

5 WAYS

USING YOUR

Creativity

MIGHT JUST SAVE YOUR LIFE



Have I got your attention?

Great!

You're probably curious as to *what on earth* creativity has to do with saving lives. And my guess is you're probably a little sceptical. I would be too.

Many years ago, I spent my days pulling my hair out over the statistical analysis of clinical trials. Yep, you read that correctly. Don't believe me? Check out [this paper](#) in the Journal of the American Heart Association. That *Malini Parker* is the very same as this one.



I worked for the University of Western Australia's Department of Medicine and was surrounded by some of the finest minds in the world. Everyone was dedicated to unlocking the key to health, and our department's focus was investigating the risk factors for cardiovascular disease and more specifically hypertension. My Masters thesis was titled, "Alcohol, Dietary Sodium and Blood Pressure Control in Treated Hypertensive Drinkers".

Fun stuff :)

Actually, in the rare moments I didn't feel completely out of my depth, it was an exhilarating environment. I learned the discipline and rigour of the western scientific method.

And I NEVER believed any claims unless they were backed by hard science. Specifically: Randomised, double-blind placebo controlled studies.

So, what I'm about to say would have been laughed out of the water by the old me. (And by any of the hard-core scientists reading this post.)

Using our creativity saved us.

It saved me.

It saved my husband.

It saved my daughter.

I know firsthand how dusting off my creativity and putting it to work (after 40 years of neglect) totally changed my life, and reclaimed it from the pit of a horrible chronic illness. And this phenomenon also saved my husband's life – or extended it – and definitely quite literally, saved my daughter's life.

I'll get to the '5 ways' in a bit. Feel free to skip ahead if you want to.

But if you stay with me here, I'd like to share three stories with you.

1. HE STUMBLED ON A SECRET KEY (My husband's story)



My husband Greg was very strong, vital, handsome and well ... generally amazing. Greg was loved by everyone who knew him. (And he knew a lot of people. Unlike me, he was the consummate extrovert.)

Then, one afternoon in June 2010, he came home from what we thought was a routine medical appointment and told me he'd been diagnosed with Stage IV renal cell carcinoma with metastases.

Translation: terminal cancer that had started spreading. His prognosis was grim. Kidney cancer is incurable. He was 55 years old.

That was the (very) bad news.

The good news was, Greg went on to confound science and medical predictions by surviving for four more years when he was given six months to live.

You see ... Greg was a musician.

He decided that, despite the chemo, the disability and the weakness, he would write new music and stage another musical production.

[And he did.](#)

Then he staged another and another.

Each time it was hard.

Each time, it was painful.



And each time it was an act of trust of each member of his beloved choir, New Era, to come to rehearsals and take direction from a very sick, ailing man, who at times, didn't make a great deal of sense because of all the drugs he was on. But they did, and he did.

Greg didn't 'battle' his terminal illness. He lived with it, and then, gradually, even as his body weakened, he thrived on it. He leaned into his creative practice as a musician, and showed me the power of using creativity.

It transformed him, and I'm convinced, it extended his life.

I have cried many tears over my silliness and regret that I didn't appreciate what he was doing, or how he chose to spend his last days.

His focus was on Living.



My focus was on Keeping Him Alive.

So there were times I really resented that we had to organise yet another musical production! But I think I 'got it' towards the end. Especially that very last concert, [From Our Hearts to Yours](#), when he shared his music publicly for the last time, and thanked us all by name. One thousand people stood as one to cheer his life and who knows how many thousands more watched his story on ABC TV's 7.30 Report.

He died six weeks later on May 16th 2014.

I have no doubt his creative endeavours strengthened him, drove him forward each day and basically scared the cancer into being quiet for eight times longer than predicted.

I have no hard core science to back me up. No randomised double blind placebo controlled trial.

I just have a hunch.

2. THE QUESTION (My story)

I'd always imagined that people became artists because they just knew that's what they had to do. I figured it came from passion and talent and skill rolled into a burning desire to do nothing else.

Then I became an artist.

By accident.

It was a strange journey, via the Medical Sciences, full time motherhood, a long stint in the performing arts followed by a few years of debilitating illness, a move to the country, and then, equipped with three (non-art) degrees and several (non-art) professions, I finally started studying art ...

But we're jumping ahead. About a year before I got to that point (of actually studying art), I recall a 'changing moment' in my life. Of course I didn't recognise it as such then.

I'd been ill with severe chronic fatigue syndrome for some time and was sitting with yet another doctor in the hope that he would be able to help make me better. After the usual medical stuff, he leaned forward and looked intently into my eyes for what seemed like a ridiculously long time. Just when I was starting to feel decidedly uncomfortable, he sat back thoughtfully, and said:

"Malini, do you have an outlet for your creativity?"

"What an odd question!" I thought.

I mumbled something, a little annoyed at his (rather non-medical) intrusion into my private life, and promptly dismissed the whole event. In fact, I took it as a sign that here was yet another doctor who couldn't help me and I never went back to see him.

In the seven years of illness that followed, there were many bad days when I couldn't walk without a walking stick, didn't have the strength to hold a cup and had to be carried to the bathroom by my husband.

I cannot convey in words the trauma and difficulty of such an extended period of chronic fatigue syndrome. My life became small and survival-driven. I was constantly concerned that I was neglecting our small child who at times, basically had to raise herself, because I barely had the strength to sit up.

Fast forward a few years.

Seeking the proverbial sea change, I took myself and my family to Albany, a beautiful coastal town in the south-west of Western Australia. It was there that I took the plunge and enrolled in art school.



It was exhilarating!

So much so that I keep thinking, “So this is why I was such an appalling scientist!”

Remember that feeling when you fell in love for the very first time? That’s what it was like. Making art was all I could think about – first thing in the morning right through to last thing at night. It was a beautiful and all-consuming feeling. It was almost a struggle to do anything else. And of course there were days when I couldn’t get out of bed because of my illness, but when I had the strength to hold a brush, to make a pot, to get to my classes ... I did. I made art.

Discovering my creativity helped change both my life and the way I defined myself. Seven years after I was diagnosed, the year I had my first solo exhibition was the year I remember thinking “I’m well.”

Of course, it wasn’t just making art, a lot of things had changed to make me well but really, that doctor was on to something.

I used my creativity after decades of ignoring it.

And I got my life back.

3. HOPE WINS (Mary's Story)

*"The very least you can do in life is to figure out what you hope for.
And the most you can do is live inside that hope.
Not admire it from a distance but live right in it, under its roof."
– Barbara Kingsolver*

I have placed the word hope in hundreds of paintings. I love the sound of it, the feel of it, the way it lifts me when I just say the word. Hope was what got me through the heartbreaking years of my daughter Mary's illness.

The hope that she would show up each day, that she would find it in herself to keep going. The hope that she would bridge the chasm between the anguish and disconnect she felt every moment of every day, to the person she could become.

You see, Mary was diagnosed with anorexia* in 2007. She was 15 years old, and she'd clearly been unwell for some time before that. The doctors said it was anorexia 'at the extreme end of the continuum'.

Our lives were never the same after that. Months of extended hospital stays to stop her from dying were just the beginning. What followed were indescribably painful years, as our beautiful girl tried so hard to rebuild her broken mind and body and we tried our best to help her do it.

In those early days, I sometimes found that chasm to be so deep and so wide that I had trouble holding on to hope. So I would embed the actual word into my paintings. Perhaps there it would be safe and lie quietly powerful, within my creation, waiting for a time when I could access it.

Against all odds, and over many years, Mary did bridge that chasm. It took all her Courage and Determination and Persistence and Love. But she showed up every day, and she kept reaching forward, fighting her demons, holding on to love and friendship wherever she found it, and [capturing beauty with her camera](#) (in ways that you and I couldn't). She tattooed the word hope on her wrist, and she used her creativity to bring hope to her heart. It gradually transformed her life.



Mary often leaves a trail of beauty in her wake. Even during her months in hospital, Mary's space was always beautiful. At home, her room is a haven of meaningful symbols – living, breathing beauty. And she is blessed not only with the wisdom that comes from great suffering, but with an ephemeral, physical beauty, that radiates from a gentle, kind heart.

Mary still battles her illness, but she has found ways to be in the world so that she is no longer defined by it. Over a decade of struggle, she has used her creativity to re-claim her life from the teetering edge that severe anorexia brought it to.

Mary is my symbol of hope.



**Anorexia is the third most common long-term illness among teenagers. And the most common cause of death (up to 12 times higher than any other condition) among young women ages 15 to 24. When I claim that using her creativity saved her life, I mean it quite literally. You can find Mary's stunning art [over here](#).*

THE 5 WAYS

So here's how your creativity might just save your life. (And don't be concerned if you think you're not specially talented or creative. Creativity resides inside each and every one of us. It just needs to be woken up. Talent is over-rated :)

*"There is no such thing as creative people and not creative people.
There is only people who use it and people who don't."
- Brene Brown*

1. IT OPENS THE FLOODGATES TO THE REALLY GOOD STUFF

I'm talking about the chemical messengers in your body. The ones that direct the cells to do ... everything. Without these messengers, NOTHING would happen. We wouldn't grow (or stop growing). We wouldn't feel happy or sad, be able to mate, flee from danger, have children.

Says Steven Kotler, author of the bestselling [The Rise of Superman: Decoding the Science of Ultimate Human Performance](#), when we are lost in our creativity:

"The brain releases an enormous cascade of neurochemistry. Large quantities of norepinephrine, dopamine, endorphins, anandamide, and serotonin flood our system. All are pleasure-inducing, performance-enhancing chemicals... Both norepinephrine and dopamine amp up focus, boosting imaginative possibilities by helping us gather more information."

Our favourite hormone is probably dopamine. Why? Well, it's the one that is associated with attention and motivation, and the driving force behind all the pleasurable activities you can think of. But dopamine is really undervalued by being commonly known as the feel-good hormone. It's involved in helping us to use our muscles, to sleep, to focus to remember ... a lot of the important stuff!

We need dopamine to live. To stop ourselves from falling over. To feel pleasure and to focus our minds.

Using your creativity increases dopamine. I feel like painting right now just so I can get me some of that!

2. IT'S PERFORMANCE ENHANCING

Creative flow is the feeling you get when you are lost in the creative activity you are engaged in. I've experienced it as "time standing still". When I'm painting; the washing, the cooking, even eating and drinking, tend to get forgotten. Now to me that's remarkable because NOTHING else in the world makes me forget to eat :)

I've seen this state time and time again in my live [workshops](#). A room full of students have to be dragged away from their paintings after a whole day of creating, because they are lost in creative flow. And these are beginners I'm talking about. Often people who have never picked up a paintbrush before coming to my class.

So what is this 'creative flow' ?

The best description I've come across is this:

"Flow is defined as an "optimal state of consciousness where we feel our best and perform our best." It's also a strange state of consciousness. In flow, [concentration](#) becomes so laser-focused that everything else falls away. Action and awareness merge. Our sense of self and our sense of self consciousness completely disappear. Time dilates—meaning it slows down (like the freeze frame of a car crash) or speeds up (and five hours pass by in five minutes). And throughout, all aspects of performance are incredibly heightened..."

– Steven Kotler

But what is happening in the body during flow? Kotler goes on to explain it like this:

"During flow, the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex—the part of the brain charged with self-monitoring and impulse control—goes quiet. The DLPFC is our inner critic, that voice of doubt and disparagement. As a result, with this area deactivated, we're far less critical and far more courageous, both augmenting our ability to imagine new possibilities and share those possibilities with the world."

So: less doubt, more courage.

Flow is the ultimate 'performance enhancer'. And we get to turn it on every time we create!

3. IT REDUCES THE S-WORD

There is more and more evidence that STRESS is the underlying cause of the biggest killer diseases in Western society. Heard the statistics? How could you not! Three-quarters (or more, depending on what you read) of all visits to doctors are from stress-related medical problems, which range from depression to diabetes, from asthma to arthritis.

Why does stress do this?

“Stress stops the normal functioning of our body. The body assumes there’s a physical threat at hand, so it channels energy into getting out of immediate danger. To do this, it shuts down non-essential systems which are taking up energy. Our digestive processes, immune system, growth and reproductive processes are inhibited ...A bit of stress in short doses is useful in improving our memory and enhancing performance. However, too much, too regularly, is extremely damaging to our mental and physical well-being. It can lead to stomach ulcers, heart problems, illnesses, lowered libido... the list goes on.” - [Headspace](#)

I challenge anyone to feel stressed when they have their hands deep in clay as they are moulding a pot. Or to feel stressed when they are in the throes of gardening or arranging flowers ... or painting.

Making any kind of art for me, and many others is a form of meditation. The external noise and clutter of both the outer world and my inner world is cut off. And meditation has been shown to have some amazing science-based effects on the mind and body, reducing our stress levels, helping to form more connections in our brain so that the brain physically changes itself, boosting your immune system and literally [a whole host of other things](#). So if you have trouble with traditional forms of meditation, try making art.

It will reduce your stress levels, boost your immunity and just might save your life.

4. IT INCREASES THE H-WORD

“Art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time.”
– Thomas Merton

There is a strong correlation between creative expression and overall well-being. Making art is a well recognised tool to improve mental health. And it is regularly used to help with severe mental health issues and cope with trauma. In other words, it's a SAFE outlet to cope with depression, anger, resentment, despair ... basically all types of life-crap. Unlike alcohol, drugs and other addictive behaviours which are more common coping tools, making art will not kill you :)

And the bonus? Using your creativity to improve your mental health doesn't do just that, it actually makes you HAPPIER.

In our never ending pursuit of happiness, there is a simple key within each and every one of us. Our creativity.

It's there, waiting to make us happier, waiting to save us from the blues, waiting to save our lives.

5. MAKING ART TAKES COURAGE (MY FAVOURITE)

Elizabeth Gilbert, in her ridiculously awesome book, [Big Magic: Creative Living Beyond Fear](#), helpfully listed 27 ways people are afraid to live a more creative life, from being afraid we have no talent, to being afraid we're too old to start ... afraid it will be a giant waste of time and money, afraid of embarrassment. Sound familiar? It sure did to me. For most of my life, I could relate to almost all 27 ways!

As wonderful as using our creativity is, it's also pretty damn frightening. Anything creative, because of the uncertain outcomes, elicits fear. And therefore requires courage. But I ask you,

“Do you have the courage to bring forth the treasures that are hidden within you?” – Liz Gilbert.

I consider myself somewhat of an expert on fear. I've had an intimate relationship with it for most of my life. In fact, I acquired three science degrees, including a Masters in Medical Science, because of fear!

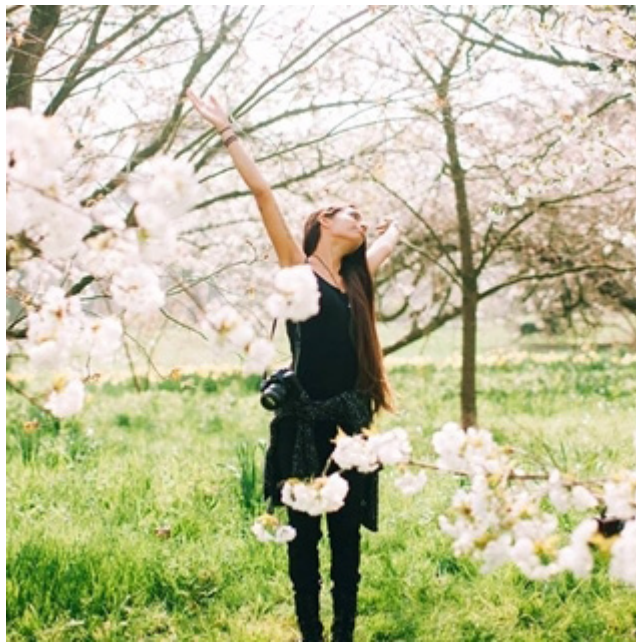
I'm so familiar with fear that I am quite blasé about it now. “There it is” I say to myself. And when I'm embarking on something creative, I tell myself, “This is scary, but fortunately it's not going to kill anyone if do a terrible job. So FEAR, I don't need you at the moment cos I'm just making art.”

Courage is what we use when we feel the fear and do it anyway. And courage is a magical virtue that grows the more we use it. Courage is the light that will lead us out of the darkness of a life crisis.

Regularly building your courage by engaging in your creativity might just save your life.

“A creative life is an amplified life ... It’s a bigger life, a happier life, an expanded life and a hell of a lot more interesting life.”

– Elizabeth Gilbert, Big Magic



My daughter Mary in Kew Gardens, London in 2015