

RAHUL PRASAD: Our first speaker is a mixed-media artist whose work has been featured in galleries across the world, including New York, Japan, Qatar, France, Spain, Italy, and Hungary. He is a co-founder of the Newark Print Shop in New Jersey and holds a master's degree in Design from the University of Washington. Here to talk about the meaning of creativity and creative problem-solving, please welcome Samer Fouad.

‘COMFORT KILLS CREATIVITY’ – SAMER FOUAD

SAMER FOUAD: I want you to think of when you were in grade school and your teacher asked you to make a drawing. I'm sure many of us started the same way all young artists do. We just painted the Mona Lisa and called it a day.

I'm sure if we were in person, I would've gotten at least a chuckle out of the audience but alas, we must find different creative solutions to deliver this talk.

We all remember our grade school drawings. We'd draw the sun on the top corner. Some clouds. The Windows XP meadows. Birds that looked like they were abstracted typographic M letterforms and, maybe, some flowers or stick figures of your parents and dog.

But there's a point in every child's life where creativity fleets. The freedom to express oneself or be creative begins to shrink.

Maybe it was someone telling us our art was bad? Or "hey what's that supposed to be?" Something happened to each of us where we decided being practical was better than being creative.

Not to say you can't be both, because I promise you, you need both. But there's been a time when all of us have said "I'm just not *that* creative."

I consider myself a creative, but there are times when I hit a wall I just can't climb over. What I find is that the wall was built by my own comfort. I was comfortable with my style of thinking, my style of making, and my style of being.

Now I am going to tell you a number of stories today that defined how I arrived at this specific moment in time. Like each of you I have specific checkpoints that changed my perspective on how I would continue moving forward on this journey we call life. What I ask of you, is for you to think about certain uncomfortable situations you have personally gone through and think about the creative solutions you came across to solve them.

What does it mean to be creative? Whenever someone mentions creativity, we automatically think of the arts, but I don't believe that's true. You can find creativity in any discipline.

Every concentration uses and implements creativity to solve unique problems within that field. We especially see it in the sciences and the humanities, but if you look at any concentration, you will find creativity as an aspect of discovery.

To be creative is to allow yourself to become a tool for an outcome. To allow yourself to become the medium for which you are creating.

I've been a skateboarder since I was seven years old. Some of you see a city as an urban landscape, I view it as a concrete playground. You see a bench; I see something I can slide on. You see a stair set; I see a launch ramp. You see some grass in between two surfaces, I see a gap I can jump. To see these fun obstacles, I had to rewire my mind to think creatively.

I had to tell myself, "how can I use this landscape to my advantage to maximize fun?"

I'd always be skating with my camera at my side... It was the age of Myspace, LiveJournal, and Xanga. The ability to instantly share what you were doing with friends and strangers alike.

This might seem normal now, but back in the early 2000's this was revolutionary. I'd upload my work to various platforms and get instant constructive criticism or compliments on my compositional considerations.

I was skateboarding in Newark, New Jersey taking photos and going to local skate spots. I was meeting my mother at Rutgers University, when we stumbled into an art gallery on campus. A senior graphic design portfolio show was on view.

Behind the reception desk was an Egyptian, like myself, so my mother started chatting her up in Arabic and telling her what I was into. As all mothers do, my mother gassed me up and told this college student that I make the best designs ever, taught myself photoshop, and have a Flickr account.

While I was staring at this branding revolving around a chicken and an egg, this student, Deana Haggag, offered to walk us into the office of the graphic design professor on campus.

She introduced us to Ned Drew and his wife Brenda McManus. They end up inviting me to a portfolio review.

Being 17 years old at a college portfolio review in a three-piece suit while all the other students are covered in paint and looking like the stereotypical artist, I somehow got accepted into the program.

Fast forward a few months. I'm hugging my parents goodbye outside my dorm. I enter the elevator and Deana Haggag is there. She remembers me from the gallery and, in Arabic, says "woah you got accepted here! Are you going to major in graphic design?" I excitedly replied "Yes!" She tells me she's on her way to her new gallery and asks me to tag along.

Without hesitation I agree and we're walking down the street. She's telling me about her business partner, Rebecca Jampol, and how amazing she is.

An hour or so later, Rebecca shows up on her yellow vespa and sees me painting the walls of the gallery. She asks who I am. Deana replies, "our new intern" and just like that, in my first few hours of college, I got my first internship. Class hadn't even started yet! Now, if you remember the chicken and egg branding, I was staring at in the gallery, that was Rebecca's branding for the gallery I was currently painting. FULL CIRCLE. Rebecca, Ned Drew, and Brenda McManus end up becoming my best friends and greatest mentors in design, art handling, and gallery management. Without their guidance and mentorship, I wouldn't be the creative I am today.

I was extremely lucky to learn design from these incredible mentors, and not everyone always has the opportunity for such guidance. They'd, ultimately, set me on the path I'm currently on. But, not without many mistakes. My lack of financial comfort forced me to be a creative in all aspects of my life.

Have you ever had to decide between rent and food? Student Loans or the credit card bill? Each one of us has had to use some level of creative problem solving to find solutions to extremely uncomfortable situations.

Upon completing my undergrad, like many students, I took the first job that I was offered. Student loans were calling, and I decided that I would work as a designer in beauty and skincare. I ultimately felt like I was lying to an audience through design.

So, getting laid off from that job was the greatest gift. So, I continued to apply to low-tier design jobs. I worked in pharmaceuticals for a bit, I worked in "fashion." *I am using air quotes because I was putting pictures of people's pets on men's ties*, and I did some user experience and user interface work.

But any job I'd receive would ultimately end the same, "I'm sorry Samer, we can't offer you a full-time position at this time due to financial constraints. I'm afraid we'll no longer be needing your freelance services."

I was once again jobless and making ends meet through my own creative means. I'd push a shopping cart through Central Park, selling my own work for a dollar per print.

The crazy thing about selling prints is, no one will say no to buying art for a dollar. If you ask 300 strangers, a day, if they'd like to buy some art for a dollar, usually 299 of them will say yes. I was making good cash back then, but it was never enough to cover student loans, rent, and groceries.

To make these prints, I'd been going to a friend's studio where she'd host an event every Wednesday called Print Club. It was a printmaking club where you'd pay \$10 and be able to print all night long using her personal ink and paper. It turned into a beautiful artist collective, where we'd inspire each other to make more creative, outlandish creations and then we'd critique the craft and discuss overall techniques used to make the work.

Print Club was a space where creativity oozed out of the studio. Or, at least, it was until the shop under the studio caught fire, and we lost our space due to structural issues.

The city of Newark boarded up the building and deemed it unsafe and that's when our non-profit journey began.

I'm telling you this story because when your back is up against the literal wall, the only direction you can move is forward. We were extremely uncomfortable, losing our studio and the storage of all our equipment created a creative opportunity for our collective to problem solve. The print shop ended up finding a new home, got its 501c3 status, and grew into a large organization. But we never changed our mission statement, and we never changed our price of \$10.

Our goal was to support the fine art of printmaking by providing affordable, accessible workspaces, educational programming through classes and workshops, and exhibition spaces dedicated to the fine art of prints.

My business partners Lisa Conrad, Stephen McKenzie, Jacqueline Cruz, and myself never wanted to change what the print shop meant to the community nor change how the community interacted with it. Our goal was always affordability and creativity.

Flash forward five years to 2017, I am 28 years old. I had a studio to make my work in. I had an office dedicated to my job as a university educator. I had a non-profit that allowed me to interact with my community. And, I had freelance work installing art in major museums and galleries in NYC.

I was telling visual narratives in art shows, exhibitions, and residencies across the globe. I amplified voices. I told stories through music and photography. I designed for companies I believed in. I was an art handler who assisted with exhibition design, and I was a creative driven by my own beliefs and narratives.

So, I thought to myself, what an amazing time to step down from all these responsibilities and career paths and try something new. And that's what I did. I applied to grad school while I was literally on the floor of Palazzo Monti, an artist residency program in Brescia, a city in northern Italy, and began to purge my belongings. My business partners continued to run the print shop without me, and I pursued other means of creativity.

I was getting too comfortable with my lifestyle and felt all my creativity fleeing. I fell into a routine that led to many mistakes that I learned from greatly.

I needed something new, somewhere new. I applied to the Royal College of Art in London and got in. I thought "man this is it! You're moving to London, you're going to say things like quid and in-nit, and you're going to make the sickest work!" Instead, I chose an unexpected route and took an offer that better fit what I was looking for out of grad school and decided to attend the University of Washington in Seattle. Looking back this was the best decision of my life. I received my master's in design there. The University of Washington reminded me of that young designer who was just excited to make and learn. It gave me the freedom to express myself and experiment through various facets of design I had never been exposed to. It continued to allow me to teach and learn from my students while giving me a job, financial support, and health insurance.

Now I am by no means a rich man. To be honest, I've never really had money. I'd work 80 hours a week just to survive. I remained uncomfortable for what I consider all my twenties to stay creative and appreciate what I have now in my thirties. I am currently a visiting assistant professor of design at Pacific Lutheran University in Washington state. I am arguably comfortable, but I am using the discomfort of the pandemic to think of new ways to make work and to engage with my community. Discomfort has been a constant in my life, but so has curiosity and drive,

Drive to make. Drive to succeed. Drive to always push forward, learn more, and to experiment more.

I allowed my creativity to assist me in problem solving. I allowed my creativity to guide me towards critical thinking.

I want you to think of that childhood drawing again and think about when you thought "I'm just not creative."

The ability to be creative is in all of us.

Sometimes, we just have to reorganize the chaos, look at the problem from a different angle, and think outside of the parameters of "normal."

We are currently living in the most important time of our lives, a time when we need to solve the ever-growing issues of today with creativity, regardless of subject matter. I believe we can solve large systemic problems with creative problem solving and critical thinking.

Our future depends on allowing ourselves to become uncomfortable. To get our hands dirty. To experiment and not be afraid to fail. To have difficult conversations and push society forward.

Now I don't have all the solutions to these problems, but some of you specialize in the wicked problems of today. How will you use your creativity and ingenuity to move forward? How will your last mistake guide you to your next experiment.

Our best teacher is our last mistake, so do not give up after you've hit that creative block.

Do not stop learning from your mistakes and educating yourself along the way.

And, when you've absorbed that education, pass it on to the next person. The hoarding of information will never allow our society to flourish.

But in the meantime, do not be afraid to break the bounds of normalcy and remember, comfort kills creativity.

Thank you.