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Eleojo Ocholi

Creative Spark

Essay I/Final Draft

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The Child Playing Alone

“I was once a rapturous child drawing at the dining-room table, under a stained-glass chandelier that sat like a hat on the swollen orb of my excitement. What is exciting that child, so distant from us in time and space?”

- John Updike

Squares of different colors are splattered all over the sheet I am staring at. Some are yellow, others pink, a few green and lots are blue. Unfortunately I am not staring at some great artwork or beautiful quilt from Alabama. I am look at my weekly planner, pasted on the wall with a few worn looking pieces of tape. Blue for physics and green for chemistry, orange for calculus and yellow for expository writing; I leave no activity plain white. Not only different colors are used in the squares, but different designs as well. Some are striped, others are spotted. Some are solid squares while others have empty centers... some are even a combination of colors. At a first glance it appears this creativity is due to necessity. I needed to

organize my time, or at least try, and so I produced a colorful chart. A deeper look transports me back to my childhood in Nigeria.

My home country, in the heart of the tropics, is interesting. The nomadic cattle herdsman is constantly covered with white specs of salt from his evaporated sweat in the arid and hot atmosphere of almost 40 degrees centigrade in the north of the country. Surrounded by a few shrubs scattered over sandy plains, he is constantly in search of pasture for his cattle and water to drink. The market women chat away in the high humidity of the south watching their kids play in the shade of the few palm trees left, after development has robbed the land of its natural dense vegetation. My home was there in the south, near the coast, with the Atlantic Ocean knocking at our door. There was the constant danger of the beach being eroded by the angry ocean, intent on claiming back its space, as about 50% of the island I lived on is land filled. Thus my mother refused to allow me onto the closest beach to my home as it had many dangers, from the ocean to bored louts hanging around looking for innocent victims. I could never feel angry at her though because she gave up her career, by choice, to take care of her children. She refused to let us be brought up by a nanny. My mother is a qualified teacher, though she never did teach after she got married. She was determined to ensure that her youngest son would not turn out spoilt. Thus, she gave me work to do after school everyday, like hand writing exercises and simple math, in addition to bringing me up with Christian values. My three brothers were at boarding school so for a couple of years, I was pretty much alone at home with the work from my mum... only seeing my best friend in school and at church. The

loneliness opened the floodgate of imagination which has characterized a large part of my life.

I see children playing today and I wonder what is going on in their minds. I remember I was constantly a secret agent running around in the back garden...until I was told to go back inside because too much midday sunlight was bad for me. At that point I would start playing with my Lego sets, toy roads, cars and my other toys. This went on in a continuous loop for some time. One day though, I started using cardboard to make “houses” in different parts of my house. My parents didn’t know what I was doing but they didn’t interrupt my activity which was good...as they could easily have told me to clear it all up. I ended up building a mini city in the first floor of my house. Each “house” had furniture I made from match boxes and the like as well as occupants, my little toy people. My dad really liked it and videotaped me giving a tour.

I found my being alone contributed a lot to my imagination. That coupled with parents who didn’t stifle my creative freedom. I remember that I was most creative when I was bored after finishing my school work. Considering that during the school term, I wasn’t allowed to watch TV during the day, and my dad would be watching the news by night time, I had to fill my time with other pursuits. Sometimes I would paint, other times I would draw portraits of my dad or at least make an attempt as befits a nine year old. Painting was one of the activities I shared with my brothers before they left, and I am a very visual person which I guess is why I chose to do those activities. Even today, almost everything I recall is from ‘pictures’ my mind takes, so I usually forget names but I always remember a face. This loneliness had a

negative effect on my social skills as I learnt later but which has corrected itself... I hope. Looking back now, I see that the looks of happiness and pride from my parents at my 'creations' really kept me looking for more things to do. They provided a loving atmosphere which did not let me dwell on my loneliness but helped me cultivate an active imagination.

What made me creative? Was it just the loneliness, or the mind of a child? As I have grown up I realize that I am not quite as creative in the same sense as I was when a child. But even when I am, I transport myself to a childlike state, unhindered by conventional ways of thinking and expression. I believe part of the creative instinct in children is due to the fact that they are free to think and act as they please, at least until they are told to stop. When we are older there are ingrained views of what may or may not be acceptable behavior or conversation. Children don't have such boundaries, as these come with experience and life in the world. Don't get me wrong... experience in the world is necessary for many creative endeavors but I believe that the creations which "break the mould", stem from an unhindered mind coupled with solitude.

Unfortunately, my being alone was not by choice, yet most artists choose to be alone when they want to create; they choose solitude. Take Johannes Vermeer, for example. From what I have found, his style of paintings was different from what was the standard in his day. He painted everyday scenes as opposed to the conventional "Madonna", religious or mythological paintings of his time. As Fraser Kennedy describes him, "He is the poet of Waiting, of the interrupted story, the moments between other moments..." Yet he had to be in a quiet situation to bring forth his

artistic creations like most artists. Although he had a large family, lots of crying and noisy kids including a brother-in-law who was crazy, he painted in the solitude of his studio, sometimes with a model who was so silent that she would almost blend with the inanimate objects in the studio. Through solitude, the mind can be allowed to roam free like a child playing alone... an essential part of creativity.

Looking back towards my planner, I can only sigh at how little time there is nowadays to pursue those activities which gave me so much joy in my childhood. I am going through life now with very few 'creative sparks' here and there, like when I made my planner. I am forced to do problem sets during the moments I am alone in my room. I have ended up using what free time I have and what's left of my imagination, to make others laugh. It is almost selfish as I would do almost anything to produce the satisfaction and fulfillment I feel when I see a smile on someone's face because of something funny I say or do. It is not quite the same as my childhood creativity though. Maybe I should set aside time in my schedule. Then shade a multicolored square and label it creativity... or better yet, shade the rest and leave the space on the planner untouched...