touch with our own creativity. My idea of the creative essentialism is about figuring out how to discover

new thoughts because new thoughts create different results. So here's this beautiful quote by Salman Rushdie.

"Those who do not have power over the story that dominates their lives—power to retell it, rethink it, deconstruct it, joke about it, and change it as times change, truly are powerless—because they cannot think new thoughts." One of the keys to higher creativity is the ability to think new thoughts. So this is the tool I've kind of shaped. Now I want to rephrase this in more of the affirmative because I think that's a really interesting way to approach this.

Those who do have power over the story that dominates their lives—the power to retell it, to rethink it, deconstruct it, joke about it, and change it as times change, they truly are powerful—because they can think new thoughts. All right.

So before we dive into what those principles are, there—We're talking about three core principles, clarifying principles, of creative essentialism. I want you to take a second and jot something down.

Write down a creative challenge that you feel like is dogging you right now.

Either something that you can't quite get past or maybe it's something you abandoned because you just needed to get away from it for a little while, stick something in the drawer, think about it.

Just something. And then I want you to jot down two or three reasons that might explain that. Like if you knew why, like what's going on with that. Why do you think this is a thing? And then later at the end of this presentation, we're going to come back to this and see if you can think new thoughts about an old challenge. All right. Take five more seconds on that, see what you can get written down.

All right. So here's our definition of creative essentialism. It is a practice based on three clarifying principles, wherein people discover new thoughts and consequently generate new results.

All right. Practice of clarifying principles. So the idea here is discovering new thoughts and consequently generating new results. So these are the three. And we're just going to do ...

I'm going to touch on these briefly before we do, try to do, a little bit of a deep dive on each of them.

It would be hubris, of course, to think that we could do justice to these principles in just a limited time we have right now because each one of them is kind of a universe unto itself.

But I believe that even doing a flyby on these is going to have some value to us. So. Principle one: the opposite of creativity is reactivity.

Principle two: correctly defined problems have solutions. And principle three: constraints can be powerful catalysts. All right. Before we move into principle one, I want to talk a little bit about creativity. Like, how are we defining creativity? I would often ask my students, What is creativity? And, and, like, we would do a—They'd submit something like for one of the word clouds that you can project. This is back when we met in, you know, face to face.

Or I ... White erase board, they'd be up there with our markers and people are putting all kinds of things down. And predictably everything that came out from that they usually, could, you know, answers came very quickly. But they fall into one of, like, three main buckets. Creativity is broadly defined as anything art, anything original, or anything innovative. So we have lots of fun answers, but almost always you fall into those three categories. And then I would ask them more, the more complicated question, which is, What is the opposite of creativity? And answers slowed down. There was a kind of a slower trickle there. And it was always kind of fun. You get the one kid that was the thesaurus kid, right, and they'd go, Okay, if the opposite of create is destroy, the opposite of creativity must be destruction. Or you get some other inventive, some things like that. But most of the answers I got when I asked what is the opposite of creativity would be, like, unimaginative, boring, unoriginal, those kinds of things. And then I would point out to them that that's interesting. Creativity is a noun.

But all the opposites you're giving me are adjectives. And they go, Whoa. And then we kind of have a discussion about that. So I do want to entertain the idea that reactivity is exactly the opposite of creating something because when you're reacting to something, you are caught within an existing system. Whether that model was intentional or not, you're caught within the system, reacting versus creating, from the outside. And while we're here ...

Okay, so when—We could do each of these principles. We're going to do a little three-part exploration. First, I'm going to give you an expository model that kind of explains that principle. And then the second thing I'm going to give you a human story, like how this works in a life. And then the last thing is we're going to do a creative product example of how it works in a project or a creative undertaking. All right.

All right. So this quote on the bottom here. Robert Fritz is another creativity theorist. He's a musician. He's mainly a composer. He's older now. I don't think he's doing as much work as he used to, but I believe it was in the 90s mostly, he traveled a lot and talked to corporations about these unintentional models or intentional models because very often he talked about oscillation within a structure that when we have a system that we are reacting to, trying to solve a problem, eventually the tension in the unintentional system is going to snap us back. So there's oscillation, rather than an actual resolution, because we're not getting outside of the existing box, right, and creating something new. And this is one of his premises that I think is really useful: in the creative process you do not make choices about what you do not want; you make choices about what you do want. So we're going to talk more about that.

Okay, for the expositional model of this, I love Buckminster Fuller as a really good example.

When we try to create from inside an existing model, we remain bound to it. Okay, so he—You may be familiar with him. If not, he's one of the more fascinating figures in contemporary American history, I think. He was an architect, an inventor, a systems theorist, a designer.

And the list actually goes on and on. He at one point ... He was actually kicked out of Harvard for excessive socializing because he missed his midterm exams or something like that. But he later became the president of Mensa, so getting kicked out of Harvard didn't do much damage to his reputation or his professional standing. But I want to tell you a quick story about him and his life. When he was a young man, he and his wife had one one daughter, toddler daughter, who became very ill with polio and meningitis, and then she died of complications pertaining to those. And he ...

They were broke already, but he felt even worse. He felt responsible for her death because their living conditions were not ideal. He thought that it was damp, drafty. This contributed to that. Shortly after that he was 32 years old when he lost his job. They had no savings. He sunk into a deep depression, began drinking heavily.

And he would take these long walks around Chicago and round Lake Michigan. And looking for answers. He's like, Okay, I've got to find—What is the right response to this problem? And like so many of us, he was raised with the idea of the American meritocracy, you know, rise to the occasion, whatever life dishes up you match it or exceed it right. You're a responder. Become a pro responder.

So he was deeply in depression and trying to figure out what is the correct response to these problems. We're trying to connect dots. So here's the problem. What's the response? Problem, response. Problem, response.

And he later expressed that he realized this was a reactivity model, in so many words, rather than a creating model. So one of the solutions that came to him as he's trying to just be a responder, respond to problem, respond to problem with a solution.

It occurred to him that if he took his own life, then he might be able to at least partially solve his family's financial problems because there would be some insurance money.

And then, as he retold the story later, he had in that moment what most people would describe as a intense spiritual experience where someone actually spoke to him, gave him some very clear instruction that he was not supposed to do that, and also told him, "You may feel like an obscure person for your whole life. You'll never know the good you do." I'm paraphrasing here. I don't remember the exact words.

"But as long as you are applying yourself to taking your experiences and making something better for everybody else, you can know that you're doing the right thing." And so this whole experience caused him to completely reevaluate his life. And this was the turning point, as he described it, for what became the model later, like this quote: "You never change things by fighting the existing reality," which was what he felt he was doing as that young man, like I've got to figure out a solution.

"To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete." Well what he did after contemplating this experience with himself and realizing that his action, his model before, had been I gotta find the right answer to the problems that life keeps dishing up. Life will always dish you a new problem. I just got to find the right answer to that problem.

Sometimes it's true. Your car needs oil. The right answer is give your car oil, right? But that's a different issue. So he decided to embark on what he called "an experiment, to find out what a single individual could contribute to changing the world and benefiting all humanity." So he described this as a complete shift. This isn't even in the same box, the box he was in before, his rise to the occasion box, be a pro responder. But this box—And he'd respond when necessary. You don't stop responding.

But the new model that he made for himself is my life is an experiment. I'm not going to be the most famous person. I don't need to be the wealthiest person. I am going to be an experiment

so that I can prove to myself what one person can do if they commit themselves to changing the world in a good way. And that literally changed the entire course of his life. We'll come back to him in a little bit.

All right. So that was the—That's the model that we can understand this concept from. So now I'm going to use a human example. I have this friend from high school, and with her permission I'm sharing this story.

So in high school, she had her father was what she described as controlling and authoritarian and angry.

And this was an experience she did not want to repeat in her life. So she had a two-part goal. I'm going to get out of the house as fast as I can and I am going to marry the opposite of my dad. Oh, he had also forbidden her to get married before the age of 25. So the idea of getting married sooner was attractive to her, not just from a rebellion standpoint. But she truly believed at the time—and she made a list of her dad's qualities and written their opposites—she truly believed at the time that this going to the other end of the spectrum would heal her. I had this miserable experience over here. I'm going to do the opposite. And it'll be awesome. If this was bad, this will be great.

Now. This is—I'm going to preface this by saying she has a great life now. Everything worked out well. But for about a year, it was a really hard learning curve to discover that this was not—This didn't work out the way she'd hoped, right.

She quickly learned that her choice was a reaction and not a creation. So she took some time off. She finished college. She gave it some thought.

Instead of saying, I'm not going to operate on opposites. I really want to think about what do I actually want. What do I want? And then she could move forward with wise choices that were not reactive like a rubber band snapping her back, connecting her to the problem that she was trying to get away from.

And while we're on opposite I'm gonna talk about the principle of opposites really quick because we are talking about opposites in here like reactivity is the opposite of creativity.

I call it the principle of opposites. Sometimes using opposites can be an excellent discovery strategy. If you're stuck with whatever writing project you're doing or any other project, go find a six year old and ask that six year old, "What is the opposite of a tree?" Ask a kid, "What's the

opposite of a book?" "What's the opposite of a pizza?" They're going to come up with some stuff that you wouldn't have been able to guess, probably, and that can be really fun and sometimes can shake some of the cobwebs off of things. So as a discovery strategy, opposite seeking can be really useful. As a decision making strategy, not always so much. Like my friend, she used the opposites as a decision making strategy. So that's just, that's a caution, right.

And I think that "reactivity is the opposite of creativity" is kind of the exception that proves the rule. All right.

So here's a creative product example about reactivity not being a useful thing. When I was in grad school, had a wonderful workshop, had several wonderful workshops, so many great classes. And there was this one workshop where there was a young man in there who always gave kind of snarky, I felt, unhelpful feedback, right. And these workshops can be a good critique group. Nothing is better than that, right? Some of the most valuable stuff.

He was ... Looking back, I think he just enjoyed entertaining himself with being funny and making comments that were kind of unnecessary. And I got tired of it.

So ... And then I—But I did get particular praise about a certain thing I was doing from my professor, and I was like ... That lit me up. Okay, this professor who's hard to please has said this really positive thing about me. So with my next creative project, what do you think I did if I'm in reactive mode? I was like, okay, my goals are, I'm not even going to give that guy, the classmate, the opportunity to give me those kinds of feedback. So I'm going to make sure I leave those kinds of things out of this piece.

And I'm going to take this thing that my professor likes, and I'm going to amp it up, right? Now. That didn't result in my best product, because I was going at it from that Robert Fritz thing. I was making choices about what I do not want instead of making choices about what I do want. It's perfectly appropriate to say I don't want unhelpful feedback from somebody who's just entertaining himself with his own sense of humor.

And it was perfectly appropriate to say I do want praise from someone who can guide me and be a mentor here. Nothing wrong with that.

But I had totally stepped outside of "what do I want this piece to be" and was operating from this reactive "I'm going to make sure that he doesn't have an opportunity to say anything like that." So that was unhelpful. All right. So. This quote. One of my favorites. "Make choices about what you do want." All right. Principle two: correctly defined problems have solutions. This is, of

course, Albert Einstein. And I love that he once lamented that the only real problem that humankind has is our tendency to define problems incorrectly.

And that's—That's a hard one to fix, right? We can't can't do that all at once. But I think we need to be patient with ourselves and our attempts to do that.

This is another thing that he supposedly said, that "If I only had one hour to save the world, I would spend 55 minutes making sure I understood the problem, and five minutes enacting the solution." Now if you get on Google, you'll find many versions of this with different wordings, stuff like that, and it's not in his notes or journals or in a speech that he gave. So historians mostly believe this is probably cobbled together from stuff that he said similar to this. And this is kind of where we're at. So, but regardless of how perfectly accurate this statement is, it does illustrate how easy a solution could be to access once we really understand the problem.

I think that's worth thinking about. We are also—It also reveals that we tend to have an obsession with identifying the problem so quickly so we can get on to the solution. If we're doing the 80-20 thing, we're definitely—I think we give even less than 20% most of the time of our energy to identifying the problem because the solution's the fun part. We're going to go do this, but we might be running down the wrong track the whole time with that.

So, and I particularly want you to be conscious of this when we're talking about misrepresenting a problem to ourselves.

We don't have access to a solution when we have misrepresented a problem to ourselves.

So here's a quick story. I'm going to try to make it a quick story. I tend to love stories and I go on my tangent. So. Dr. Ignaz Semmelweiss. This is a Hungarian.

He's a scientist and physician, but mainly in obstetrics. He was an early pioneer at the antiseptic protocols. This is in the early and mid 1800s.

So this is way before, well, I think possibly during part of his career germ theory might have been floated but nobody was buying it yet. That did not get proven or accepted till decades later by Louis Pasteur.

So at this point, even the ideas that we understand now about microbiology were not widely regarded. The medical community was still very much in thrall to the idea of the balancing of the four humours. And infectious disease, not really a thing. So.

There were two clinics in Vienna. And these were both, like, pro bono public clinics for, mainly for poor women to come and have their babies there. Women of means typically had their babies at home and the doctors could go visit the woman in their home.

But here, this was for very poor women, for prostitutes. These two clinics existed as educational resources. We'll call it "Clinic A" was for medical students.

"Clinic B" was for training of midwives. Now Clinic A, and maybe you've heard this story, had an astronomically high maternal mortality rate, and they couldn't figure out why.

Women were admitted to these clinics on alternating days, just to kind of keep it—If you if you went into labor on a Tuesday, you might be admitted to Clinic A.

If you went into labor on a Wednesday, you might go into Clinic B. Well, women that were supposed to go into Clinic A literally were so terrified of it because the reputation it had, such high mortality, that those women would have their baby in the alley outside the clinic and they would have a better mortality rate than the women inside the clinic. This concerned Dr. Semmelweiss. He's, like, what is going on? And he tried all kinds of process of elimination, trying to figure out. They have the same resources. The same people were in charge. They have the same kind of funding. They ...

One day, a colleague of his, another doctor, was working with students in the cadaver lab. Incidentally cadaver labs in the mid-1800s were not what they are now. They were terrifying.

Unclean places, necrotic tissue, whatnot. And so while they're doing an autopsy, his colleague gets stuck by an unclean scalpel accidentally by a student and within days develops a terrible sepsis and dies. In his autopsy Dr. Semmelweiss discovers that he has a lot of the same pathologies as these women who were dying of what they were calling childbed fever. There's two or three different names for it, but that's the easiest one to pronounce.

So he starts to make some connections. And he's like, well, the only difference between Clinic A and clinic B is the medical students go to the cadaver lab and do autopsies and that sort of thing. And then they come in and they treat these women. They'll examine and deliver babies, and then the women get infections and die.

But over in the midwife clinic, those women with the students in that school never went to the cadaver lab. So he starts putting this together and says, okay, new rule for all the students, you have to wash your hands.

Totally new. Handwashing was literally not a thing at this point. But he made a chlorinated solution, and some kind of chlorine and lime thing.

And the reason we chose that is because he knew it got rid of the smell and if it got rid of the smell, then maybe it was getting rid of something else.

So this was his experiment. Anyone who had been in the cadaver lab had to scrub before they could go treat the women. Well, mortality totally dropped. Women were not dying of childbed fever. This was amazing. Like, it was a dramatic thing. So.

Oh, and they had to wash their instruments as well. Hands and tools. Now he could require students to do this. A lot of his colleagues didn't want to do it.

Some doctors as gentlemen doctors were offended at the idea that they might be unclean because they've considered themselves socially so much higher than these very poor women that they were treating.

So it's hard to get them on board with this. You would think, however, that people would have gone, "Oh my gosh. That's amazing." They didn't do this. He was ultimately laughed out of town, highly criticized by colleagues. They found other ways of explaining this. And he retreated to Budapest, left Vienna.

And his life ended very sadly. He may have had some sort of dementia. He was ultimately put in an asylum and died two weeks after being admitted of a infection that they think he got. He went septic after being beaten by one of the guards. So ironically and very sadly, that's how he died.

But now we have this thing called the Semmelweiss reflex or Semmelweis effect, which is a metaphor for the reflex-like tendency to reject new evidence or new knowledge because it contradicts established norms, beliefs, or paradigms.

I don't even think we need the name "the Semmelweis reflex" or "effect" because it's pretty much human nature to defensively reject things, right? We do this.

And the thing that's most important concerning your creativity is that you don't do this to yourself, that you're able to go, I'm going to just be my friend and trust myself. And when I can think—if I can define the problem correctly, if I'm willing to expose my brain to the idea that there might be something uncomfortable, but it might solve my solution if I can solve the problem—then don't limit yourself the way ... Don't kick yourself out of Vienna. Okay.

So there's one other part of defining the problem correctly that I want to share, and this is realizing that you are the creative leader of your life. Leadership has a lot of overlap with creativity. Now I'm going to talk about—This is Professor Heifetz, Ronald Heifetz's Harvard Business School, right? And he's published lots of things, but in this one particular article, there's a great quote here. "The single biggest failure of leadership is to treat adaptive challenges like technical problems." Now he's talking about business. Leadership in business. But you are the creative leader. You are the leader of your own life.

That's just the truth, and you are the leader of your creative projects. So I—Without going too far down the leadership theory thing, accept that you are the leader. And I want you to think about this. So we're going to talk a little bit about, we're going to touch quickly on, the difference between adaptive challenges and technical problems.

Okay, this is the little handout that came in his article. The single biggest failure is to treat an adaptive challenge like a technical problem. So here we go. Technical problems are very easy to identify and they often lend themselves to quick solutions. You can say, oh, this is the ...

This is the thing that we ... We need new software, bam, fix it, in a company context.

Adaptive challenges, conversely, are usually harder to identify, and they're very easy to deny. Now, the example with Dr. Semmelweiss, the technical problem was wash your hands.

But it was a bigger—That would have solved it, but it was an adaptive challenge because nobody wanted to receive that. That seemed ridiculous to them. They were insulted.

They literally said it seems like too much work. These are men who were, you know, they would tell off visible blood, but they didn't believe that microorganisms were present on their skin.

Adaptive challenges require change in numerous places. Number five, people often resist even acknowledging adaptive challenges.

And a solution, looking at number six here, to an adaptive challenge: they require experiments and new discoveries and they can take a long time to implement.

And they can't just be implemented by edict. If you look over at number 6 under technical problems, solutions can often be implemented quickly.

Even by edict. Now if you think about this. I imagine that you'll be able to see an area in your life where you have bullied yourself into "this is a technical problem, not an adaptive challenge." I can think of examples even like mental health challenges.

Like I'm just a lazy idiot. I need to get out of bed. I whatever. Something like this. It's a techn—I'm going to apply a technical problem solution to this right away instead of sitting with it and going "what kind of support do I actually need? What do I need to do to get myself out of this spot?" The next part of this handout, he, the doctor ...

The doctor, Heifetz, offers some examples. So he says, if somebody has high blood pressure, Here's this technical solution. Take medication to lower it.

You figure out what it is. Doctor writes a prescription. Bam. Problem solved.

Which might be the right answer, right? But if you're looking over on the right, here we have an adaptive challenge. This is much harder to embrace.

It's probably a lot easier for a doctor to get a patient to say, "Yes, I'm willing to take a prescription," in most cases, than to say, "Absolutely. I will change my lifestyle, and I will figure out ways to manage my stress better." So adaptive challenges ask a lot more of us, but they are definitely where the creativity lies. Okay. Enough on that.

So here's an example. I want—We're still on number two, right, defining the problem correctly. So this is a creative product example for my friend Lena. She is an excellent writer and a novelist.

And not too long ago, about a year ago, I think, she landed a national agent within a great agency. This fantastic—Very exciting for her. She's done other publishing and stuff but not at this level with a potential for a national market.

So it's pretty exciting. So I asked her, I wanted to consult with her for the purpose of this class, actually, and say, Okay, let's—I want to play with this idea a little bit. So.

What is something that is a creative challenge for you right now? Just like I had you guys write down at the beginning of class. What is something that's been dogging you? And she goes, Oh man, I have been procrastinating revising my novel for months. In fact, my agent is waiting and I don't know what's going on. I'm taking way too long on this. So I said, Okay.

Great. Perfect example. What are some of the reasons, you think, for that? So she gave me a couple of reasons. She goes, Well, I'm just lazy. Some days I don't even show up at the keyboard.

And then she said, I've lost the joy, that spark, that thrill that was with me in the beginning I just can't, I can't get it back. So even when I show up at the keyboard, nothing happens. And then she said, And I think one thing that would really be helpful is I just need a better support system. I used to have this great critique group. Dissolved.

I don't have a good support system. So these were her reasons. So as Lena and I walked through the idea of technical problems and adaptive challenges as far as being the creative leader of her own life, she began to interpret these a little bit differently.

So when she revisited her reasons, this is what we came up with, what she came up with.

Laziness. Now on her—Laziness is one of the reasons. I'm not a psychologist or a clinician of any sort. But in my experience, very often, I think, laziness is a label we put on something else to disguise it. And Lena thought, Okay.

In my case, laziness is fear. She's like, I feel like I'm galloping toward this cliff edge.

And this, my book, is galloping toward this cliff edge and then when it reaches the edge, it's either gotta fly like a bird, or it's gonna drop like a rock. And if I can slow the gallop, Then maybe I won't have to know. I don't want it to fail. If I don't finish it, it can't possibly fail. I don't have to gallop towards the cliff. So once she was able to identify that, she was able to say, Okay, I'm going to step out of that model, out of that box that I created for myself, and take some time thinking about how I can conscientiously apply a better model, create a new model, and respect this as an adaptive challenge and respect that I'm going to need some time and I'm going to, I need to be gentle with myself to be able to get past this fear.

Then her example of "I just can't find the joy anymore." She realized, Wow, this is kind of like that first principle we were talking about, about reactivity being the opposite of creativity.

Because I keep pining for the old spark. It was—I was so on fire when I was writing this novel in the first place, right. And she's like, I kept wanting that back. And then when she sat with it, she's like, You know what, I realized that I keep wanting to go back to the birth of the book. But that's happened. And the book is older now.

And what I need to do is find the new spark for this stage instead of wishing I was still back there. And I can remember that fondly, love it. But maybe there's something I can be on fire about for now or at least find the engine for. Creative projects, the energy waxes and wanes and you've got to be kind with yourself for that too, right? You can't always expect to be at a high peak of thrill. Sometimes it's just really hard work. But she's like, Instead of pining for the past, I need to be able to be present in the present. So.

And then the last thing was her poor support system. She said, I gotta admit, I am not actively seeking a solid critique group, and I can change that.

She was just bemoaning that she no longer had the one that she had before. So it's like, I can find a solid critique group. That's—That is within my power.

And then—So when she and I consulted about two weeks ago, talked with her, maybe a week later, and I asked her what she was doing, and she said, Actually I'm halfway through my revision.

And I was like, Fantastic. It helped her to be able to reframe things as adaptive challenges because even if though it's more work, you now have power, instead of feeling acted upon.

All right. Principle three, and this is a really fun one: constraints can be powerful catalysts. Okay. When I was young, and I would do anything creative. I'd take any class, do any undertaking, any challenge. But I hated the idea of a constraint. When I was in seventh grade, the art teacher at my school put me and two of my friends in charge. We were the yearbook staff, supposedly. We had very little power. But he called us the yearbook staff.

And he'd say, Okay, you need to do this. But these are all the rules that you can, that you can and can't, blah, blah, blah. Like, here's a little box.

And then I'd go, Are you kidding me? Why can't we do this? Why can't we do that? Occasionally we could negotiate a little more room. But most of the time, this is the thing.

And I resented it because I didn't understand how much power there is when you can take something and need to get bigger with it. So this is a picture of Frank Lloyd Wright. He said, "The human race built most nobly when limitations were greatest." He's talking about the pyramids. He's talking about the magnificent cathedrals of Europe that we wonder at because it was built in a time when 90% of the tools we use today didn't exist, which is mind blowing.

Okay. Limitations are an artist's best friend. This is a paraphrase of that. It's sort of a contemporary translation.

I didn't know that till I got Googling it because a friend of mine is an artist and an art teacher. And in her classroom, so many fabulous things on the walls, right? A lot of it is student work. Some of it's her work.

A while ago, she had, like, art prints of some Modigliani portraits because the students were learning to do that style of portraiture. But she had this little plaque on the wall, a little eight by eight plaque, kind of, that said, "Limitations are an artist's best friend." And I asked her about it. And she said, you know, out of everything, all the fascinating and beautiful things I try to keep in this room, that's the one thing I get the most comments on.

People want to know about it. This is called "Fallingwater." This is probably the most famous piece of architecture that Frank Lloyd Wright did. This is built in 1935, so it's interesting to think that in 15 years this house will be 100 years old. This is in Pennsylvania. The man that commissioned it was named Kaufmann, I believe. He was a manager or owner of a department store. And he met Frank Lloyd Wright and said, I want you to build me a house at the base of this waterfall.

And Frank Lloyd Wright went out to the site and looked at it and he decided to give himself an extraordinary constraint because he got this vision. And he said, I'm going to build the house on top of the waterfall.

So he—This was a whole engineering feat, architectural feat. It required all of it. And there's another angle on it right here. This is in spring.

The other one is in fall. I think I like the fall one better; you get a little bit more of a shot of it. But he gave himself constraints in order to create something even cooler than it would have been in the first place.

All right, so I'm gonna give you a quick human example of a constraint. I don't know if you're familiar with this board game or not. It was actually created by the same guy that created Pictionary.

Years ago, this was about 25 years ago, my husband and I lived in Seattle, and we somehow got on a call list for one of these market research companies where you come in and test things.

And so we got a call and said, Hey, do you guys want to come down and play a board game? We'll give you 50 bucks or whatever it was at the time, I don't remember. We're like, Sure. So.

We went down to this big marketing office, and there's a big conference room and several other strangers, and we started playing this game based on the idea of a Rorschach inkblot test. Right. So the idea here is that you are, you're looking at an inkblot, and they tell you what to find. Like, they're going to tell you look for—When we flip this over, you need to find ...

See all the vegetables you can identify or something, or all the African animals, or something like that.

And the game was actually really fun. So as soon as it flips over, a timer is going. So you got a time constraint.

And then you just start writing everything that you can see. And you get points for everything you can convince other people that you saw. Yeah, that's totally a leopard. You can say, okay, I see the leopard. Point. All right. So you're kind of doing that. So.

And it was fun as long as we were given that kind of a constraint. But then you'd get an inkblot. And they would say, Now, ready set go, write down anything you can see.

And all the pencils around the table would be kind of silent for a little bit.

The energy kind of drops and then you'd hear a couple of things written down, and then you'd hear a couple more. And it would be kind of slow. So that was when there was definitely a lull in, for us, our test group, when we were doing that. But then when it came back to here's the same blot and now find anything you can that is things in a garden, right, and I would immediately go, Ah. OK, I see bunnies in these corners. I'd see a bunny in a garden. Here's an earthworm out when—These are beans, and I can see pea tendrils and turnips and, you know, suddenly, it's all there. I could just go and go and go when you had that constraint. And it surprised me to realize that was true for me. Once I had a limited thing, things found in a suitcase, things in a

pharmacy, whatever it was, you could always get a longer list when you were given that constraint.

So this is an example of a professional athlete giving him constraints in order to sharpen his own mind and sharpen his own muscles, to sharpen all of his own reflexes. This is Steph Curry.

Unless something has changed, I think he is still the record holder league, he ... Maybe he's been bumped off a couple times, but he's been a long time record holder as a three point shooter.

So when he trains, he wears these special goggles that limit his peripheral vision and also are like sunglasses so he doesn't have as much light to work with. So he has to be very sharp.

He dribbles with one hand and he catches a tennis ball with the other, sometimes throwing the tennis ball to himself and sometimes working with his trainer here, who will throw the tennis ball back and forth. They'll throw a ball and then they'll both throw a ball at the same time and have to catch it. And he'll do this, and then he'll switch hands that he's dribbling with. So we're just going to watch a couple seconds of this because it's such a great example of making something harder for yourself and getting a better result.

And then I think in here, this is where his trainer's throwing with him.

And I love that because I think it's really good to see that professionals make things harder on themselves because that sharpens the saw.

All right. One of the best things I can possibly offer you in the terms of constraints is a little piece of homework. So I'm also going to drop a link in the chat at the end of this class live with a link to a document that has all these great resources in here. I'm going to link you to anything I've talked about, to the people I've talked about, some book titles, and to this TED Talk. Tess Callahan is an author and creative writing professor, and she did this great TED Talk called the love affair between creativity and constraint. And she can offer you more than I could possibly do in the few minutes that we've got left. So I—she talks about the Houdini dare and how seductive that is to the imagination because your imagination loves to use its wits to unshackle itself. She talks about three kinds of constraints.

Limiting form. She has a great Mary Oliver example on that. Limiting your materials.

And I think she's, it's a Jennifer Egan book. And then inviting incongruity. And she's got some beautiful examples for that. I think she also mentions Steph Curry in her talk. So I want you to go watch this. It will—You're welcome. It's really one of the most inspiring and delightful things you'll see. It was actually originally a TEDx, but it was so great that the TED organization did bring it into its own canon. So you can find it archived on the ted.com site. All right. So we are revisiting our three clarifying principles. The opposite of creativity is reactivity.

Remember Buckminster Fuller and how he changed the model of his life. He made the old model obsolete and decided to make his life an experiment.

Correctly defined problems have solutions. The most important gifts you can give yourself is not mischaracterizing the problem. Spending some time with it and think, looking at an adaptive challenge. And constraints can be powerful catalysts, remembering that limitations are an artist's best friend.

When you're denied the normal resources you thought you were going to have, sometimes you can dig deep and find better ones. All right. Closing thought.

This is a beautiful quote from Buckminster Fuller about how he decided to live his life. So I'm going to read the whole thing even though it's here, but I want you to follow along.

"Something hit me very hard once, thinking about what one little man could do. Think of the Queen Mary—the whole ship goes by and then comes the rudder. And there's a tiny thing at the edge of the rudder called a trim tab. It's a miniature rudder. Just moving the little trim tab builds a low pressure that pulls the rudder around. Takes almost no effort at all.

So I said that the little individual can be a trim tab. Society thinks it's going right by you, that it's left you altogether. But if you're doing dynamic things mentally," which is creative essentialism, "the fact is that you can just put your foot out like that and the whole big ship of state is going to go. So I said, Call me trim tab." This is him explaining that he called himself trim tab, and this is our closing shot. This is his grave and they added this beautiful stone up here that says, "Call me trimtab." I want you guys to be able to think about these things usefully, to be able to—I hope that these little treasures that I kind of created for myself and put in a velvet pouch and have tried to polish and apply are going to be useful to you.

And I appreciate all of your time and attention. Go. Be creative. Thanks, guys.