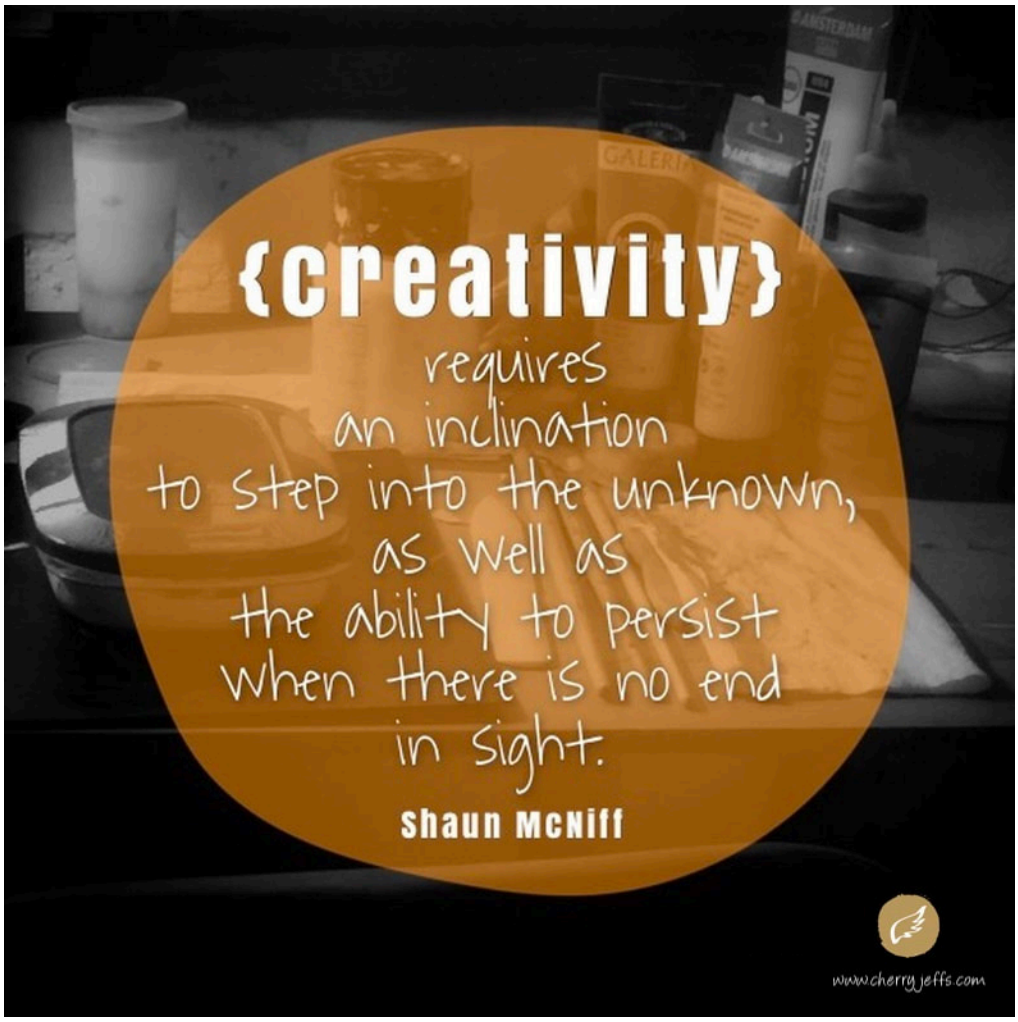
Trusting the Ideas to Unfold as We Work



Trusting the Ideas to Unfold as We Work

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How do you deal with it? That fuzzy period at the beginning of a new project where you don't have a clear plan?

This stage requires such a delicate balance doesn't it?

On the one hand ideas need time to mature sufficiently so that you don't end up down a dead end.

But on the other hand, you have to be wary that the 'ideas stage' doesn't just become an excuse for procrastination.

> «Naturally it is good that we get things done in a timely fashion. Nor do we want to use the idea of "late deciding" as yet another rationale for procrastinating or not engaging fully with the process.
>
> But it is also the case that not making premature decisions just to ease our anxiety is a vital part of the creative process.
>
> Beethoven sometimes took decades to make his musical decisions! Yes, that is a long time; let us hope that your decisions come more quickly than that.
>
> But let us also hope that they do not come before they are actually ready to come — that is, that they do not come just because you want the anxiety of not knowing to go away.»
> Eric Maisel

No matter how many times I pass through this stage in my own creative work, it's still a challenge. I have to garner all my faith in order to trust the process.

In my current project the fuzzy period seemed to be going on eternally. My productivity was through the floor despite putting in lots of hours.

Being the first piece in a new body of work was also compounding the problem. I felt that if I didn't get my ideas together at this stage, the whole project would be on the road to nowhere.

The Importance of Limitations

My project has quite strict parameters format-wise - designed to match my recent semi-nomadic lifestyle:

- small, lightweight footprint which folds out to a large wall-display piece (easy to transport with me or ship to a collector).
- incorporating locally sourced materials and/or inspiration from the environment in which I find myself.

- an ‘artist’s book’ format (which, as you probably know doesn’t actually have to be a book) possibly also including elements of origami and/or paper engineering (or pop-up).

For a while it felt like it was precisely these parameters that were the sticking point. But in the problem lies the solution. Ultimately it was probably the restrictions that saved me.

For starters Portugal (my location for this project) is not a heavily consumerist country and opportunities for sourcing materials have been few.

This led me to settle fairly quickly on some some thin craft wrapping paper in alluring colours as the only supplement to materials I brought with me.

The format itself was more problematic. And more time-consuming. I spent hours combing Pinterest and origami tutorials and did a lot of paper-folding practice but still I was wondering:

- What format would be most suitable?
- How could I make a combination of origami, artist's book and pop up work in terms of bulk, folds, handling and so on?

In the end, I hit on the solution pretty much by chance: a cross between an exploding box and a Tato or folding purse or envelope. It ticked more boxes in my list of parameters than I thought possible.

Letting Go of Fulfilling ALL the Parameters

Despite all this, there came a point when I recognised I had to let go of something in order to get the first piece in the series done by the time I leave Portugal.

All the exigencies of the new format meant that it would be crazy to attempt a really large piece before I’d ironed out any of the inherent logistical problems.

I had to temporarily surrender one of my most cherished parameters - to make a piece that folded out to a large size - in favour of creating a test piece with a smaller footprint. In this case 'done' was going to be the best approximation to perfect!

Rewards of Staying the Course

Of course the great thing about challenges is that eventually, they lead to new, stimulating work.

As I emerged out of the long, dark, fuzzy, not-knowing period, on the other side lay the 'Yay! I’m doing it!’ excitement of the beginning.

Once I found the best solution for the format, both the constraints of the format itself, and the time left in which to execute it, provided impetus and a clear mandate within which to work. As a result my productivity went up massively.

Accumulated experience - which has taught me I do my best work if I don’t plan the piece beyond what’s necessary to get it started - also helped here.

As a result the piece is literally 'unfolding' as it goes along.

How Do You Deal With the Fuzzy Starting Period?

- Are you able to balance the tension between the call of the process and the need for a definable product?
- Do you ever go down a blind alley due to starting too soon?
- How do you know that you're still percolating ideas and not procrastinating?
- Is there an idea or parameter you need to let go of in order to move onto the next stage?