

THE CREATIVE CURRENT

Un-common sense, social smarts and creativity



Robert Cowan.

PHOTO BY REINA COWAN

By Vanessa Coplan

One of my New Year's resolutions is to expand upon our current understanding of creativity; to move it beyond the confining definition as it relates to an art form, and into the broader context of lifestyle, thought patterns, how one sees and lives in the world with oneself and others. We can use creative understanding and expression as a lens through which we see the world and, like a kaleidoscope, allow for all the various patterns, colours, shapes and light to pass through our eyes, into our brains, our heart and move towards a greater place of tolerance and awareness. Assert inventiveness and imagination into your life and ... see what transpires.

Rob Cowan

My neighbour, Rob Cowan, is a guy who lives very much according to this kind of creative "creed"; he embodies a life that combines a purposeful, intention-based, socialistically engaged existence.

These creative elements forge a road less travelled. A quiet one, and one that is not followed by many. It is a path that is ripe with originality and shedding some light on it may pave the way for others who are also interested in living according to the beat of their own drum.

Rob grew up in different countries before landing in OOS with his family of origin at the age of 11. His dad was a linguistics professor and brought young Rob and the family to various parts of the world, including Beirut, England, and Rhode Island. Looking back on this type of unconventional up-bringing, Rob remembers one of

the greatest impacts being the social smarts he acquired learning about different kids in different cultures, and how to adapt and navigate within different parameters.

When he came home to Ottawa after living abroad Rob realized he was "not mainstream." Four different schools in four years highlighted his differences from other kids his age who had a more conventional up-bringing.

Rob sees the impact of these early years abroad as fostering the ability to "See people as they are/who they are, to not make false assumptions about people," and "to get into the other person's shoes."

In the working world Rob was able to develop these insights further. Working as a manager at Druxies Deli was a learning curve. He had one co-worker who used to go into abandoned building sites and make fires, for fun. Rob realized that this deviant behaviour manifested out of boredom and restlessness so as her manager he gave her more responsibility and she excelled. Rather than call her out, or judge her as incompetent, Rob spent the time figuring out what she needed; resentment and people mistrusting her led her to act out. Rob felt it was a 'no brainer' in how to help her; treat others the way you would want to be treated and things turn around.

Rob attributes his unconventional approach to management based on his early experiences in having to think for himself. He didn't go along with

things because someone told him too. He formed his own opinions and made his own way. In Rob's view, "if you're mainstream you're not creative because it's all been done before." Pioneering, looking and working outside the box breaks a mold and allows for relationships and interactions to take root in novel ways.

Another employee at Druxies was scared to operate the brisket cutting machine. Rob knew she could do it. He told her he would help her if it got busy, only to appease her anxiety. It did get busy and Rob let her handle the machine herself. She didn't even realize she was doing the very thing she feared, effortlessly, because someone had believed in her and trusted she could do it. Rather than micro-manage her, Rob applied his un-common sense to her fears and she flew.

Rob enjoyed working in the service industry because he got to learn a lot about people. He understood what being that new employee felt like, much like what it felt like to be that new kid in a new school, in a new city, multiple times.

Rob's most recent incarnation is working on home renovations part-time for a neighbour across the street.

In looking back on his past Rob surmised, "Customer service fit me, but working under management was a no go – the ambitious ones who were not competent and did not work for me." And on the heels of that came, "I not one for blindly following rules." While not exactly a regret, Rob did comment on a missed career opportunity he might have had as a successful teacher. In speaking with Rob, and living on the block with him for many years, it is clear to me that Rob is a teacher; he leads by example. He models behaviour based on his own clarity of direction and purpose, a deep understanding of the others, and novel approach to problem solving.

Here's to a New Year filled with helping ourselves and others in creative and innovative ways.

Vanessa Coplan is an artist, art teacher, creative coach and a resident of OOS.



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