



*About
the
Author* Dr. E. Michael Desilets teaches film classes at Rowan College of New Jersey. His poetry has appeared in a number of journals, including The Chattahoochee Review, Potato Eyes, The Habersham Review, The Journal of New Jersey Poets, and The Vincent Brothers Review.

He has twice been the recipient of the John M. Corcoran Poetry Prize, sponsored by the Irish Edition of Philadelphia.

The More We Create



E. Michael Desilets

I have an idea: I have no idea what creativity is.

I'm tempted to say that creativity involves the engaging organization of scattered thoughts, feelings, and impulses. But I'm not tempted to say that very often.

I certainly wish I did have simple beliefs about creativity that I could state emphatically; a few handy commandments, perhaps. Creativity, however, can be messy, no matter how swell we regard the finished product.

Trying to expound on the topic makes me feel like Doc Boone, the lovable alcoholic played by Thomas Mitchell in John Ford's *Stagecoach*. When Dallas, the whore-with-a-heart-of-gold (played by Claire Trevor), asks him about the advisability of marrying the Ringo Kid (John Wayne), the old drunkard can't help but wonder why anyone would care about his opinion. Mitchell, it should be remembered, won the Academy Award for his performance. Still, I tend to identify more with the failures of his character than with his successes as an actor.

"The more you think," Raymond Chandler wrote, "the less you create." He also wrote *The Big Sleep*, *Farewell, My Lovely*, and other classic "hardboiled" detective novels, using

a formula appropriated from Dashiell Hammett. When I was in high school, Chandler was my favorite author.

Stephen King seems to be the author of choice among my students. He has perhaps penned many clever remarks about creativity, but if so, I haven't read any of them. (I have read *The Shining* and *Firestarter*. That puts me very far behind my own students.) King does, however, have formula galore. The less he thinks, the more he creates, we might assume.

So, having a formula can help: the Elizabethan sonnet, for example. Even a mediocre student can assemble 140 syllables with the appropriate rhyme scheme that would be acceptable. I've read scores of them myself without even whimpering. But we all know that too much formula is a problem. Just read the denunciations of American television in today's paper.

Creativity is slippery, worse than the slimiest eel, the greasiest pig, the smoothest silk.

Repression can actually stimulate it. Look at James Joyce. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. Andrea Dworkin. Artists denied funding by the National Endowment for the Arts. Student journalists threatened with annihilation by censorious faculty and administrators. There's nothing more exhilarating than using your creative talents to offend all the right people: old goats, contented cows, fat asses with thin skins. Take your pick.

Otherwise, it's the bland leading the bland.

Back in the '60s (a regrettable but handy phrase) I was offered a bit of praise for my own budding (burgeoning? billowing?) creativity by Dr. Evelyn C. Dodge, an English professor at Framingham State College. "Michael," she said to me one stunningly memorable day following our creative writing class, "sometimes you say the right thing."

"The more you think," I had wanted to respond, "the less you create." But I hate explaining myself, so I accepted the compliment graciously and headed to my place of employment to juggle jars of jams and jellies. (The less you work, the less you make.)

This seems a fitting juncture at which to quote from Charles Bukowski's latest collection, *The Last Night of the Earth Poems* (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow, 1992). I have chosen a stanza from his "creative writing class":

I sat alone in the back row with
my scowl
further noting that
the men didn't look like men and
the women didn't look like women.
again
no way to judge creativity.
but what they produced
looked like
what they were.

Of course, Bukowski is an old reprobate, a scurrilous chronicler of his own nasty peccadilloes. As a professor, I should hold his work at arm's length and not be too alarmed at his portrayal of institutionalized creativity as practiced on the college level. After all, I do enjoy telling my students that they sometimes say the right thing—that they have, in other words, expressed themselves well; that they have distinguished themselves through the use of the written word. Creativity, after all, can have its rewards, even including the praise of alleged professionals.

All the same, even reading Pulitzer Prize-winning poets leaves me in a dither regarding this creativity thing. The following bit from Mary Oliver's "The Notebook," in *House of Light* (Boston: Beacon, 1990), is a perfect example of what I'm trying to say:

The turtle
doesn't have a word for any of it—
the silky water
or the enormous blue morning,
or the curious affair of his own body.

On the shore
I'm so busy
scribbling and crossing out
I almost miss seeing him
paddle away
through the wet, black forest.
More and more the moments come to me:
how much can the right word do?

I can only hope I use a right word or two each time out.
But who's to judge? Dr. Dodge retired long ago.



On Creativity

A film is never really good unless the camera is an eye in the head of a poet.

— Orson Welles

If you want to draw a bird, you must become a bird.

— Hokusai

That which is creative must create itself.

— John Keats

Artistic growth is, more than it is anything else, a refining of the sense of truthfulness.

— Willa Cather

Art is a lie that makes us realize the truth.

— Pablo Picasso

Art must take reality by surprise.

— Françoise Sagan