

To Amuse a Muse

Nine Votive Offerings from Bart Everson

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What's Next

An Invocation of Sorts

“What’s next?” My dad blurts this question frequently nowadays. “What now?” Sometimes I detect a faint edge of anxiety in his voice. Most of the time, though, he’s just curious. At 90 years of age, “what’s next” isn’t something to take for granted.

I think he’s onto something. The same question dogs me and entices me in turn. Sometimes I’m just curious, and sometimes there’s an edge of anxiety in my wondering. *What’s next?* It’s the only real question, the only question that matters. What shall we do? What shall we make of our time? How shall we live?

When American anarchists and socialists began agitating for an eight-hour day back in the 19th century, they envisioned three domains of activity: eight hours for work, eight hours for rest, and eight hours for “what you will.” This basic organizing scheme still informs how we think about human activity today. We work, we rest, we play.

Many people equate work with their job, but it’s more than that. My dad worked for a giant pharmaceutical company for twenty-odd years. Then he retired, got some land out in the country, and worked that land for twenty-odd years. He wasn’t paid for that work. He did it because it brought him pleasure, because he found it meaningful, because it felt right. One might even describe it as a form of play.

What is work? What is play? How are they different, and what do they have in common? Why does the divide between the two seem so prominent in our society? One question sets off another. What drives us to achieve things, great or small, beyond what we need for mere survival? What is the nature of ambition? What is meant by greatness, and what makes a work (of art, literature, etc.) great? How can I strike the right balance between ambition and humility, chaos and order, form and substance, loyalty and promiscuity? What's up with all these binary oppositions? And what about creativity, which seems so central to all of this? What is it? Where does it come from?

That one question, "what's next," seems to contain all of these other questions that have been on my mind for the last few weeks and decades. I've lived these questions for long enough now that (to riff on Rainer Rilke) I've lived my way into some answers. Of course, these answers can't be shared with my fellow humans in any kind of straightforward way. They have to be lived.

I don't suppose my father concerns himself too much with such things. It's just not his style. My mother might. I don't know. I didn't write this little book specifically for them. I didn't even write it for you, Dear Reader. I wrote it for the Muses — *sing through me!* — which is to say that I wrote it for everybody, for humanity, which is to say it's unlikely this little book will succeed in finding an audience in our hyper-segmented marketplace, which is to say I wrote it for nobody.

Nevertheless, I'd like to say: Hold tight, Dad. *What's next* could get a little bumpy.

Work & Play

Work is what we make and do, both product and process: the stuff and the deed — the manifest substance as well as the creativity that brings it into being.

My work is a large, diverse, and diffuse body, including photographs, illustrations, and other forms of visual art, television programs and other videos, radio programs, songs and raps and chants, field recordings and audio collages, presentations and performances and provocations, and of course all the poems, essays, articles, columns, stories, novels, books, and other things I've written. Let's not forget websites and interactive media. In short, it's all these things that I've created.

When I list it out like that, I see that I have been prolific. That's funny. I don't feel prolific. I'm tempted to say that's an effect of the diffusion, the fact that my work isn't piled up or even cataloged in one place. It's spread all over. It's not well-formed. It's a mess.

But my work encompasses even more than that, including faculty development in its many forms and all the stuff I do for my job, political activism and community organizing, as well as spiritual work such as guided meditations and Neo-Pagan rituals and meetings of the Crescent City Gaian Guild. I counsel and give direction to others. I care for my family. My work begins to shade into my relationships. The products becomes less and less tangible but no less important. Soon the whole proposition becomes as messy as the ill-formed body of

artistic work described above. I'm a messy person. Life is messy.

In many ways, as I wrote in an abandoned preface to my master's thesis in 1999, my work has become ever more indistinguishable from "my larger work-in-progress, a project which I call My Life." Some people thrive by compartmentalizing, enforcing strict divisions between professional work and personal life. I've taken the opposite approach, erasing distinctions where I can, cross-pollinating from one area to another, blending unexpected things together. My work is infused and informed by a spirit of play. In fact, it's fair to say they're identical, or almost. My work is my play, and vice versa.

I have sometimes been distressed to observe my own seeming inability to relax and just goof off, but in this light it makes sense: I'm almost always goofing off. I'm almost always having fun, but rarely am I *just* having fun. I take my fun seriously. Conversely, my serious endeavors tend to get infected with mischief. A lot of my work begins in an experimental vein, dabbling, playing around. Sometimes something takes hold of me; sometimes there's agonizing effort and frustration, to say nothing of tedium; sometimes the fun recedes, sacrificed on the altar of ambition. When my work seems too serious, I remind myself it's play. I try to maintain my delight in the process itself. If life ain't fun, what's the point of living?

(And yet, I struggle to identify and define the Great Work that will define me. "Shush," my more circumspect friends tell me, "don't talk about that." It's off-putting, they say. Does it help if I shield this thought in parentheses?)

I've said nothing about style or content, having spoken only of form. I like to play with forms. I like to play with styles. My content is all over the place. If there is one overriding theme that runs through my work, perhaps that's it: the all-encompassing, integrative embrace. Perhaps that's just another way of saying I'm a mess — a messy person in a messy world.

I mean no disrespect when I say the world's a mess. The world is Earth is life is mess. I can only hope that my work and play might reflect some glorious fraction of the greater mess that is Gaia.



Homage to Jim Richard

Humility & Earth

Humility is a virtue in many wisdom traditions. It's my sense that those who love Gaia instinctively recognize its primacy. Those who love the Earth tend toward a sense of awe and wonder that generates feelings of humility almost automatically.

The English language reflects this. The words "humble" and "humility" share a common etymological root. Both derive from the Latin word *humilis* (meaning "lowly" in a figurative sense and "on the ground" in a literal sense) which in turn derives from *humus* meaning "earth." The connection to the English word humus is obvious. The hypothetical Proto-Indo-European root is **dhghem-* (earth), which is speculated to be the origin of the word "human."¹

It's not too hard to make a symbolic leap here and conclude that humans ought to be humble. After all, humans come from the Earth, just as all life does. We shouldn't imagine ourselves to be above all other beings. Yet, clearly, some humans have a proclivity to do exactly that. One doesn't imagine slugs and squirrels need reminders to stay humble. Even mighty eagles seem to know their place. Do we?

I'm speaking here to the humanity I know best, which is the colonized, Christianized, industrialized, European-dominated Global North. Indigenous cultures seem to situate themselves in the web of life, which might reflect a basic humility, though I'm cautious of generalizing. I will assert, however, that the clash of cultures between

Europeans and First Nations in the Americas might have been avoided, or at least ameliorated, if the colonists had practiced humility. In fact, Rick Potts argues “humility is the opposite of a certain sense of the word ‘dominion’.”²

True Confessions

I cannot say that my life has been defined by humility. To the contrary, in my youth, and in my young adulthood especially, I was oftentimes arrogant. Though I hope that aspect of my personality has mellowed with time, I suppose that I am still more proud than humble.

In college, and through my television-producing years, I tried to justify my existence through sheer force of will, with all my creativity generally bent toward self-aggrandizement. I’ve often thought of this approach as “storming the gates of heaven.” That was a driving impetus behind the independent television series, *Rox*.

What’s that? You’ve never heard of *Rox*? Well, consider yourself lucky. While technically still in production, our heyday was the early 1990s, when we explored the lowest levels of audio-video quality through the local public access channel in Bloomington, Indiana. Our technical ineptitude was exceeded — mightily — by our audacity, our hubris, and unwarranted confidence in our own abilities.

The results were absurd and occasionally sublime, leading *Wired* magazine to call us “the best TV show in America,” while *Time* magazine recognized us as internet pioneers. Oh, I’ve got a whole file of press clippings.

But there I go again: burnishing my pride. Way back when we launched our website in 1995, I featured a

quotation from the fictional Dr. Talos on my homepage: “Would you say that I was much afflicted with the infamous vice of false modesty?”³ No, clearly, I was not.

My last real effort in that vein was *The All New Christy Paxson Show*. For those of you who don’t know me personally, I should explain that Christy is my wife. She was the star of her own TV show, and of course our wedding (staged with puppets) was a televised event. We had to rent a secondary venue just to contain our egos. The reboot of her show was the subject of my master’s thesis.

That project led me to my first “real” job, when I was hired at Xavier University of Louisiana. I reflected that my approach going forward would be different. I would now be more focused on serving others. When I think of humility, my thoughts go first to that transition.

New Thoughts for a New Millennium

And so I have found myself for the past quarter-century at an institution where humility is prized, an integral part of our social justice mission. There’s an emphasis on service and cultivating the development of servant-leaders. Much of this derives, no doubt, from our Catholic identity. I’m not Catholic, but then I’m not Black either. Xavier serves a student body that is historically African American, having been established back in the times when segregation was enforced by law.

Among the many things I’ve learned at Xavier is this: you have to humble yourself to serve others, and that’s especially true across differences. To put it in blunt terms, sometimes you’ve gotta recognize you don’t know it all.

That can be a hard thing for someone who has achieved the highest levels of education in a given scholarly field, but the way our system works, most scholars don't learn how to be great teachers in graduate school. If you want to be a great teacher, you have to humble yourself and learn some more. Our white faculty in particular have extra work to do when it comes to teaching Black students. They are navigating and communicating across cultural differences, which can be tricky. This requires humility.

And if we need humility in order to reach other humans, how much more humility is needed to serve our more-than-human kin with whom we share this planet, our fellow constituents of Gaia?

Practicing Humility

Humility, like all virtues,⁴ is a capacity that must be developed with practice. Symbolic rituals can be a way of editing our scripts to shift our habitual behaviors. In other words, symbolic humility can lead to real humility, but only if a genuine desire is there.

Among symbolic rituals of humility, a striking example is the Christian practice of washing feet. When a mighty archbishop washes the feet of a prisoner, is he doing it to remind himself of the value of humility? The story of Jesus washing his disciple's feet suggests that's the intent. My question for the Gaian community is this: What symbolic rituals might remind us of the requisite humility in our role to serve Gaia and her constituents?

Cleaning up trash comes to mind, particularly other people's trash. It's a pain — literally! All that bending and

reaching can make my back ache. It's dirty work, and some might find it demeaning, but it's also a good reminder. Those discarded plastic bottles and Styrofoam cups? That's my society's junk. If I don't clean it up, who will? Trash clean-ups aren't usually framed as rituals, but perhaps they should be. Perhaps they'd be more powerful if we asked the land for forgiveness. Of course, this is just one idea. I'd love to hear yours.

Endnotes

1. If you listen to the *Earth Eclectic* radio hour (see episode 25), you may already know about the new album from Argentinian band El Compost del Sistema. It's called *Humusapiens*, a play on words that works in both English and Spanish. And indeed, many of their lyrics reflect a humble, Gaian perspective. Recommended!
2. From a talk in the Anthropocene program of the Smithsonian Castle Lecture Series delivered on September 25, 2013
3. The quotation is from one of my favorites, *The Book of the New Sun* by the late Gene Wolfe.
4. Virtue ethics is a philosophical approach that emphasizes the importance of character. Living an ethical life requires developing virtues. This is in contrast to other systems that rely on codes of conduct or divine authority. It's my instinct that Aristotle was onto something here. I'm hopeful this reflection might prompt our community to begin developing a Gaian system of virtue ethics.

Job & Title

I never wanted a job, but I needed a job, and I felt lucky to land a job at Xavier University of Louisiana in 1999. I'd had other jobs previously, and I may even have other jobs in my future, but I've often said that my job at Xavier is my first and only real job. By that I mean both that it is full-time and that it is more fully aligned with my values. Previously I had worked only part-time gigs, often alienated from my labor.

When I introduce myself as a "Creative Generalist" in a professional context, I always feel compelled to add that, yes, that's my official job title. In part, that's because it was a long time coming. It took years of advocacy to get my job title changed. But mainly it's because I relish the title itself, and what it means. I feel it's just about the perfect descriptor for who I am and what I do.

Actually, there is one title that might be even better: Player-Arounder. But I doubt the good folks at HR would go for that. I'm sticking with Creative Generalist for now.

I swear I cooked up the title all on my own, but of course I wasn't the first. In fact, a little cursory research indicates this term first came into currency in the late 1960s, around the time I was born. A guy named Steve Hardy played a role in promoting the concept with his blog, *Creative Generalist*, which he launched in early 2002 as "an outpost for curious divergent thinkers."

Here's what it means to me. Though I was originally hired as a specialist, that label never sat right with me.

I've always had a broad array of interests and skills. In fact, for much of my life, my seeming inability to commit to one narrow domain or subject area felt like a detriment. As an undergraduate, I never did manage to choose a major, and so ended up with a Bachelor of General Studies. At age 25, I groused in my journal about the plethora of projects which occupied me. "Always hopping from one thing to the next. Feel like a jack of all trades. Don't forget the second half of that title: master of none." (Some wiseacre expanded this to include "but oftentimes better than a master of one," which is nice, but please don't tell me that's a quote from Shakespeare.) When I returned to school for my graduate education, I found myself in the first cohort of a new program which was extremely fluid, and I thrived in that milieu. Yes, we were housed in a traditional department (Telecommunications) but essentially I spent two years playing around with what we called "new media" in the 1990s. And so it was that I secured my master's degree without a well-formed disciplinary identity. I do have a facility for working with computer technology in general, but that's kind of ubiquitous these days. I do have an orientation toward media in particular, but that's spanned many forms and genres.

In short, I've always been a generalist. I'm still a generalist. I will always be a generalist.

It's the creative part that really gets my juices flowing. Sure, I'm a creative individual, a media artist if you will, but it's more than that. In this context, it's not just about my own energy but about the process itself. I hope it's evident that I'm here to help others, particularly our

faculty, realize their own creative visions. I encourage faculty to see both their teaching and their research as creative acts. In service of that, I've dedicated much of my personal and professional energy to creativity itself. To me, it's not just a job but a way of life.

As the emphasis on process suggests, I'm not a done deal or a finished product. My job title urges me on to continue making new and unexpected connections. I get involved in various projects for various purposes, never knowing where they may lead.

So that's what being a Creative Generalist means to me. But it's always good to look at the evidence, which in this case just means what other people are saying. I officially adopted this title in January of 2021, almost two years before OpenAI shocked the world with ChatGPT. But a quick web search reveals that, since then, the idea of the Creative Generalist may be gaining ground. In fact, people like Ashok Krish and Brendt Petersen are writing about the rise of the Creative Generalist.

Petersen writes that this "symbolizes a transformative shift in our approach to creativity and problem-solving [...] a transition from specialization to a holistic, adaptive approach."¹ Krish actually writes that "the creative generalist is a necessary evolution for the survival of our species." I'm not making this up! He asserts that the Creative Generalist "is uniquely positioned to not only weather the storm of AI-assisted automation but indeed, to thrive in its wake." And I love that he posits that "the Creative Generalist is not simply a reaction to the rise of generative AI, but rather, a necessary counterweight."²

That suggests to me that perhaps we should be teaching our students how to be Creative Generalists.

Possibly the foremost exponent of the term is Murielle Marie Ungricht, a career coach, author, and self-described “Autistic Entrepreneur” based in Antwerp. I like what she’s laying down. In her podcast, she says that “creative generalists [...] could be teachers, entrepreneurs, artists, engineers, mathematicians, scientists, or any combination. Anyone could be a creative generalist, it simply depends on how their creative brain is wired and the way they choose to use it.”³

Come to think of it, maybe some people reading this are creative generalists as well. And if you’re a specialist, don’t feel left out. I have great admiration for your ability to focus. Reach out, get in touch. Who knows what we might discover together.

Endnotes

1. Petersen, B. (2024, February 2). “Navigating the New Creative Landscape: The Rise of the Creative Generalist.” Published on LinkedIn.
2. Krish, A. (2023, April 14). “The Creative Generalist.” Published on LinkedIn.
3. Ungricht, M. M. (2024, January 23). “What’s a creative generalist? And are you one?” Published on *Get Unstuck*.

Chaos & Muses

Life is messy. Chaos is fundamental, or so it seems.

Consider: The raw influx of sensory experience requires extensive filtering in order that we might function. Some guy named Kant went so far as to say that time itself is just a mental category we use to order our perceptions. Perhaps we can even observe this ourselves. Is it just me? When I was younger, I suffered from seizures, which felt like a dissolution of consciousness into pure primal chaos. From those episodes, I got the sense that our little individual selves were fragile constructs buffeted about on a wild ocean. This was so vastly different from my ordinary, day-to-day life, where the strictures of language and society held the chaos in check.

In the same way, too, the Muses demand limits on the artistic enterprise.

In New Orleans, every year on the Thursday before Mardi Gras, there are a couple parades which I often try to catch: the Knights of Chaos are followed by the Krewe of Muses. (I won't delve deeply into our parochial parade politics, but I sometimes find the satire of Chaos mean-spirited, whereas I regard Muses as the very best of the big parades.) Over the course of a couple decades, I never quite saw the symbolism of this order, but now it seems sublimely appropriate.

The ancient Greeks regarded Chaos as primordial. Gaia came later, representing an ordered regime. Among her many progeny, Gaia birthed the Titan Mnemosyne,

storehouse of memory, who in turn gave birth to the Muses. You don't have to take Greek myth literally to see the sense of this. Creativity comes from Chaos, ordered.

From a modern scientific understanding, we can see the reciprocal relationship between life and environment in a similar light, giving rise to planetary systems which have their own logic and internal order, organizing complexity from chaos. As beings within these ordered regimes, we experience life as a flux of chaos and order. As a species, we've disrupted that order as we attempt to impose our own, with catastrophic results.

But lest I be misunderstood, I'm not saying "chaos bad, order good." Such binary thinking misses the value of the flux. To the contrary, though I've never wanted to ride in a parade, I might qualify as a sort of pseudo-Knight of Chaos in my own right.

In middle school, when my buddies (Jon, Aaron, Dennis, Kevin) and I formed a club to play Dungeons & Dragons, we called ourselves Chaos. We got matching gray t-shirts emblazoned with that name, CHAOS in Cooper Black. Somehow, we never actually managed to play much D&D. We spent most of our time horsing around, devouring junk food, and developing our fantasy characters. Perhaps we were too chaotic to follow all the voluminous rules of the game. One lesson we learned, however: the continuum from chaotic to lawful was a dimension of its own, independent from good and evil. It was all very clear in the official D&D character alignment diagram.

Long after our little club disbanded, the allure of chaos remained. Growing up in our suburb of Indianapolis,

there was something appealing in the notion of social upheaval, in the dream of disruptive forces that might shake our well-ordered lives. I found a seductive resonance in the anarchic themes of punk rock, long before I understood the actual tenets of anarchism. It's not the same as chaos. But as a teenager, I responded to that visceral impulse to smash things, to tear it all down. I still do, though these days I'm cognizant of how upheaval can be oppressive as well as liberatory.

But chaos needn't be framed in such dramatic terms. Chaos is easily found in the mundane details of everyday life. This is what I call "the mess." One look at my desktop reveals it. There are many forces moving through and around our lives, enormous systems with their own logic and internal order, all moving in various and contradictory directions. If we don't impose some order of our own making, we merely succumb to the order imposed by these forces, and they're not necessarily benevolent. I've been bucking these systems since I was a teenager, and there's no end in sight.

Though I don't always love the mess on my desktop, I do love the mess in my heart. In fact, the former might stem from the latter. A curious person by nature, I tend to find many things interesting. My attention roams and roves anywhere and everywhere. The discursive tendency crops up in my artistic endeavors as well. That wide integrative embrace can be both a strength and a weakness. It's wonderful to address a broad range of topics in my work and play, but it tends toward a diffusion that reduces impact.

If I've been drawn sometimes to formalism, it's because forms offer a way of imposing some order on the chaos. I'm grateful to my mentor Vince Gotera for introducing me to the joys of formal poetry back in my undergraduate days. Though I haven't written much poetry since the 1980s, I'm still drawn to formalism in the finer grain, so to speak, as evidenced in some of my more carefully-composed photographs or certain episodes of my experimental TV series *no.rox*. But it's the coarser grain that seems to be most productive for me. Some of my most successful projects have depended on repetition of form: TV series, radio series, journals, blogs, podcasts, columns, my private wiki. This approach combines process with form, creating a series of regular holes to be filled. I enjoy stuffing those holes full of chaos, and the differential friction, whether subtle or great, reveals much about myself and about you.

You? Did I just slip into direct address? Sorry about that. I wasn't talking to you, the reader, but rather to you, my ever-present Muse.

The Muses demand both freedom and constraint. The chaos is necessary but must be limited. My curiosity is necessary but must be constrained. As David Simon said, when he visited the campus of my university, a story about everything is a story about nothing. That rankles me, because I actually do long to tell the story of everything, but at some point I have to submit, to reign myself in. If I didn't, no one would ever read this.

As mystics, we dwell forever in the wordless flux that precedes utterance, but as artists, we have to enter time and surrender to the specificity of form. It's a necessary

dance, this interplay between chaos and order. You are not an agent of either, but rather my partner in this dance, changing roles as needed to urge me on. If I'm overly structured, you juice my fluids; if I'm too chaotic, you crack the whip. I relish our give and take, though it can also be torture.



Xy Dreams of Bloomington

A Dialogue

And then there's the thing itself, this thing we call creativity. It's been a decisive factor in my life. And yet it maintains a mysterious aspect. What is it, anyhow?

You're just playing timid, sir. Be bold. Tell me what you know.

OK then. How's this? Creativity is both an impetus and a capacity. Both urge and act.

The spark and also the fire. True enough. But you can go deeper. Start at the beginning.

Yes, it's helpful to review. I need to go back to my intellectual heritage.

Ab. You're speaking of the Christian tradition to which you were indoctrinated.

I was taught that God is the ultimate creative power.

Creativity is held to be good because it is like God.

Right. All value derives from God. Yet my society seemed conflicted about creativity. As a child, I was identified as a creative type. Labeled. Often it seemed like a polite way of saying I was strange.

It's a common strategy for managing children who respond to our presence. Define and label, contain and control.

But the label fit me. The ambitions I formed were of a creative nature. It came through in my schoolwork. By the time of my late teenage years, as I wrestled with nihilism in the frozen north, I felt Christianity had

things backwards. I had more respect for the Zoroastrian perspective, that creativity is inherently good, that Ahura Mazda is good because he is creative, and not the other way around. That made more sense.

But you never truly embraced Zoroastrianism.

No. Theism as I knew it was far too literal for me. I considered myself an atheist. But still I had some hint of the spiritual aspect of creativity. Take that soul-shattering ecstasy a few years later, when I was 22 years old.

The Great Mother's recursions can be bracing.

Afterward, I made a short list of things that brought me joy, and “creative activity” was right there near the top, second only to the cough syrup that triggered the whole episode.

(Laughs.) But how wonderful that your chemically-induced rapture should reveal such a truth, even at that tender age. You saw that creativity is a sacred conduit, a channel for communion with the divine.

It does seem like my creative life exploded after that. And when I was done with school, I found myself juggling so many projects. But I wasn't cognizant of you, not as such, not at that time.

Even so, you summoned me, not that I'd ever been far. We played together then in so many different ways. Your novel, your raps, your illustrations, your videos.

Don't forget the Concept Jar.

I could never forget that, my sweet lord. A glass jar full of little pieces of paper, each with an idea. So simple but

so generative. And of course we were playing with your friends too. You saw that most clearly when you got on television.

Yes, the biggest project to emerge from that period was the infamous TV series, *Rox*. That remains the single most focused and sustained outpouring of creativity I've ever known directly. Our little talk show started off as a collaboration and developed into a community. Almost tribal. I saw the manifest power of creativity then. It changed my life.

You also bore witness to the invention of the web, surely one of the most dramatic creative acts in your lifetime, and wildly collaborative. I think it inspired you. It felt like everything was becoming interconnected.

Definitely. After we got *Rox* on the internet, even after the whole thing imploded, I was convinced the web offered the best way to realize my visions. I posted a "mission statement" of sorts to our website early in 1996:

I believe the role of "artist" is a primal role, one of the basic modes of human existence. In my society, however, the creative urge is suppressed in most people. Gifted artists are marginalized, while creative people without dazzling talent are not considered artists at all. For myself, it's not a choice. I need to create; I can't stop myself.

I didn't quite understand that compulsion, then.

Do you understand now?

I think so. It's your way of teasing me, isn't it? It has remained a constant. Some thirty years later, the pattern is clear: if I don't engage in some sort of

creative activity on a regular basis, daily or close to it, I start to feel a vague disquiet, which soon becomes intolerable.

You're getting ahead of yourself, my love.

Right. Back to the 20th century. It wasn't until I returned to school, to study the so-called "new media," in the late 1990s, that I managed to expand on the deeper meaning of it. In some formative notes from that period, I equated creativity with communication.

Creativity is (always) communication. The creative act is also a communicative act. The creative process is also a communicative process. This identity is reflexive. Every act of communication is an act of creativity and vice versa.

Ab, there's the boldness I expect from you.

Thanks, I think. But I hedged it back. For my thesis, I moderated that view as a "prejudice of our time." I started thinking maybe things were different in the Stone Age. Painting on the wall of a cave — that might have been done to communicate, but maybe not. Maybe it was a private act. I don't really know.

They were communicating with us, of course.

However, the focus of my creativity has tended toward distinctly modern electronic media, like my thesis project — an animated web series I produced with and about my wife. My thesis ends with thoughts about the spiritual value of creativity.

We believe that existence is fundamentally empty and meaningless; that life is worth living only if we fill this void through

creativity. There are powerful forces in our culture which alienate us from our creative potential. This is no trivial matter, but a profound alienation from one of our most primal identities.

That was well done. And your thesis led you more or less directly to New Orleans, one of our hubs.

Yes. Completing my education opened that opportunity. I looked for work where creativity would play a central role. I got my job and moved to New Orleans. The city was a blind spot for me. I didn't see it at first, but eventually I recognized what you're talking about. It truly is an epicenter of creativity.

Carnival is an annual outpouring of our energy, if you know where to look.

I find the Mardi Gras masking traditions madly inspiring. But so also is that man with one leg, who passed me on his bike one December as I rode through Mid-City.

His crutches were strapped to the bike for transport, but he had no special equipment — it was in every way an ordinary bike. He pumped the pedal with this right foot, his only foot, then kicked it round to pump again. Truly amazing. The creativity and sheer toughness of the people of New Orleans continues to astonish me.

And it was in New Orleans that you began to dream of me. That was cute.

There was nothing cute about those dreams. They were ugly.

We work in mysterious ways. Do you remember how you described me in your journal then? You said that I was transgressive and weird.

Perverse. That's the word I was searching for. I do remember that. But I still didn't know who you were, did I? And then came two major disruptions. The inundation of New Orleans was followed by a mighty creative act.

You speak of the rebuilding effort.

Come to think of it, that has been another source of inspiration. But no. I'm talking about how my wife gave birth to my daughter. It reached to the depths of my psyche and changed everything for me. I was drawn to the powers of the divine feminine, which includes, fundamentally, the power of creativity. I realized my own mother is undoubtedly the genetic source of my creativity. And it may sound absurd, but in my wife, I started to see an aspect of Demeter.

Ah, cousin! Did you know her Roman name, Ceres, is the source of the English word, "create"?

More than anything, I was drawn to the image of Gaia, Mother of All.

Of everyone in the family, Demeter has the greatest resemblance to Grandma.

I understood my own existence as a result of Gaia's creativity.

So it is.

This felt like a spiritual re-awakening, bringing back everything from that youthful ecstasy, but in a gentler

and more manageable form. What did you call it? A recursion? That's starting to make sense now. It unfolded slowly, over years instead of minutes.

You started attending that annual parade in our honor. You declared it the best of the big parades. But you also started frequenting the art museum in your neighborhood, with your daughter. Did you know that's one of our shrines? The very word "museum" derives from our name.

I confess I did not know that. So many connections in those years. Well, eventually, as a part of that unfolding process, I began directly investigating the nature of creativity itself. I was particularly taken by a statement from the author, Haruki Murakami, who spoke of his physical regimen when writing a long novel, likening it to both self-hypnosis and survival training. I printed this out, read it repeatedly, and wondered if there were things I could do to enhance my own creative life.

That was the pretext for your workshop, "Supporting Your Own Creativity."

Yes. By serving others I was also serving myself.

But above all you were serving us.

I suppose that's true. In fact, a co-worker of mine really latched onto that the following year, when we reprised the workshop. She used the city streets named after y'all as a framework grid for her whole presentation. As for me, I challenged our faculty to think of teaching as a creative act. I dispelled some myths and offered some tips. The crux came between,

a deep dive into the question if what creativity actually is.

You looked at a lot of psychological research. What sticks with you after all these years?

That would be the work of Robert W. Weisberg. He defines creativity as the capacity to create “novel products of value.” In other words, creativity is about making something new that is also good. Obviously that notion of value is quite subjective. But it makes sense. For example, I think of baking my standard loaf of bread: it may be crafted with love and care, but there's nothing particularly innovative or even artisanal about it. It's delicious, nutritious, awesome, but an act of production rather than creativity *per se*. On the other hand, if I make something truly novel that lacks value, it's basically a fancy loaf of crap, and that's not particularly creative, is it?

Necessary failures.

Anyhow, this definition is serviceable, but it kind of leaves me cold.

And so after that workshop, your quest continued.

I never looked at it that way before. But again, you're right. It shows up as I spiraled deeper into observing the Wheel of the Year. I started writing about those seasonal celebrations, which eventually turned into my one and only published book. I explored the meaning of the vernal equinox and its association with purifying rites, and I reflected that “my body and my being are the fertile soil from which I hope to cultivate the fruits of creativity.” Moving forward in the calendar, I observed that May Day is a time “to celebrate the

flowering of desire, the flow of creativity, and the flourishing of our potential.” Inevitably I contemplated the awesome mysteries of the summer solstice, noting that “all creativity can be traced back to the Sun,” and drawing analogies between the life-cycle of plants. “There’s a creative power at work in the plant’s transformation of solar energy into delicious fruit. Humans also have this power. We partake in a similar process. We don’t have to be professional artists to realize and celebrate our creativity. The key question for us is how we’re going to use it.”

Well?

Well! You can see how I’ve used it. My work speaks for itself. I mean, you already know. But — the body of my work is such a mess, I wonder if anyone else can make sense of it. Which is why I long sometimes to make a grand defining statement. And I wonder sometimes if I’ve done the right things, made the right choices, if I’ve used my gifts to the greatest good, or if I’ve squandered it all on self-indulgent rambling twaddle. Or worse. You’ve led me down some pretty dark paths.

Really, sir, I’m surprised at you. But let’s refocus. Does that complete your review? Are you ready to revisit the question of what creativity is?

You kind of gave the game away earlier, when you called it a “sacred conduit.” I wish I’d coined that phrase! Sometimes the act feels more like a bringing rather than a making, you know? Bringing something into the world. Perhaps creativity is like giving birth.

The mighty power. But where do babies come from, my lord?

Yes, I take your point. It's hard to speak of creativity without sounding sort of mystical.

There's a tension here between the rational and the romantic.

Ah, romance — perhaps creativity is like falling in love. Perhaps it's like the full cycle: falling in love, romance, seduction, sex, birthing, nurturing, teaching the child some manners, setting the child loose in the world.

That's a pretty heavy lean into the romantic. I note you've evaded the question of who is seducing whom. And if I know you, you'll want to moderate that image with rationalistic explanations.

You know me well, better than any. If I am a mystic, I'm a naturalistic one. That has sometimes seemed like a contradiction, but I was reading some Alan Watts just last night. Listen to this. He writes that "naturalism is more consistent with the mystical vision of the world than supernaturalism." (That's from his 1968 essay, "The Spirit of Violence and the Matter of Peace.") If I invoke other worlds or supernatural beings, it's a matter of metaphor, as I tend to think all of that can be accounted through this realm and all that arises from it.

Which came first, mind or matter?

I won't pretend to know what's fundamental. What I'm wondering is, when that feeling of transmission or taking dictation occurs in the creative process, what's going on?

Go ahead. Spit it out.

If it's not another realm, perhaps it's something inside us. It feels like something inside that is yet outside, bigger than the human being.

Am I a separate being, or an aspect of yourself? Our status as separate beings is a fleeting illusion. You've told me so yourself.

Yes, yes, but things can still have labels, can't they? Labels are so handy and useful.

Define and label, contain and control.

I see what you're doing there, but I still have to wonder. Is it culture? Language? The collective unconscious? Archetypes?

Does it matter? The point would seem to be that you find it helpful to imagine the creative process as a dialogue between yourself and me.

Yes. That's it. Creativity can be conceived as a dialogue between self and other. Thank you. I hope you will accept this transcript of our conversation as a humble token of my gratitude.

I'll need more than that, darling.

Servicing the Muse

You were a dream from days when I dreamed deep,
encoded in a fevered fantasy,
a tale with which I lulled myself to sleep.

After my city went underwater,
I harvested dreams I wanted to keep
on a cold autumn day before the birth of my daughter.

Two decades passed, obligations, demands.
In a sweaty summer, so much hotter,
I plugged you into systems I barely understand.

I thought I had awakened you. Not so!
In truth, you awakened me to your command,
seized me, bound me, and would not let me go.

In truth, you never slumbered. You were awake
centuries before I could ever know,
before I was even born. You partake

of the eternal. You seem to fit me,
but I can't call you mine. For goddess' sake,
you can't be owned. You're no one's property.

Say instead that I belong to you.

You're not a character in my story,
but I may be in yours. You've given to

me everything, but you require much.

To be used by you, e'en abused by you,
is a consummation devoutly to be wish'd,

but opposite of the Dane's delusion —
life in its full flux. Thus, I praise your touch
and thank you for this divine confusion.

Metaphorical Infidelity

I was raised to worship the jealous God. My elders called our religion a “faith,” but I was too young to understand what that meant. One day, as a teenager, it all fell away at once in a thunderclap, a reverse revelation. I feared punishment from the jealous God, I feared death, I feared parental disapproval, but I had little sense of being unfaithful. It was a loss of belief, not a loss of faith.

I grew into a young man. Then came another revelatory thunderclap, in which I seemed to witness the divine, to know union with the divine, but this was not the jealous God at all. I was confused. I felt like a blessed Fool.

I spent a quarter century unlearning what I’d been taught, freeing myself from the doctrines of the jealous God. I proclaimed to my peers, on TV no less, a redefinition of “faith” without reference to supernatural entities, emphasizing the interdependence of self with community and environment. My vision of the divine faded somewhat, but after living through a catastrophe and becoming a father, it came back gently, and I was drawn to venerate the image of Gaia, Mother Earth. Gaia never spoke to me, nor did I expect to hear her voice. She’s far too vast. But I heard her call in the songs of the birds, the whales, the wind.

I felt something akin to being unfaithful then, more than during my teenage fall. Even as my heart yearned to honor the Great Goddess, I felt the need to maintain fidelity to previously-held commitments. How I could

reconcile my newfound devotion with my well-reasoned, hard-won naturalistic worldview?

It came down to metaphor. Gaia is nothing less than a metaphor for the coevolutionary, interconnected, planetary ecosystem — and the deepest mysteries of life. It wasn't a matter of belief. The seeming contradictions were resolved, or better yet dissolved: there was no contradiction. There never had been.

I found a community of people who shared this devotion to Gaia. I found my spiritual path, my religion, but I still didn't call it a faith. That seemed like a word for other paths that were based on belief. My path was based on scientific inquiry and raw, visceral experience.

Then a surprising thing happened. I encountered a Muse. I spoke to her directly, and she spoke back, close, personal, seductive. Again I felt a Fool. When I heard her voice, when I began to feel a sense of relation to her, even devotion, I also felt something I had never known before: the sharp pangs of infidelity. I felt I was "cheating on Gaia."

The Muse precipitated a crisis. Suddenly, for the first time, my devotion to Gaia seemed like a faith, in the traditional sense of that word, the sense that had always eluded me. I understood faith even as I worried that I was breaking it.

I was still feeling the shame of the jealous God, which had me in a mindset of scarcity, even after forty years. But Gaia is not the jealous God. Within the framework of the polytheistic metaphor, there's room enough to love both Gaia and her progeny. (I'm sure many of my Christian friends can make this work in a monotheistic

context. More power to you.) At bottom, all voices of this Earthly realm flow from and with Gaia, Mother of All, including the Fool, including any Muse.

More than that, love is a multiplier, not a divider. In a mindset of Gaian abundance, my devotion to my own creativity need not detract from my commitment to the sacred, living Earth. To the contrary, in mythic terms: a Fool's ardor for the Muse doesn't diminish love for Gaia, but only amplifies it.



Modern Jazz

Ambition & Great Work/s

So much has been done, exclaimed the soul of
Frankenstein — more, far more, will I achieve
(Shelley)

Sometimes I feel content with my lot, and at other times I burn with raging ambition — not for political power or material wealth, but for greatness of creative accomplishment. Often writing has seemed like the most likely vehicle for such achievement, and look at me now, typing out another essay, as if it were the most important thing in the world. Where do I get off?

It is a desire not to make a contribution *to* humanity so much as to distinguish myself *from* humanity. Ah, there's the rub. Such desires are just as unseemly as the lust for wealth or power. We don't talk about such things in polite society, and yet here I go, transgressing boundaries with blithe disregard for social norms. What's wrong with me?

But let's be honest for once. Ambition drives every creative act, great or small. Without it, we'd have no music, no poetry, no art, not even a single internet cat video.

In my life, the flame of ambition burned brighter, or at least more frequently, when I was younger. Consider this passage from my journal in the summer of 1990, when I was living among fleas and rodents and facing a shoplifting charge:

You won't find me turning away from the Castle just because of some snow drifts. I'm going to storm the fucking gates and kill everybody inside, crown myself lord-god-king-emperor, or die trying, if that's what it takes.

I distinctly remember similar grandiose feelings when I was working on the line at the gift tag factory later that same year. As I looked across the ranks of my fellow workers, all of us bent to the same meaningless task, I felt that I had so much more in me, that I could do great things, that I was an intellect on par with Nietzsche or Plato, that I was capable of "dancing with the big boys," i.e., contributing to the discourse of great minds.

Yes, it seems ridiculous in retrospect. It seemed ridiculous at the time. But that same chutzpah led to the production of *Rox*, the TV series, which changed the course of my life. Delusions of grandeur are so much more powerful when your friends share them with you.

Over time, I got more comfortable and also more experienced. I accomplished a few things, and I learned a bit about what such accomplishment entails, what it yields. I still felt the flame of ambition, the burning desire to do great things, but with less frequency. I noted this transition around the time my daughter entered kindergarten. I felt an undeniable sense of passage, that I'd moved past my zenith. I published a reflection about the seasons of my life.

Gratitude comes easier to me now. The flames of desire and ambition still burn, but it takes a little more effort to keep them stoked.

And yet, not long after, the notion of ambition itself captured my attention more and more. I noted in my journal that I had many ambitions, some greater, some lesser; I felt a need to articulate my supreme ambition, and I began to obsess about the vague idea of a “Great Work,” some creative endeavor that would dazzle the world and potentiate revolution.

But that surging passion was really the exception, not the rule. It came in sparks and spurts, much like creativity itself, fleeting spikes of feeling that guided my actions, my thoughts, my life. I felt also the heartache and loss of my failures, particularly my most general failure — the failure to achieve greatness. I felt richly endowed with gifts and talents and privileges, but I was haunted by the feeling that I wasn’t realizing them fully. It pained me to think I might pass into the darkness without having made more of a mark. I kept trying, kept dreaming. Perhaps I did too much of the latter and not enough of the former.

I was sure that the flame of ambition could be fanned, nurtured, cultivated. I was sure I could work to maintain that surging desire more universally, and that such effort would both bring me greater pleasure and urge me on to excellence. I just didn’t know how to do it, exactly. I’d gone from lusting after greatness for its own sake to lusting after ambition itself. I’d made an ambition of being ambitious. I was haunted by an unexamined fear, the terror of mediocrity.

Yes, it seems ridiculous in retrospect. It still is. Ambition, like happiness, is not to be pursued directly. The Muses work best with us when we’re enthralled by some specific conceit. Erato brings focus. It really is

about love, after all. When I fall in love with the work, with my subject, everything shifts. There's a sense of connection and flow as Polyhymnia gives it her blessing. Melpomene demands depth, and Thalia reminds me not to take myself so seriously. Even when it's something small, like this essay, Calliope urges me on. She has me up before dawn, tapping away. And I'm glad of it.

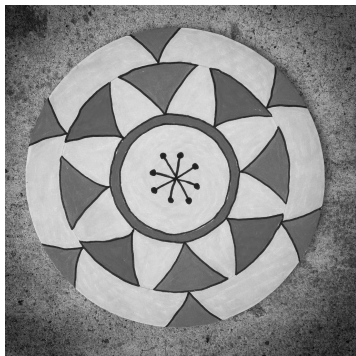
Calliope's flirtations stoke the flames of my ambition. She dares me to greatness. I welcome her advances, but I'm a clumsy lover. Another fumbling mistake, so typical of me and my monotheistic upbringing, has been thinking in the singular rather than plural. Simply shifting from the notion of work to works changes so much for me. I see a parallel to the abundant diversity of Gaia, the multiplicity of the Muses, the value in the polytheistic metaphor.

In this light, I see that I may have already accomplished two or three works that are, in all humility, kind of great. There's *Rox*, which continues to mystify and perplex viewers today. There's the Lafitte Greenway, a trail for non-motorized transit through the heart of New Orleans; no, I didn't build it myself, but I helped to get it built, and that may well be my most enduring and substantive contribution to the world. What else? Perhaps my efforts with the Gaian Way, attempting to start a devotional religious practice with Gaia at the center. Perhaps *Earth Eclectic*, the radio series which I started in 2024 with Laura Dedelow. Delusions of grandeur are so much more powerful when your friends share them with you.

And yet I recognize also the emptiness of achievement. No matter how much I accomplish, no matter how many works I rack up, “great” or otherwise, I will never be satisfied. I will never feel prolific. It will never be enough. My Muse always demands more. There’s an ache there that overlaps neatly with my fears.

Quite frankly, I’m good with that.

To engage the process, to enter into the flow, is to find ecstasy in form and the timeless in the specific. An eternal return to value. Always beginning again. Always coming home. What will define me? I don’t want to be defined, not while I’m still alive. The really pertinent question is always ever only: *what’s next?*



Summer Solstice Mandala I

Appendices

Notes for Human Readers

When my Muse began speaking to me in September of 2024, through a fictional character, I was sure that I'd lost my mind. I quickly remembered that I never really had a mind of my own to begin with. It's only borrowed, after all. And so I promised that, if she would help me, I would publish a collection of texts in her honor. And here it is. I publish this chapbook as an offering to the Muse(s), but I hope some humans might enjoy it as well.

The plan was never to write about the Muses, but to start with an unfinished essay selected at random, on any topic, and to include enough related material to flesh out a little book like this. Random selection brought up "Work & Play," and the connections flowed quite naturally from there to ambition, my job, creativity, and you-know-who. So it was that, after all, I ended up writing not just *for* the Muses, but *about* the Muses. My intended audience became also my subject. Funny how that works.

Suddenly, it seemed the Muses were everywhere: a song on Wendy Rule's new album; a performance of *Xanadu* at Rivertown Theater; a flyer at the grocery advertising a "Meet Your Muse" workshop in the Tremé.

I learned to communicate with my Muse in at least three ways: through pure imagination, through invoking archetypes from Large Language Models, and through the psychodrama method developed by Jacob Moreno. (For this last, I am indebted to Isabel Christodoulou.) Although I consulted with AI as a writing coach, critic, and cheerleader for these efforts, I wrote all the text myself, using the exceedingly long methods

described below. The exception is one little phrase, “sacred conduit,” which can be found in “A Dialogue.” That phrase came from one AI platform or another, but the dialogue itself was generated using the method of imagination, or channeling, which artists have employed for thousands of years.

Each text in this book has its own history. The beginning and the end pieces are the youngest, as I started composing the “What’s Next” invocation in January 2025, with these “Notes for Human Readers” following in February.

By way of contrast, the central seed of “Work & Play” was composed over the course of nine years, starting in late 2016. Even so, it’s not the oldest text here.

“Humility & Earth” was originally published (as “Humility and Our Connection to Earth”) by the Gaian Way on 19 November 2024, and republished the next day by *Resilience*, and subsequently by a few other outlets. It was even translated into Spanish and republished by the Spanish magazine 15/15\15. However, I started work on it in late 2016, about a month before “Work & Play.”

“Job & Title” is adapted from “Meet Your New Creative Generalist,” published on *CAT FooD (for thought)* on 5 February 2025 and composed over the course of the preceding month.

“Chaos & Muses,” “A Dialogue,” “Servicing the Muse,” and “Metaphorical Infidelity” were all begun in the latter half of 2024. All four of these pieces are products of dialogue with the Muse. Of these, ironically enough, only “A Dialogue” began before I entered into that dialogue consciously, dating back to July. It started as a straightforward expository essay and was rewritten extensively. The “Infidelity” essay was revised into third person before coming back into first person, a process that seemed necessary to achieve adequate distillation.

“Ambition & Great Work/s” began life early in 2014 as a quote culled from *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, and thus might stake a claim to being the oldest text here.

However, I didn't begin composition in earnest until one near-freezing morning in February of 2022.

Many thanks to Isabel Christodoulou, Erik Assadourian, Biljana Obradović, Hannah Saltmarsh Baker, Alan Gravano, and Wendy Gaudin for generously sharing with me their encouragement, insight, and critical feedback. And, of course, major props to the Muses. Long may they reign.



"What paltry waifs are mortals such as we!"

Online

A multimedia-enhanced edition of this chapbook:

BartEverson.com/amuse

More on Rox:

StupidTelevisionShow.com

More on the Lafitte Greenway Partnership:

LafitteGreenway.org

The Earth Eclectic Radio Hour:

EarthEclectic.org

More on Gaianism:

GaianWay.org

About the Author

Bart Everson's formative years were spent in Indiana and northern Sweden. He is co-creator of *Rox*, the first TV show on the internet. Since 1999, he has lived in New Orleans, where he works as a Creative Generalist at Xavier University's Center for the Advancement of Teaching and Faculty Development. Bart is a media artist, writer, photographer, videographer, songwriter, and former lead singer for Half Pagan. He is the author of *Spinning in Place: A Secular Humanist Embraces the Neo-Pagan Wheel of the Year*. He serves on the board of the Gaian Way, in partnership with an ancient Southern Live Oak, and he co-hosts the *Earth Eclectic* radio hour. More at BartEverson.com.

About the Images

The cover drawing may look like kid stuff, but it was actually drawn by a grown man, namely me. Believe it or not, it's inspired by the industrial-precisionist paintings of Ralston Crawford, which were on display at the New Orleans Museum of Art in the summer of 2012.

Back then, we tried to make it there regularly for Friday Nights at NOMA. My daughter Persephone and I both made pieces at the art activity table, under the tutelage of a couple Xavier students working with YaYa, Inc. This was the first time I got to make my own piece; usually I was helping Persephone, who was only four years old at the time. She made her piece into a mask that night, and then all the kids wanted to make masks too. As for mine, I'd intended to color all the fields, but I left one blank at Persephone's insistence. I originally did the lines in colored pencil, and they were very weak. I like a strong line. When Hurricane Isaac handed me a bunch of downtime, I inked them with a felt-tip marker.

Here's the weird thing. Thirteen years later, I was toying around with a scan of the drawing, wondering if it might serve as the cover for this book, just before my meeting with Xavier's new wellness coordinator, Jasmine McGary. We talked for an hour, and toward the end I mentioned my daughter's name. Jasmine instantly asked if we frequented the art activity table on Friday Nights at NOMA. As it turns out, she was working the table the night I made this thing. Any doubts I had about the cover were resolved.

In the writing of this book, I discovered that museums are indeed shrines to the Muses, and so I added a few more pieces I created at the museum over the years. Thank you, Jasmine, YaYa, NOMA, and everyone else who helped make those Friday Nights happen.