

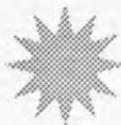


*About
the
Author*

Prior to coming to Rowan College twenty-five years ago, Rodney Gates taught Head Start and elementary and secondary art in Maryland public schools. At Rowan, he teaches courses in art education and criticism and supervises the experiences of student teachers.

Rodney has exhibited his collages throughout the East and in Michigan and New Mexico, and is the author of Excellence in Your Art Room.

The Possum, the Brick, and a Little Bit of Daring



Rodney Gates

... then there was the time I did an autopsy on a possum.

I had recently been discharged from six years in the Navy and was working as a shoe salesman for Woodward and Lothrop's in Chevy Chase. This was a pleasant yet dull shift in my life after having been a hospital corpsman with the Marines in Korea. I welcomed the routine of slipping spectator pumps onto the feet of the wives of middle-level government officials. Still, it lacked the immediacy of holding a life in my hands.

Cruising home one summer evening, I saw the car ahead of me swerve to miss a furry mound in the road. It turned out to be a freshly killed possum. An urge was upon me. Without deliberation and in one even-flowing movement, I pulled up next to the dead animal, opened my door and swept it into the back seat. My excitement mounted as I raced to my parents' house.

Poor Mom. She never really understood what drove her oldest son. Still, never having been the type of person to hold an opinion to herself, she let me know what she thought of my having a dead animal in the house. Retrieving the surgical kit I had collected over my years in the Navy, I set

up shop in the garage. Here I had most of the things I needed: the workbench was the correct height, the lighting was close and bright, and tools were available that I could substitute for those instruments I lacked.

Over the next few days, after working in the shoe department, I rushed home to unpack my iced and stiffened project. The work moved along at a pleasant, relaxed pace and often right through dinner. When at that workbench (which Dad was reluctant to use for months afterwards), I was in my own world. Time, people, and physical stress were somewhere else. There were only two things occupying my concentration: the possum's anatomy and my skill at uncovering it. All else drifted away from my little island of fluorescent light. I had achieved pure zen.

This moment of pure concentration and joy was what shortstop Cal Ripkin Jr. would call the *zone* or what psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi would identify as *flow*. I was alone with the moment. The moment, my thoughts, the materials, all were serving as one.

This same sort of intimacy of the moment engulfs me today when I construct a collage, when I write, or occasionally when I teach. It is a sense of curiosity, of discovery, of pleasure and peace. It is a sense of skilled accomplishment that shuts out all extraneous activity. It is also quite necessary to the creative act. Curiosity is most important in developing a sense of creativity, as is the willingness to take risks. I was curious to discover if the anatomy of the possum was anything like that of humans (it was). To accomplish this, I was willing to risk the displeasure of my family. Poor Mom. She never did understand what drove her oldest son.

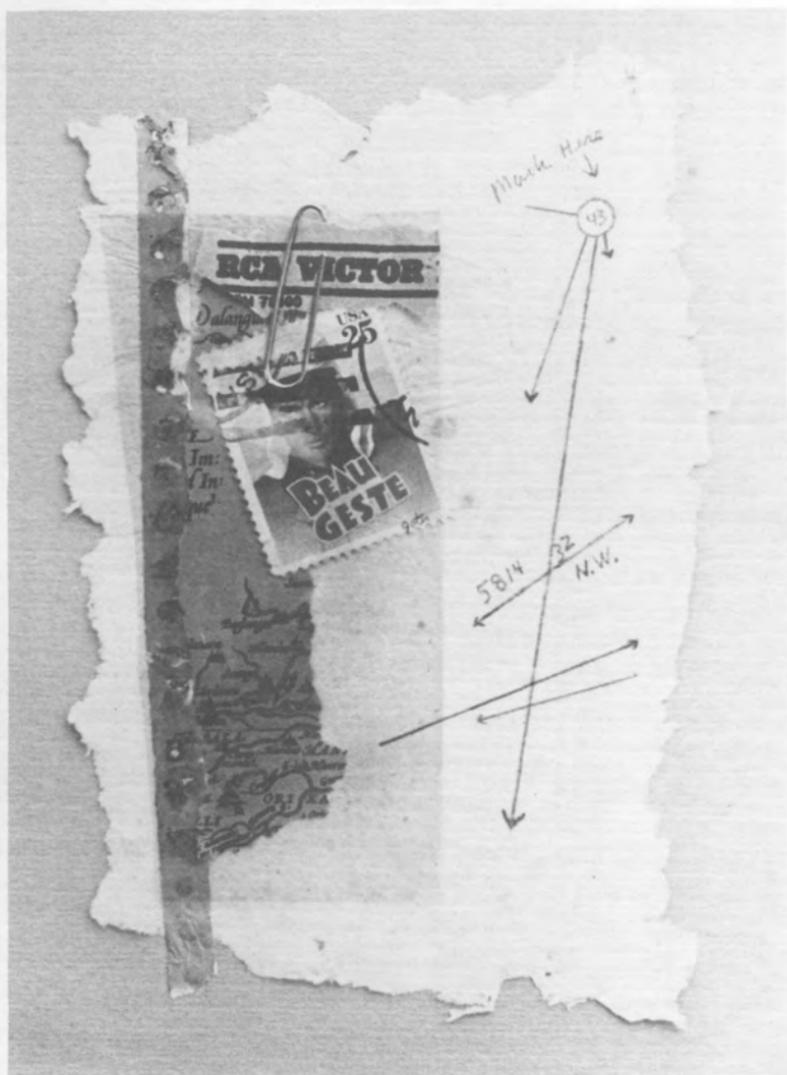
As we know, life will offer our students many contradictions. The creative skills needed to resolve these are not limited to those students in the arts. All of us—teacher, sailor, businessman, chef—gain from our skills of creative thinking. Curiosity, the willingness to take risks, and fluency of thought are necessary to the development of creative skills. Not only should we be aware of the contradictions to be

found in life, we should ask why. Why and how do nature, humankind, art, religion, industry, or whatever offer contradictions within themselves and in relation to one another? Why and how do they agree? We must set about to discover the answers. I can't imagine not asking the questions or seeking the answers. To do less is to be ordinary at best or dull at worst and miss so much of life. The creative person not only sees the contradiction but seeks the solution. One effective method of seeking solutions is to train oneself in the skill of fluid thinking. This is sometimes called brainstorming, and the trick is to relax and let the possible solutions flow through one's head without prejudice. Entertain all ideas, no matter how frivolous or impractical they may sound initially. Consider any idea a potential answer, no matter how silly or obscene or divergent it may appear at first. From such brainstorming may come the one answer that is needed to resolve the contradiction.

In many classes, I introduce students to Gilford's brick test. (A brick, a paper clip, a football helmet, any object can be used in this exercise.) The brick test was set up as a method of measuring creativity, but I believe that it, and exercises like it, can be used to stretch creativity. In this exercise, I place a common red brick on the table at the front the room and ask each student to write a list of all the uses he or she can think of for a brick. After five minutes, I ask how many have listed ten uses? How many have more than ten? more than twenty? and so on.

But this is only half the exercise. It is not just the greater number of answers that measures creativity, but also the number of unusual or bizarre answers. Unusual or bizarre answers are those with no relationship to the traditional function of a brick. (Incidentally, the most bizarre and creative answer ever offered was in a class entitled Suicide and the Creative Mind. The answer was for an individual to throw the brick into the air and step under it. The brick would be an instrument of suicide, but the act would appear to be murder.)

Each student (and each teacher, for that matter) must find his or her own possum and feel comfortable enough to lay it open. We, however, can help by offering the curiosity and the pleasure, the freedom and the guidelines, the skills and the tools for each to make that first tentative incision.



Untitled Collage by Rodney Gates