

Defining Creativity S1E20: Mary McMullen transcript

Debbi: Hi, everyone. Thank you for joining me for Defining Creativity, a podcast that explores where and how creativity is found. I'm your host, Debbi Ponella, a creativity researcher, cultivator, and devotee. When I launched Defining Creativity back in 2022, my goal was simple, to talk with people from all walks of life and explore where creativity lives, how it develops, and what it means in their lives.

What fascinated me throughout the conversations was not merely how different their answers were, but also how they often seem to circle back to the same questions, and the themes that emerged.

For this final episode of season one, there's one person I particularly wanted to sit down with before moving forward, to help me reflect on those questions, as well as to add her unique voice to the conversation. So today, I'm joined by...

Mary: I'm Mary McMullen, and I guess I'm going to define myself for the purposes of this podcast as a recently retired early childhood education professor from Indiana University. I held that position for 32 years, but more broadly, I consider myself a child development researcher, a teacher educator, a play advocate, an author, and I guess that pretty much sums it up, but more might emerge as we talk, Debbi.

And let me just say, I'm so excited to be talking to you today because we've had so many discussions about creativity and how it overlaps with, influences, is influenced by, play, which is one of my primary areas of concern.

Debbi: Thank you, Mary, so much for being here. I really appreciate it and I am also excited about this conversation. So, you've spent your career thinking deeply about children, play, learning, development, teaching, all these things you've just mentioned and environments that help people grow. You've taught generations of teachers and scholars, and one of my great privileges was getting to learn alongside you and ultimately co-teach a doctoral seminar that explored the intersection of play and creativity.

And that's where I'd like to start our conversation, because after spending your life observing children and studying play, I'm curious, what do you think children understand about creativity that adults often forget?

Mary [2:53]: Oh, that's an interesting way to think about it. What they understand about it. I don't think they think a lot about it or reflect upon it, especially the young children with whom I worked and studied.

I think they live it, they experience it, and to me Debbi, you've probably heard me say this, but you can't have creativity without play, and you can't play without creativity, so I find those two things inextricably linked. And so, the thinking that goes on with a child is just the notion of living this free expression of choice-making and doing something that doesn't have a goal, but in doing that, they're always creating the next step. They're always creating something to... say they're involved in a drama, a dramatic play with a child, a friend.

The two children together are co-creating a scenario, right? They're co-creating something that they want to play out. And in doing so, their mind is whirling, their mind is spinning, their mind is going... Okay, it's almost like an improv that you see on a stage, that one child does or says this, and that feeds into what the next child is going to say, 'yes, and...' They don't say it explicitly, they don't say, now I'm going to co-create with my friend, but they live it, they just do it.

And to me, they are going toward not a goal, because I see play mostly as non-goal oriented, non-end product oriented, but they are living a process. And so that gets me to think about how I understand creativity, and it's harder for me to ever put words in the mouth of a child about how they understand creativity, but the way I understand it is, it's a process that is always ongoing if you allow your mind to go there.

So, number one, the child or you or I need time to allow our minds the freedom to expand and to think of the next possible scenario and what would make this fun or interesting, or yeah, what would solve a problem. So, if we allow them, and that's yet another bigger subject, if we allow them the freedom to play, they discover what creative spirit they have within themselves.

Debbi [5:50]: Absolutely. And in what you've just said, you hit on so many, if we break it down, the characteristics of creativity, that all of these adults that I've just interviewed and spoken with are trying to find

and reflecting on and seeing how those things apply in their lives, whether it's in work or personal or whatever it is. And so right there, there's the value of play and creativity all rolled up in one. Let's dive into a couple of the things you said, though, because they are themes that people kept coming back to over this season.

[6:26] First of all, the process. The process piece is sometimes hard to see, sometimes hard to understand as we're caught up in life, in our work, in what is the product we're putting out there. When I originally started back in grad school interviewing people, I actually had a question that I would always ask. Which is more important, process or product? And a majority of people came up with process, because that's where the learning happens, that's where the innovation happens.

Any teacher I've ever interviewed always says process. You do get to the point where you're talking to someone who, like I was talking to a Broadway director, and you're putting something up on stage that people are paying a lot for. So, that's where that sort of can eek in that it's a product you've got to show, or if you're trying to become the next big entrepreneur, what is that product? But really where the living, and you said, "Live it. Do it." I say those things about creativity, live creatively, live creativity. So, I, too, think the process is just of ultimate importance.

Mary [7:49]: Can I add to that? I don't mean to say, and you gave a great example—if you're a musician or an artist up on a stage or a dancer or whatever. You do have in mind a goal and that's that good performance that will please my audience or will please me, because I've improved upon how I did it the last time. Or I finally mastered that bar of music, that it trips me up every time.

So, unlike little children who are just playing, like I spoke of before a dramatic play episode where it's one thing after another and it feeds on each other and they co-create some kind of fun thing, I think what I have learned about creativity is, yes, the process is the most important, but I often have an endpoint or a goal in mind.

I don't always get there, because along the way you take creative turns and it might shift the goal, but there's something in mind that I want to accomplish. Whether that's teaching... You've seen me teach Debbi. I always come in with a plan, a goal, an idea of what I would like to see unfold and happen and how I would like to engage my students in that process. But I still have in my mind—okay, I want to make this point, this point and this point, and I want to make sure they know that, or understand it, or feel it in their own way. But I want to incorporate those ideas because that's my goal for this two-hour seminar or whatever.

[9:30] So, there are two things about that, and I know I'm jumping around a little bit, but I mentioned engaging the students. I think, whether I'm talking about those two little three- or four-year-olds that are engaged in dramatic play or I'm talking about the Debbi Ponellas I had in a seminar, I see these things as relational. For the most part I am not engaged in the process by myself. For the most part. There's a different kind of creativity I might engage in in my own thoughts and challenging myself and that kind of stuff. But for the most part as a teacher and teacher educator, for me it was I played against... with—is a better term—the people or person with whom I'm working. So, it's a collaborative co-creation of the outcome.

So I might be, and it often happened... I go in with a set of plans for teaching and we become derailed, or I might have seen it in the past as being derailed, by an idea or a something that just happened in the news or somebody's life—maybe they have an appendicitis attack in the middle of the class—or whatever, and so things shift, and we have to adapt and move together as a group in care and compassion and respect for one another, but it's a process that happens together. So therefore, what I'm saying is, there are goals in a process, often, especially in our adult lives, and it often is in response to an environment in which there are relationships that are occurring. Stronger relationships, sometimes new relationships, but it's always in response to the people in the environment... for me.

Debbi [11:37]: Relational is one of the things I have circled in the various transcripts of the different episodes over and over and over, because it is... Creativity is living—with people, with our environment, with ideas—and there are so many subcategories to that. One of the key ones that I saw us keep returning to, though, is, within that relationship, listening. So, when you were just describing how to co-learn, which is sort of my vision of teaching for myself, but yes, you do have an expertise in it, and what you're sharing, that needs to be relevant to the people who are learning it. I think that no matter what it is, you're going to learn it, you're gonna digest it, it's going to help expand your understanding, whether or not you agree with it, can embrace it in different ways,

but that that element of relating to whether it's a person, whether it's yourself and your own feelings, whether it's your environment, whether it's your culture, I think that listening piece is so vital to be able to be creative yourself, to be able to see creativity in others, to be able to then relate to that and expand, coming back to that living. But I think there's that personal relationship with whatever it is, and it doesn't have to be the person you're listening to, but just listening.

Mary [13:09]: I think that's so important and it's something that teachers need to... well, we all need to, but teachers especially need to understand that you are not just conveying information. You're not just stuffing somebody's brain with something. They come in with their lived experiences and their opinions and their needs and their desires and their beliefs and you are entering into dialogue with them. But, Debbi, let me step back for a minute because that takes confidence. You can't just listen or just be in the presence of somebody. You have to be confident in thinking that you have something to contribute to the relationship.

So, for me... You know, I think I said I taught for 32 years as a professor at IU. The first couple of years were a little rough for me. I think any couple of first couple of years for any teacher or probably any profession I don't know, are a lot rougher than subsequent years. And by rougher for me, it was learning that I am in relationship, that it's not just me coming in with my stack of notes and my... Back then it was transparency sheets, full of facts, but it was, "Okay. Who are these 10 to 20 people in front of me?" And there's where that listening comes in, but also that confidence that I don't have to just speak to them, I can speak with them.

And I think this goes back and I may be getting off the track here a little bit, but that notion of confidence and seeing myself as a valued contributor. And here's where I, in part, understand creativity, that I have value to add to our conversation. But it took me a couple or three years as a professor to see that because I never saw myself as creative. And I see that confidence and relational stuff as part of the co-creation, the co-learning. So where did I lose that confidence? Because I started out as one of those little kids who played with my friends and did all those things that I so value in play, and then I lost it. I lost that notion that I had something to contribute to my friends in a play scenario or to contribute in a creative way to us digging our holes to China. Younger listeners won't even know what that is, but we used to dig giant holes in the earth, say we were digging to China.

[16:12]: Where do you lose that spark, that imagination that you could even do that? You could dig to China? To me that happened around second grade and as I studied child development in my doctoral program and after having kids, I kept coming back to that. When I was age seven or eight, I thought I could do and be anything. There was that magical thinking perhaps, but it was so joyful and so freeing and so hopeful. And then that gets squashed out and I remember... I was thinking about this last night in anticipation of talking to you. When did it get squished out or squelched out in my life?

And I remember inviting my parents and sister to come see an art show that the local community arts whatever was doing and I had a little picture that was featured, where I had drawn a scene of a little barn and house with snow and trees, and in my mind it was the most gorgeous, beautiful thing and I kept building it up to them and in myself: "It's so good, Mom. It's so great!" And then I got to the art show and realized, in comparison to everybody else's, mine looked, to me, terrible, or really wanting or not as I had built it up in my mind.

And later, as I studied child development, I realized or found it's well documented. It's around that age that we lose that, either through social comparison or your art teacher saying you're not very good at art or whatever might happen to you, you suddenly realized I can't be or do anything I want to do. I'm not the fastest runner. I'm not the best drawer. I'm not the whatever. I can't necessarily grow up to be an astronaut or a dancer. I'm not able to do those things, and so to me, that's one of the saddest things.

If you had asked me 15 years ago, Debbi, if I was creative, I would have said no. No, I'm not creative. So, think about that. From age 8 to whatever, I'd be in my mid 50s then, I did not think of myself as creative. So, regaining that ability to see other things as creative. My thoughts are very creative in terms of when I have a goal, an endpoint, a desire. Like, I wanted to write a book. All my colleagues seem to be writing books. I don't have a book in me, I can't do that. And I realized, yeah, I can, and I have something I want to say and I can say it, and I can create scenarios that might be compelling for people to want to read, and I can do these things, and so that's one thing I'd just like to say that confidence has to go along with this relational thing, whether the relationship is with the environment or other people or the materials... You certainly have a relationship with the music that's on your score, you know.

So, what are those things that are going to scaffold me, are going to be that play partner for me that I bounce off of? For you it's probably your music and for you, you may play with something, you may sort of even master it,

but aren't you always—I'll throw this question back to you—aren't you always trying to see if you can improve how you did that phrasing or that way of expressing yourself in your music?

Debbi [20:20]:

Oh, absolutely. There are no two times that I ever play anything or say anything or do anything that will ever be exactly the same. If I'm working with a phrase in music, as you mentioned—I play with the nuance or texture, color, articulation—all of which affect the production of the sound. The same thing with a phrase that I write or how I interact and speak in a conversation. If we had this conversation tomorrow, we might say the same things, but in a different way.

And going back to the concept of relation, relational, I have always preferred chamber music or orchestral music or playing in the pit to just solo performance, and a lot of that is that relationship with the music, with whoever composed the music, and who I'm making music with. That communication where whoever's sitting, on the other side of the quartet, is breathing with me. We're breathing, we're communicating, we're talking through music and the way that that can transcend words or ideologies or... we get to a basic human expression, that is communicating on a different level.

And I think that deep connection transfers to communication and expression between people, in conversation. Or, even when I'm in nature. It's not just oh that's a pretty sunset or trees or a cliff or mountain or whatever. It goes into all my senses, the hearing, the feeling, all those things and I'm always looking for more connection and meaning, right? I can't see a dandelion by itself in a lawn and not think about its loneliness or it's standing up as unique in its surrounding. You know, like all those things are connecting. So, I think... Yeah, for me, it goes beyond music.

Mary [22:08]: Can I return to something you just said?

Debbi: Sure.

Mary: And it just hit me as so... I'm sure I've thought about this a little bit, but you said, “when I'm playing the music.” Listen to just that word play and playing and you're speaking about it in context of some kind of orchestral piece or maybe a quartet or playing even with a pianist or something. You are playing. So, you and what I spoke about earlier that when we play, we'll say playing with the go back to the two kids playing some kind of little dramatic scene, we play off of each other.

So, there's this harmony and there's another word you can use with the nature scenario you were talking about or with the musical scenario or with the two children creating something. They're doing it in relationship. They're doing it in harmony, but so many of the words that we use, like I play with ideas when I'm writing. I play with the thoughts and if I allow myself freedom, like I would in just playing, I allow one thought to lead into another thought to lead into another thought and allow them to just go to some natural place.

So, I love that we use the word play for children's play for this free and joyful expression of self through activity with self or mostly with others and we use it in terms of performance, performance art. You know, any thoughts about that?

Debbi: Absolutely. It is used in so many things. Play ball.

Mary: Yeah.

Debbi: Play, you know, there's so many things. That playing aspect and getting back to the communicating and to letting things develop. Right? And also, I love that you brought in the harmony because harmony isn't just in music, but what goes with harmony is tension, right? You have tension and resolution and it can be in a story. It can be in the made-up creation that these kids are doing or you've talked about improv like, “yes, and...” There's more to it. It's not just simple. If it's simple, I don't mean to judge, but it's kind of boring, right?

Same thing with music. We want that tension, but then how do we play with those notes or play with those feelings or play with the story and the scenarios and get beyond the tension and find the resolution or, does it not resolve? Is it open ended? You know whether the storytelling and the play and I think that's so important as an adult and as a member of the global community and as a human to be able to be okay with some of that ambiguity. Again, this is one of the characteristics of creativity, right? The ambiguity. What's coming next?

[25:08] Having the curiosity again, let's apply it to almost every conversation I've had on this podcast and beyond and let's apply it to those kids, right? So, I think all of that play and as you had said, if we allow them the time, if we allow ourselves the time to breathe and really not just be so driven and goal oriented, but to look at those hues and shades of other things and allow that tension and the ebb and flow of life and creativity and play to be part of how we live.

Mary [26:07]: You know one thing you said when speaking about tension, that made me think of the primary way that I've discovered myself as a creative person, is that I'm a good problem solver.

Debbi: Mmm-hmm.

Mary: So, everything is not harmonious. Everything is not just going along fine and, as you said, sometimes that could be really boring. Like you, you've never played a piece of music the same way twice, I've never taught even the same class with the same syllabus, is inevitably different because of those relationships and things and because of tension points that might come up and having to work through some things. So, I think tension... Think of the two little children playing that I mentioned before. Inevitably you're doing this dramatic play and a monster comes along or the bad guy comes.

You know there has to be something that allows you to think through a way to get away from the bad guy or to defeat the monster, and so the more practice we have doing that as little kids, the more we understand how to resolve those human tensions, human ambiguities to be, you know, sorted out in real life. Real life, I think children's lives are absolutely real, but I mean in our future adult lives.

Debbi: Absolutely.

Mary: Speaking of that tension, it's that tension that might cause, and here I put my child developmentalist's hat back on. So, we speak of humans as being highly adaptable and our minds are always seeking balance. We don't like to be thrown off. Our minds always try to come back to some kind of balance. We speak about assimilation and accommodation, and so when I'm given some kind of information that's pretty close to something that I've done before or thought about before, I just need to assimilate it and maybe generalize it to this new situation, which is good and that's a creative process too, but it's not a very challenging one. So, through accommodation, my brain wiring has to change.

So, accommodation is something that's not that close to what you knew before, or a way of doing something that you've done a million times. It's something that is a brand new, curveball thrown at you to make you think in a different way, and that's that tension I think you're talking about, too. It's if my mind has to restructure itself neurologically to respond to something, I am sparking neurons in my brain that needed to be fired, maybe. They needed to be refreshed. They needed to be challenged, and that's when the excitement begins, you know, or occurs. It's those 'aha' moments, you know, the "Oh I get this now" or "Oh, I see a solution now" that was different than the same old thing we've been doing.

So that whole way of thinking about the brain as learning through assimilation, and that's fine. It builds little, tiny, small steps as you go along and ways to generalize and accommodation where you have this cognitive dissonance, this thing that you come up against a little bit of a wall that you have to break through. And those are the exciting, joyful things.

And it happens again with that little scenario with the two children playing. If now somebody throws into the play scenario a monster, when you've been going along just fine in your little princess castle, oh my gosh. What am I gonna do, you know? And that's that moment of joy, I find them joyful, to allow for that refreshing of the brain. yeah, and some of it when we're talking.

Debbi [30:14]: Absolutely. When we're talking creativity and the characteristics, lots of times we talk about adaptable, adaptability, flexibility, all those types of things. And that's where I think a foundation of having different experiences, hearing different ideas, different cultures, diverse perspectives... When you come smack up against something that's, I've never experienced this, then your brain can go, oh, but there's this and there's this, and then make connections that will just springboard you to the problem-solving or adjusting or... coming back to that idea of just being aware. And just soaking up different experiences and different ideas. And can we say listening? Listening to and being present where we are and allowing ourselves to develop and broaden in all of those ways.

Mary: I liked your word 'allowing' ourselves because I'm thinking about what you just said and what if you come up against those things and you build the brick wall. You build the box around yourself that does not allow you to listen and to listen actively and reflectively, not just hear, but to listen and think again, 'aha.' I get where they're coming from now. I may not agree with it, but it allows you, you're allowing your brain to think in a different way instead of saying, oh no, new idea, weird belief, I'm going to ignore that. So, I'm not going to listen to that. And I think that is so detrimental to creative thinking and to growing as a human and to learning and to those relationships we talked about.

Debbi: And if you put those brick walls around yourself all the time, where's the joy? It's not going to get through the brick. Right?

Mary: No.

Debbi: Back to that. The joy is going to be on the other side trying to knock it down.

Debbi [32:28]: Thinking back to a couple of things, there's been so much in this conversation already and it just thrills me to have it. But you were talking about in a classroom how you teach the same material, same syllabus and it's different every time. Part of that is the same awareness and the same, you allowing people to be who they are and who they are becoming within that and allowing yourself to change and learn and accept those differences and perspectives within it that would allow you to even go off and diverge from a specific intent. And so, I know that because I've experienced it, and I know that that's how I want to live and that's how I want to learn. And so, there are a couple of things I want to touch on within that. And first of all, you're talking about having confidence. Well, in order to have confidence that one of the prime characteristics of creativity, I keep coming back to those, is to be able to be vulnerable.

I know when I'm teaching or when I'm part of a group or learning or whatever my role is in this environment, I need to be vulnerable in order to allow an environment where others can be vulnerable as well. And so, I think that that's something you do so well. It's something I strive to do. But how do we get that? How do we cultivate that? Again, putting yourself out there, trying to, as you referenced before, understand your voice has import.

And this is another theme that keeps coming back, finding your voice, letting people, whether it's somebody cultivating it in others or finding it for themselves, understanding that if you don't say and you don't share who you are, the world is worse for it because it will never be said. No one else can say and be who you are.

Mary: Oh, I love that, Debbi. That's such a great thought. You know, when I think of your word cultivating and vulnerability, I think that you have to cultivate that vulnerability, that ability to put yourself out there. And again, the first two or three years of teaching, I was not good at that. I once had a very dear colleague of mine say, "Oh, Mary, never say you're sorry" and I thought, well, that's ridiculous. You know, I'm often sorry. And I'm often sorry to say I'm teaching a class, and I realize maybe I said the wrong thing, and I can tell by the look on somebody's face that I've said the wrong thing and I have to step back and say, "Gee, I think I said that wrong. What were you thinking when I said that?" You know, have a conversation about it and be out there and be vulnerable. And that's the way I grow. This isn't, I'm not teaching just to teach a bunch of people so that they grow. Although, yeah, that's my desire that they grow and change in ways that are beneficial to them, but I'm doing it for myself. It was my career and I loved it.

And so I need to feel that I am growing and changing. It was my art. It was my playing of music. It was my painting or my dance. You know, so I'm always wanting to grow and change. And the only way I can do those things to cultivate that vulnerability, if I want to stick with that, is to cultivate reflectivity and the ability to reflect.

And so I learned very long time ago, early in my career, and I loved this, and I can't tell you exactly who it came from, but a teacher colleague said, every time you leave the classroom, ask a bunch of questions. She was a preschool teacher and she was talking about herself as a preschool teacher. And she said, every time I leave the day, I say to myself, why? Why did that work? Why did I respond that way? Why didn't I think about this? Why does he respond that way to the way I treat him? Could I change that? Could I do it differently?

But notice I said, why in a positive and negative way? Why did that work? I give myself credit for the things that I've done well, or that had good responses, or that were successful. But I also say, why did that not work? Why did that fail? In other words, I have to be willing to embrace failure, because it's through, I'm not talking

about major failures, I'm talking about things that just don't work. That things that I, where I overstepped, or didn't step in enough, or whatever, embrace those failures, because it's through that, that I learn and grow.

And I think that's all, let's go back to what I said about this all being a process of creativity. So, that feeds into the creative loop to say, as I'm thinking about the next class, or the next year, or the next whatever, I think about those things, what I learned from this not hitting the mark. So, even if I do, and I didn't always, but even if I do use the same syllabus, I go back and I think, this didn't work for a large segment of these students. I need to change it in this way. So, not everything will be successful, or wildly successful. Some things will just be fine. But asking, why did this work? Why didn't this work?

Debbi [38:14]: Absolutely, that fear of failing stifles so much creativity. And another thing that you said that it gets to me, it's like this whole concept of not wanting to be wrong, because as one of the guests this season said, one of the things that we do from early on is start grading people. And when grading people, it's punishing if you're wrong. If you make a mistake, you get a worse grade. And that's where that learning can be. And I do understand, certainly the discussion about grades or not, and like how all those things work. I know it's its own thing. But in order to encourage people to find their voice and understand how to ask questions and be okay with not knowing the answer instantly or be okay with not getting it right. Well, what did work, what was right or why did that not sound right or mean the same thing to someone else? There's so many layers of that.

Mary: You know the thing that I am most happy with in retirement is I never have to give another grade to anybody.

Debbi: Yeah.

Mary: I go back to that notion of squelching the creativity of a young child. I think the thing that we do to them, you know, when we throw them into primary grades right away, they're getting grades for all kinds of things and we learn that system from early on, and then that social comparison stuff like I told about with me at the art show, coming in, thinking I did so well and seeing how I quote 'failed' in my mind in comparison to others, and I think we set ourselves up— our whole system is set up that way— and so we learn throughout our lives.

I mean, we have teachers who will do terrible things to us— unintentionally I hope, but you know, giving us a bad grade for something that we put our whole heart and soul in and we just don't understand makes us feel diminished in some way. I remember my nephew coming home from first grade many, many years ago with a non-smiling face, a frowning face, drawn on a paper and it said bad coloring, bad coloring.

And I was with that nephew this summer and he's now in his mid-40s and he still goes back to that incident when he was a six-year-old boy about how that devastated him. And just think about that. These things that teachers do or we say to little kids and college students...

Debbi: Mmm-hmm.

Mary: ...that diminished them in their own minds and therefore squelch that sense that they can be creative and have some creative thing to contribute to their lives or to society or to their friends. It's just so sad.

Debbi: Yeah, and I ran into that in my doctoral program. I came in as a creativity researcher and in a class that was about becoming and how teachers become, when I said something to the professor, I got the feedback: "Don't use the word creativity, because nobody will take you seriously." And okay, I had thick enough skin that I could just put that into the category of what it was.

But it is that idea of looking at creativity as other or as something not important, when, for me, everything I do and see and the people I interact with, I see that creativity, I see the value of it and I think that reflection piece that you talked about, you know, looking at yourself and what is my voice, how am I creative? In fact, even going back to squelching those creative things and the comparison, rather than having kids find out "you're not good at this" or "you're not creative," if we can flip that on its head and say, how am I creative?

Mary: Yes, yes.

Debbi: You know, just let's go there and reflection, I mean it, it changes the view right, and then the cultivation of it, once you understand that, then that can change the whole journey and where it takes you and it allows you to go beyond the normal pathway or the well tread path maybe, and just generate that value and that unique input and contribution to this world, that that each person has.

Mary: It makes me think of two things Debbi. Howard Gardner— and I hope I'm attributing the right person here— but, you know, he's the multiple intelligences guy, and we have different ways of knowing and learning and those kinds of things. I think that this quote is from him, that we need to stop measuring how smart kids are and instead look at how are they smart. You know, and it's very similar to what you said. Stop thinking about creativity in such a way that we quantify it and then find people lacking.

Debbi: And people find themselves lacking, which, and that's not okay. One thing I've learned, is a major barrier to creativity is not just talent, but a lot of it is identity, right? I don't believe I'm creative, so I won't allow myself to explore that, because there's that failure, because I have to be vulnerable to try and to have who I am put out there. But it's that identity work. And so many of the people, even throughout the season, we talked about, it would come back to that and finding those moments of reflection to see those things.

Mary [44:20]: Okay, so here's one of the reasons I love talking to you and have loved talking to you through the years. Your vision of creativity is very similar to my vision of play. And we're similar also in this way, that throughout my, you know, 40-year-plus career, either working with young children or teaching about and studying young children, the very ability to use the word play in what we describe has ebbed and flowed and come in and out of favor. And it's, no, don't talk about it as play, you're diminishing the work of children. Don't talk about play this way. Oh, no, we need to reclaim play. Because I've gone across four decades, I've seen the ebbs and the flows, and let's just get beyond that.

Debbi: Right.

Mary: You know, play is a part of life. Life is playing, whether it's with ideas or with sticks and balls and digging to China or whatever. Sometimes we play on a grand world stage, sometimes we play on the local theater, but to be shot down for using the word creativity, or play, it's like, that's my word. And this is how I'm using it, and you need to listen to hear, I would rather that whoever that professor was, would have come back with, well, how are you using the word creativity, Debbi? Can you explain that more?

Debbi: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. And honestly, I was trying to make connections with him and with that. And that's neither here nor there. I, I do find that it's, it's a lacking of wanting to understand. It's, you know, putting these things in a box, right?

Mary: It's that brick wall. He/she built up that brick wall between you right away and probably diminished your capacity to fully engage for the rest of the semester.

Debbi: Yeah.

Mary: I mean, that's what those walls can do.

Debbi: So, one thing I wanted to make sure to get into with you a little bit because of your expertise is this idea of play, right? And even back to thinking of those two kids, you know, people think free play or whatever, it can be related to a blank page in front of an artist, writer or whatever, you know, and that no restriction, like you're just free to whatever. And a lot of people in the season talked about creativity within structure and how valuable structure is. So, I was thinking about that in regards to the structure of play. And I'm thinking that even those two children we've been referring to this whole time, creating this scenario with the dragon and they're creating rules as they go. I'm a this, you're a this, there is a dragon in our world. Having some structures in place are really important. And I think that they create them as they go sometimes.

Mary [47:35]: Yeah. I like the idea of creativity within a structure. I used to think of myself, again 10-15 years ago, as a very concrete, sequential person. I recognized I engaged in a process. I recognized that often that could be free-flowing and lead to different endpoints. But I always thought of it as contained by a structure. To me there was safety in knowing my boundaries. And, oh, I can't let my thought go there, that's ridiculous. Or, no, that's irrational, or that's not a possibility.

And then I learned to free my mind a little bit. I do agree there is still a structure, though, that contains me, and that might be my moral and ethical values now. It might be my desire to be kind to other people and give them the benefit of the doubt, if you can consider those structural components, and I think I do. Let's think about the two little children that we've been talking about. For them, there is safety and boundaries that have been created for them and around them that have allowed their play to flourish.

So, there are adults nearby if one falls down and gets a boo-boo. There are limits to the yard size or the back garden that they're allowed to play in, or to whatever physical environment they've been given. There are limits,

even things like weather. I grew up in northern Michigan mostly, and playing in deep piles of snow, and that would create a structure, a boundary, a way of living out our play.

And there are times that little children will say, maybe not in words, but, you've gone too far. No, the dragon cannot do that, or the prince cannot do that. And they create their own rules as they go. That's how we learn rules often, and what our social norms are.

But I believe in structure. But I also believe, let's go back to the brick wall that I may put up. I believe that over the years, I've dismantled a lot of that brick wall, and I refuse to put more bricks on it. So, I think a lot of the structure is defined within our own norms, beliefs, ethics, those kinds of things, and a spirit of kindness and respect.

Debbi: I think that's a beautiful image, too. You've got this brick wall, you can let it stop you, you can climb over it, you can go around it, or you can dismantle it and understand it. I really love that. The idea of the play needing structure, I love that. It's something I think about with creativity, too. Play needs a frame, and the kids that you were talking about immediately started establishing rules. The play creates the structure, and then the structure creates the game, and the game creates possibilities, and then those possibilities generate the creativity.

Mary: That's where I started, I think. If I didn't say it strongly enough, I'll say it now. They are inextricably connected, so they feed in a reflective loop upon one another. So, the play has to start with something that ignites it, that sparks the desire to engage. I keep talking about playing with somebody, but you can also play yourself. Even as a child, you're drawing, and you're imagining, and you're telling yourself stories, so it begins with something.

You initiate the play, you start the thing, and you're constantly doing this assimilating, accommodating, creating together, if you're with this other person, or you do it yourself. And so, I think that the structure, let me get back to that for a second, also comes with what resources are available. So, the play, the creativity, feeding upon one another in a continuous loop, but within the boundaries of what resources, what environment do I have in which to do it. So, it's like play and creativity inextricably combined with a circle around them of the environment and resources that allows it to proceed.

Debbi: And with those structures and those limitations in some ways, that creates resistance, and then again, that's that tension that you can resolve, and that gives it all the interest. I love it, and I'm seeing this as that within those boundaries, the children aren't removing the boundaries, they're actually inventing them.

Mary: Yes.

Debbi: Yeah, I think so.

Mary: Yeah, that's interesting. They are inventing them, but often to dismantle later on. So, the boundaries they tend to create on their own, not the physical ones around them or imposed by resources or whatever. The ones that they build themselves within the evolving rules or processes within the game, are often dismantled or torn down or replaced by something else. And this is where experimentation comes in.

So, they'll decide they don't like the dragon, or they defeat the dragon, but what are the repercussions of doing that? Now the walls of the castle have tumbled down, how are we going to get the village to come together to recreate that? Or there can't be a dragon, because dragons don't exist. Oh, what if it's a bear? You know, something like this. So, they will, themselves, in a way that is enviable, I think, recreate rules and expectations within the play that allow for different types of scenarios to evolve.

And if only we could do that as adults, you know, negotiating wars or negotiating struggles, you know, to let some of the old rules tumble away and replace them with something new.

Debbi: Absolutely, that structure or the gaps in it is what create the meaning.

Mary: Yeah.

Mary [54:26]: Creativity and play can allow the magic of the brain's processes and ideas. It makes you feel good when you've created a solution that works, makes you feel good when a previous thing or idea failed, you

overcome that the next time. Those are magical to me moments that make me feel inspired. It makes me feel I have something to contribute, and therefore it allows me to be more confident the next time.

Debbi: Absolutely. Nicole Johnson, with her definition of creativity, she said, “I define creativity as a practice that leaves space for magic and catalyzing moments.”

Mary: Yeah. And the catalyzing moments are the ones that make you leap forward. They're the ones that create that accommodation, that cognitive dissonance that maybe throws you a little off balance at first, but that off-balancedness makes you right yourself and move forward, right? So, if you're stumbling and about to fall, but you pull yourself up and you go forward, you feel good about that. You feel, I've moved forward. I've done this well now.

Debbi: Speaking about moving forward, this is the final episode of season one of the *Defining Creativity Podcast*. And before moving into a new season, I want to take a moment and reflect on the amazing guests I've had the opportunity to speak with thus far in my quest to define creativity

[Montage of Definitions of Creativity by the Season One guests]

“I think creativity is just taking everything you have and making something new with it” (Dev Meenagh, E13); “Regardless of the scope or the size of it, doing something that is new to you” (Todd May, E11); “It's going beyond normal” (Terry LaBolt, E16); “Creativity is a resilient and adaptive response to my environment” (Louise Neilson, E7); “Creativity to me is about either producing something from yourself or drawing something from others that creates a level of positive energy for either you or them (David Hale, E10); “I would say it's the free-flowing expression of our own human experience. You have to not be too distracted in order to tap into it, but once you know it, it's a superpower” (Tatiana Kolovou, E4); “Bringing to life something new” (Harold Popp, E19); “I think creativity is an authentic expression of yourself, and I think my idea of creativity can come in many forms” (Carlene Quinn, E14); “Creativity is also observing things and keeping open to possibility” (Mary Losure, E3); “Creativity is a unique element expressed by individuals who innovate and communicate in a distinct manner and it often results in a motivation or responsive outcome” (Jonathan Phillips, E17); “Truly where God meets us” (John Holzhüter, E5); “Think outside of the box to cause learning” (Esther Kataate Namakula, E18); “Creating the most fertile environment possible for children and adults to experiment, to take positive risks and experience the wonderment of an experience they're part of creating” (Cindy Ripley, E6); “I think of it as identifying all the choices, and then deliberately or consciously choosing the one to achieve the result you're looking for” (Michael Menapace, E9); “Taking something and making it into something else. It's that simple” (Brooke Ivey, E12); “I think that everyone has creativity. It's a question of how you define it and how they define it for themselves and how it gets supported” (André Watts, E2); “I define creativity as a practice that leaves space for magic and catalyzing moments” (Nicole Johnson, E1); “Being able to live and explore within a world that allows us to play in our true self.” (Megan Elyse Fulmer, E8); “Creativity is huge... but for me, creativity is a process for finding solutions within a system of constraints and arriving at a pleasing outcome, whether that's artistic or practical” (Malcolm Webb, E15).

Debbi [59:03]: So, Mary, as my final question for this episode and season, I would love for you to add your voice and perspective—how do *you* define creativity?

Mary: I feel like aspects of my understanding and definition of creativity are woven through much of what I said. First of all, I'm going to challenge that creativity is, in my mind, separate from play. They're inextricably linked, and it's a process. So, they're inextricably linked in this process that they feed on one another within the mind.

So, this thing is going on in our minds, and I play with an idea, I create new scenarios, I create resolutions, I play with more of the ideas about those resolutions, they're going back and forth. It's one thing for which I don't think in English we have a word. And I would love to hear from people from other language and culture systems if they have something that better combines those two notions.

So, play and creativity refresh the mind, the body, the soul, and they bring a person to new levels in which something changes or allows for a different result, and we can finally see something that we could not see before, and something that had remained elusive in our minds, or in our thoughts, or in our lives. It doesn't have to be a grand painting, I've realized that since the third grade. It doesn't have to be that great painting, or the writing of the great American novel, or the performance of some piece of music.

It can be the little and big 'aha' moments that we all have that cause us to have delight. So, I think play and creativity bring delight and joy, and even if it's for a short moment. So, play and creativity are a part of a whole that I cannot find a word for, and I do not believe can be easily defined. So, I'm leaving you with the idea that my definition is so insufficient, but it's my thoughts on play and creativity right now.

Debbi: And that's how I feel. I've said so many times that I think there are as many definitions of creativity as there are people.

Mary: Yes.

Debbi: Because it's really, again, that relational question of what does it mean to me? Who am I as a creative being? How does it manifest itself in me? In fact, I end every episode by saying, and I truly mean this, meanwhile, be open to possibilities, make connections, and embrace your creativity, however it manifests itself in you. And I just think that that is what it's all about.

Debbi: Well Mary, this has been an incredible conversation, as I knew it would be. What a fantastic way to wrap up season one and look forward to future exploration. Thank you so much for being such a positive light in so many people's lives and for all that you have done and continue to do. You are such a special person and I wouldn't have wanted to have this conversation with anyone else.

Mary: Well, thank you, Debbi. I look forward to your future work in this podcast and, hopefully, maybe in a book.

Debbi: That's a wrap for Episode 20 as well as Season 1, my discussion with Professor Emerita from Indiana University whose research and writing focused on the role of play in early childhood education and development, Dr. Mary McMullen. I'm so grateful for Mary and for you, the audience, for tuning in. Additional thanks to August Fackler for composing and recording the music. Join me next season as I host an inspiring lineup of people from all walks of life to talk creativity and continue to explore where creativity lives, how it develops, and how it brings meaning to live. Meanwhile, be open to possibilities, make connections and embrace your creativity however it manifests itself in you.