

Defining Creativity S1E2: André Watts transcript

Debbi: Hi everyone. Thank you for joining me for this episode of *Defining Creativity*, a podcast that explores where and how creativity is found. I'm your host, Debbi Ponella, a creativity researcher, cultivator, and devotee. On today's episode, I'm excited to share an interview I did back in 2019, a fascinating discussion with a musician who, not atypically, begins with the idea of being *not* a creator, but instead, a *re*-creator. However, creativity oozes out of every sentence, no matter the topic. So, without further ado, here is my discussion with...

André: André Watts, musician- pianist...

Debbi: Thank you so much for being here and taking the time to talk to me about creativity.

André: Thank you.

Debbi: I want to start with simply having you share how creativity is relevant for you in your profession.

André: Well, it's interesting, the phrase creativity, because I've... I'm actually moving away from it, but I've spent a lot of years in my life trying to make the differentiation, which I've believed to some degree and still do a little bit, between creative artists... Now, we're only talking about musicians in this area. Creative artists and re-creative artists. You know, Mozart was creative. I hope that I'm re-creative when I'm playing Mozart.

Now, I don't think you can be a re-creative artist unless you have creativity, but a little unfair, since we already were talking before, and we sort of, I think, came to the conclusion, you know, 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. How we encourage that. You know, I teach, and so it becomes a little bit narrow, but the pianists and so students come and play, and of course, you know, you look at the music, and then you don't necessarily need creativity to play the right notes in the right time. You need some education about how to read this and decipher this.

[2:27] But then, mostly, I try to make the main thrust, it's the thing that interests me the most, and what I try to talk to them about is... examine. You need to dig a little bit to find your real creativity, which is, well, I know that that's loud, and then get softer, and this is really, really quiet, and then, over a short period of time, get really loud. Great. Fine. And I can do that physically, and I can make the piano do that. What does that mean? What kind of get loud? Is it threatening? Is it martial, as in soldiers? Is it full of anxiety, as opposed to just aggression, threat? Whatever. That's basically some kind of core sense of creativity in music making. You try to understand what the composer meant, based on what's on the page, and then you examine your reaction to it, and your reaction is your creativity, and then you try to project that. So, I say to people, you know, when people say...

[3:51] You know, he wrote that you should get quieter here, and man, I really just always feel – you know, when you have students who are that open and willing to talk that way – I always just feel you should get louder. And I tell them, please, don't stifle that. You recognize that, objectively, as far as we know, if this is correct printing, your response does not fit this. It doesn't mean it's wrong, but you should find out, so what's the quality in this getting soft that you can combine with your inner reaction about it should grow, it should get larger?

You know, getting soft doesn't necessarily mean smaller. It could get soft and expand. That's really, in a way, for the ultimate in creativity, for the recreative performer. After all, you know that you hear music and evoke some kind of response, beauty, et cetera, et cetera. If you want to play that, you need to examine and find out how to – recreative performers are very self-exploitative, self-exploitation.

You use the most intimate, emotional response to music, and then you try to read and say, well, he wanted this louder, softer, this accent here, and try to do that and make that meld, merge with your feeling, your

individual response. When people talk about, well, you know, I want to have something individual to say, I don't bother to argue with them about that. I say, okay, I'll tell you what. You go listen to the recording of so- and- so, and I want you to imitate it perfectly. It's impossible. You couldn't. You couldn't, even if that were a desirable thing. This proves your individuality. It proves your uniqueness. Now, use it. Exploit it. Anyway, so creativity. I think, basically, in music, for performing, that's what creativity is.

Debbi: [6:05] I think that is always a challenge, learning to find your own voice as a performer. You are, as you said, taking what someone else has created and recreating it from your own perspective. I think there's a certain amount of confidence necessary to own that, to feel that you get to be the voice of someone else's creation. It obviously takes technical ability, but how do you learn to develop that personal connection to the music and feel confident to state it in your own unique way?

André: So when I was 14, I had to learn the Franck *Symphonic Variations*, and naturally, yes, I won that competition with the Philadelphia Orchestra with some other piece. But then, it's not fair, actually, when I think about it. I didn't think about it at the time. So I got to play with the orchestra, but I had a choice. I could learn Strauss *Burleske* or Franck *Symphonic Variations*. Don't ask me why. They're not exactly equivalency pieces.

But anyway, and so my teacher, I'm sure it wasn't really me, I think my teacher and my mother, anyway, they picked the Franc. So I would go to my lesson, and I would play. My teacher would say things, you know, this should be louder, this should be blah, blah, blah, blah. And then I would go home, and I would practice. And my mother would say, no, no, no, don't do that, you know, it should be this and this. And sometimes they were exactly opposite.

So I got very good at tilting in my teacher's direction during the lesson time, and if my mother was home when I was practicing, I would tilt in that direction. But because of these differences, I think it actually helped me think for myself. And sometimes, I don't have specific places, but you know, I remember, sometimes I would think, I don't like either of them. And besides, it says... I was pretty good about that, even when I was young, you know. It says here, so maybe I, doesn't that mean blah, blah, blah. So I went through my life like that.

[8:24] When we got to the performance, I played what I thought, which was some of this, some of that, and some that was purely, you know, my own fabrication. Yeah, we got lucky, the performance was very successful. And when it was over, because it was successful, my teacher said, just like I told you. And my mother said, good, you did just like I told you. And so that tells you something also, which has not to do necessarily with creativity, but success makes people then say, oh, you agreed with me, I agreed, blah, blah, blah.

If it's not successful, then people then would tend to say, well, you know, you should have done, you didn't do everything I said, and if you had done everything, this would have been successful. So anyway, but that was, I think, the beginning of my ability to... hear other people opinion and, you know, take some of it really to heart, but to sort of think for myself, and creativity is the thinking. They go hand in hand, especially with, you know, performing music, you have to think about, why this time he wrote that, this time he wrote that, is that an accident, or if it has meaning, boy, you better underline that meaning, and that's your creativity at work, thinking, analyzing, blah, blah, blah.

Debbi: [9:51] And I think developing that ability to listen to other people's interpretation, and then figure out what to embrace as part of your own understanding or opinion, is valuable far beyond music.

Debbi: [10:07] Another thing that has occurred to me as you've been speaking, is the idea of collaboration. As a performer, you come to understand that there is an interplay with an audience, collaborating, if you will, to produce the atmosphere, the experience in its entirety. Even as a soloist, you aren't, in a way, performing alone.

But what you are talking about seems to be a collaboration with the composer. This gives it a totally different perspective. I think of collaboration in chamber music or ensemble playing, where it is so important to listen, interpret, take different ideas, and you are talking about taking all of those things, and putting it into a solo performance.

André: Uh-huh.

Debbi: You're collaborating with someone who can't talk back, except through what they've already done. It takes an entirely different view of communication and of a dialogue.

André: [11:48] Somebody said to me, but many, many years ago, and there was some discussion, probably at a dinner, something about... Well, when he plays solo, it's fine, but when he plays concertos or chamber music, it's not. It's that he can't listen. And somebody else said to me afterwards, you know there's no such thing, right? You're listening or you're not listening. That's all there is. Listening or not listening. And I think that means even in conversation. You know, invariably, first of all, I think it moves back and forth.

Someone gets worked up and starts to dominate the conversation, but then they said their piece and then somebody else comes. You know, this give and take. But you know that when you have conversations with people... It's not mean, it's not venal, they're just incapable of listening. And you know, they don't hear anything you're saying because you're talking and they're thinking... And then like, sometimes, if they're not too bright, you know, you don't even finish your sentence.

They say, you know, I... You know, it's quite fascinating. So, listening. It's like trying to listen to what the composer says to you and you have to repeat for some people if you're performing. Same as when you listen to your colleague and you're playing.

Debbi: [12:41] Or I might suggest that applies to any kind of colleague or any kind of interaction. Listening. Even when you think what you're saying is right or more important. Listening and truly hearing the other person allows you to more fully consider your own perspective—allow for change, whether significant or more nuanced. Or merely be more convicted in what you're saying. Or your belief.

André: It's funny that it would come up. I just had to, well, happily, coached a Mozart a violin piano sonata. And a violin concerto with the piano, you know, playing orchestral part. I had to talk about... You know, subsidiary material in either instrument is just that, and vitally important. It's not like... woomp poom poom poom poom poom woom pah... okay, who cares? Somebody else got the tune. No, no, no. Tune not going to work if poom poom poom poom isn't good. So, you have to really listen, and everything important, everything meaningful. And if it's meaningful, it's in its right place. You know, not everybody has the top line in an aria. But you know, when you hear a quartet from *Rigoletto* and whatnot, it is actually your limitation of listening that gets in the way of hearing all four lines.

Debbi: [14:33] So I want to talk a little bit about the cultivating of creativity throughout your lifetime. You've talked a little bit about your interpretation with music, but how did that develop? Where did that confidence in expressing yourself come from? I know you had a variety of experiences and even environments when you were young. You were born in Germany and moved here shortly after when you were...

André: Eight... to Philadelphia, by the way.

Debbi: And how does an eight- year- old in Philadelphia have his creative development encouraged?

André: [15:07] I went to a lot of different schools. I went to parochial schools and public schools. A year and some months to a Quaker school. I guess as far as inner life and thinking and recognizing difference and whatnot, no one got in my way, got in the way of my thinking about... You know, it's like comparison shopping of ideas and ideals and ethics and whatnot. And first of all, early recognition that people are saying such different things with the same good intent. I mean, yeah, there's perceived bad intent also.

But when you have the experience, without particular damage, of having many different people and that you have a conviction are good and mean you well, say different things and you think, wait, wait. And it changes your... If nobody is over on the sidelines saying, don't listen to that person because this is a bad idea, don't listen to a bad idea, this is a good idea, take that. If nobody does that to you, you get a little wider and you get a little more... You get better ability to listen.

You have more patience and you're willing to mull over what has been said and actually give it time to be said completely, rather than when somebody says something and the first couple of words you think, bullshit, I'm not... I don't accept that. Well, of course you have the internal visceral reaction like, really? But you're listening, you don't shut down and say...

Debbi: Not a knee-jerk reaction that *you* have to be right. First of all, you could actually be wrong. But there's also a possibility that they're not mutually exclusive. The other person being right doesn't necessarily mean you're wrong. And being open to other perspectives and possibilities is really key to creativity and developing creativity.

André: [17:35] I had a great experience with... When I was 23, I played with Sergiu Celibidache in Israel and my mother was there. And in those years, the Philharmonic had a car and driver. And he would... He took us, I don't know, to Bethlehem, you know, all kinds of things. Aside from the concerts. So, I'm not saying too much, the driver's not saying too much. My mother and Celibidache are talking a lot. Because he's a very... a very charming guy. Brilliant, but psychologically manipulative. And consciously so.

And, you know, aware and trying to pull everybody's strings. So, he's talking and... I'm not really paying attention, but he says something, catches my attention. And I say, Oh, really, Maestro? Really? I don't quite get that. I don't... You know, I mean, I didn't mean it as a challenge. And he said, "Well, I explain to you. In the first place... Second... Third... Ergo, so and so." And I said, in response to that, I said, "Well, you know, I never thought about all those things. Sure, of course, it makes sense." "Aha! Too easily influenced!"

[19:12] So, I mean, for me, this was a wonderful kind of... in the sense of taking from other people and listening to other people. But it's not necessary to agree or disagree, and sometimes neither works vis-à-vis the other person anyway. Celibidache, who was, in his way, a genius, and I'm so proud that I got to play with him, and played, actually, rather decently... um... It didn't matter whether you agreed or disagreed. It wasn't enough for him, because if you agreed, that means... He took it to be that you're equals. He couldn't have that. There has to be something wrong with your opinion and whatnot. I always think about this when we talk about people saying something, being influential, and then giving reasons, backing up their opinions and whatnot, and then, you know...

Debbi: Interesting.

André: He was fascinating.

Debbi: [20:18] It becomes obvious, hearing you talk, that you manage to make the best, or take the best, and learn from the various situations in which you found yourself. And that brings me back to environment again. It sounds like, in many cases, you did have a supportive environment and felt free to evolve without your creative exploration being stifled. Let me ask you this, though. In your experience, what kind of environment best facilitates creativity? And, on the flip side, is there anything that particularly stifles creativity for you?

André: Whenever I played with a conductor whom I thought was not a good person... I mean, perception. It's my perception. It doesn't mean it's right. But in this narrow instance, this narrow communication, somebody who was shitty to me, somebody who was condescending, or somebody who was, perhaps vis-à-vis me, neutral in behavior, but... I mean for me, a negative person in the sense that, "Please God, don't ever let me be like that person." I could never play. I could never play well.

You know, sometimes okay, superficially, maybe externally, it was all right, but it was never good, and I could never... If, which doesn't really work, you know, maybe if I could have played and never looked up,

and sort of denied, been in denial about who that was, maybe I could have been a little bit creative. But basically playing and looking up, and it's like death. And it blocks all creativity. So that's when I was at my least creative. That's stifling to me, the company of people who are not simpatico.

[22:20] Yeah, okay, sure, it's tougher if you play with musicians who are not very good, or didn't learn their part, or, you know, something of that nature. But that doesn't actually stifle creativity, it just makes the performance less good. Creativity and the sense of performance with other people is a oneness, it's a kind of coming together. And really good musicians, I played with conductors, and we, well, obviously, you know, if we were having this kind of discussion, I liked them, and I guess they liked me well enough. Disagree. Disagree. Man, you know, really?

You really think it's got to go that slow here? It's just poco ritard, come on. You know, that's good. Disagreement. Well, normal disagreement, healthy disagreement. Here we go with definitions again. But anyway, disagreements that have no hint of lack of respect or understanding. Disagreements... "Really? Are you sure you really believe that? Come on, man." You know, that doesn't stifle creativity. I'm just convinced, which means that I already put, you know, the curse on it.

[23:37] On some superficial topic, I feel I could have a perfectly fine discussion, civilized discussion with somebody like Mitch McConnell. But if we started talking about ethics, belief, spirituality, there's no way I could talk to that guy. That's maybe my shortcoming, fine, I get it, but I have an opinion and I have a belief of understanding that person that, well, nobody who is actually... I don't care practicalities. We all, you know, we bend things, you know, to proceed in life in practicalities – but nobody could do that and actually have a high spiritual development. And I don't really care if he goes to church every Sunday, I don't know that he does, but I'm not talking about that, it doesn't interest me.

That's a person who stifles creativity for me when I encounter something like that. Something about creativity for me must have to do with the comfort and the non- effort and belief in the humanity of the other person, even when they don't agree. "No, that's not how that Mozart phrase ends there." That's okay, you can be really – I mean, first of all, maybe you're right and maybe Mozart would agree with you, you know, not with me, so that's okay. It's the non – it's the... yeah, the biggest stifler for creativity for me is my perception of a negative personality.

Debbi: [25:29] Yeah... Talking about personalities, I want to move the conversation to a huge personality, one which I can only imagine was influential, at least in part, to your creative development along with musical. You worked with Bernstein, performing in the Young People's Concert at the young age of...

André: 16.

Debbi: In contrast to the negative personality and lack of respect you referred to with stifling creativity, just watching and listening to his first introduction of you shows an incredible amount of respect.

[Recording of Leonard Bernstein introducing André in 1962] And now we come to a young man who is so remarkable that I'm tempted to give him a tremendous build-up, but I'd almost rather not so that you might have the same unexpected shock of pleasure and wonderment that I had when I first heard him play. He was just another in a long procession of pianists who were auditioning for us one afternoon, and out he came, a sensitive-faced 16- year-old boy from Philadelphia, looking rather like a young Persian prince, who sat down at the piano and tore into the opening bars of a Liszt concerto in such a way that we simply flipped. He is named André Watts, and that mixed-up name comes from having an American father named Watts and a Hungarian mother who met each other in Nuremberg, Germany, where Andre's father was stationed with the United States Army. I love that kind of story. I like to believe that international marriages produce highly distinguished human beings. At least this one did, as you are about to hear, when André plays for you the Liszt Concerto in E- flat major. Because I admire his playing so much, I'm going to be selfish and take the pleasure of conducting for him myself. Let us welcome with warmth and pride Andre Watts.

Debbi: [28:07] Can you tell me a little bit about that experience with the lens of creativity as the focus?

André: I only knew Bernstein for about 10 or 12 years. I never played with him again after I was 26 years old. And you know, he lived a long time after. He was important in my existence. Those were the great years. So, creativity. I got to watch him rehearse with teleprompter, and you know the Young People's Concerts, there were two filmings, and he wrote his own stuff. He never used the same adjective twice. He would struggle to find a word. If it said magnificent, he would find another word. Fabulous. Incomprehensible. And I thought, oh, I mean, I'm not so sure that intellectually I got it. I mean, not on a deep level. Superficially, sure, I understood what was going on. But I think, subconsciously, I realized. This is the creativity of the moment. This is how he keeps it alive. You're saying the same thing again and again and again and again, which is, if you're lucky, if that's what you want and you get a career, and you know, you play the same concerto... If I'm lucky and I stay okay, next year I'm going to play Beethoven 5 about, and this is not counting repeats in the city, like seven different cities in the second half of the season. Well, for some people that's like, you know, going to be like rote.

It's never been a problem, and it stems from Bernstein, it stems from that self-push to be creative in the moment; to make, renew everything. You do it again, it's new. It's not just, "Well, okay, that worked, I'll say that again." And that was interesting, because not necessary.

[30:00] The other one was creativity, it's a little bit to the side, but not really, because it stems from the drive to create. So I, it was in the fall of '62 Young Peoples, and then in '63 I substituted for Glenn Gould, and they called me on a Tuesday, and concert Thursday night, Friday afternoon, and when I got there on Wednesday, the next day after they called, they said, "Oh, and by the way, concert Thursday night, Friday afternoon, Sunday night we record." I never made a record before, I didn't know.

Lots of repertoire from him, with the Philharmonic for that night, and my concerto, 17-minute concerto, in four and a half hours, actually four hours, and no overtime, and this is the point of my story. So we did the concerto, and he said to me, "You never played the same wrong note twice, so don't worry about anything, everything's covered." I'm not sure I really even knew what that meant, because I, you know. And he said, "So we're going to go from here," three quarters of the way through the piece, "to the end."

"So, no matter what you play wrong, don't stop, because if you stop, we have to stop the session. We'll go into overtime. It will cost a lot of money. Please don't stop." And I said, "Yes, Maestro. Of course."

We start, and about, I don't know, 8 bars, 12 bars in, he starts singing at the top of his lungs, and ruined the take. There was no audience. Trust me, the members of the New York Philharmonic were not going to be impressed. He wouldn't ruin something like that to impress some kid. It was, I understand it was a little undisciplined. Yeah, yeah, okay, it's a mistake, but it's a mistake that resulted from an unquenchable, an un... A totally real, non- fake desire for achieving something, getting something, to be creative. And so for me, yeah, yeah, you know, he had lots of mannerisms and all that, but ever after, when people said, "Oh, it's a little showboat, isn't it?" I thought, "You don't have to like those mannerisms, but trust me, they're not fake. He really... That's what he is." And that was very strong for me about being creative, which is not so simple.

[32:25] The refusal to be afraid to look like a fool in the process of going after something. The absolute every time you utter, and in his case, yeah, I know, stick, but you know, utterance. It's a musical utterance from him... The force of music. Every time it is... It's life and death. There's no phoning it in. There's no... I don't know. That, for me, those were big creativity lessons. Plus the fact that then, you know, he talked to me and he asked me, he said, "Well, I know you can play, but can you talk your way through a Beethoven sonata?"

Because of course, that's what he was so good at; explaining music to, you know. I forget which Brahms symphony, but he did, and it may not have been a Young People's Concert, it may have been the previous Omnibus stuff or whatnot. Suddenly he comes up and he says, "Well, basically, this is Shortnin' Bread."

And then he does this and then he puts the Brahms symphony together and you think, "Really? Where'd you come up with that?" But that kind of, the power of deciding, having the intention to be maximum

creative at every moment. It took me a year and I played, I played E-flat Liszt like three more times and then I played it, I don't know, four or five times. I couldn't understand why it wasn't just never as good. I practiced, I played better, I know I played better, I practiced harder and harder and after a year I suddenly realized, "Yo, dummy. It's him."

Because he, this force of, and it's not, yeah, of course, force of personality, big alpha person and all that, yeah, yeah, yeah. That's true, but it's really more than that. It's the belief, the creative urge that you stoke, that's a good word, you stoke that impulse and creative thing, so it's a conflagration that really never goes out and never... It takes over everything. People around him played better. You did your stuff better because of his presence, his pull, the magnetism, and it's not just superficial B.S. magnetism, deep musical conviction.

Debbi: [35:04] Which do you find more important, process or product?

André: Oh, process, process. Absolutely, process, much more important than result. The pleasure is in the discovery. It's a very fleeting, I'm not saying it's not great, but it's a very fleeting kind of happiness and besides, it's also... Process is really unlimited, product is limited. Process, first of all, process goes on forever.

If one could make that kind of, what do you call it, quantification of greatest performance in the history of all time, which is very silly, but if you really have been doing process for that, and it came out very well, probably you know all the holes that are there, that is... "Next time, next time. I'm going to do this and that, and I want to actually... I want to see if I can get..." It's more process than anything, I think. I don't know.

Debbi: And that unlimited process enables you to keep growing and learning from all your experiences, even mistakes or misfires. That's another aspect of creativity and development that goes way beyond just being a musician.

Debbi: André discussed this concept on an episode of "Mr. Roger's Neighborhood" on an episode on making mistakes that aired in 1987.

[Excerpt] Do you ever make mistakes? I mean, I know when I learned to ride a bicycle, for instance, I fell so many times while I was learning. I have a feeling it's all part of learning.

André: Yes, it's all part of just being people. We all make mistakes and playing music and playing the piano, I make mistakes all the time. I wish I didn't, but I do. And every time you make a mistake, naturally you think about it, because you think, "Oh, that's too bad." And you think about, "Why did I do that?" and you try not to let it happen again, and while you figure out why you made that mistake, you actually learn more about that piece of music or that place in the piece of music. So it is always a learning experience, even when you're unhappy about the fact that you made a mistake. It has its positive side.

Debbi: [37:34] After performing all over the world, what made you settle down here in Bloomington, Indiana?

André: Well, in the first place, I was asked. I might be someplace else if I had been asked in the same circumstance and in the same way. That's one thing. Of course, I could have been asked lots of places, or without question, where I would not be. The tradition, I mean, it sounds Pollyanna, but actually, I'm teaching where Gingold was and Starker, and, you know, Sebők. People less famous than Starker, same level, you know what I mean, all that. So that's a big deal. It's a place of great reputation. And when I did that distinguished professor thing, what these people were talking... I mean, some guy said completely seriously... He was talking about his Middle Eastern and how the trade route really is maybe the opposite of what we've all been taught, and blah, blah, blah.

And he said, "And, you know, I had to do this, but it gave me the opportunity to learn another language in order to do the research." I'm sitting here, "Shit. What am I doing here? They're going to throw me out. I'm like a schlub, you know, I'm an imposter compared to these people." So, I'm really happy to be sort of tangentially connected to people like that for the, you know, the high level of the university. I don't think I ever thought of myself as living in the Midwest, you know.

I do think of myself, even though I love New York City, but moved out to the country, even in New York State. I don't, I wouldn't want to live in New York City now, but I think of myself sort of, you know, as an Easterner, whatever the hell that means. You know, it's a kind of mindless superficial, but yeah, I would go there. One of the qualities I like is that I get to teach here and the expectation, as far as I know, is not that... From your end and from the students' end, the only successful working together is if you have people who have careers like Lang Lang. We don't, we're really not supposed to be geared that way. We're supposed to be geared to learning what the university is about. And so that's nice. I like that. Yeah, that atmosphere interests me.

Debbi: [40:18] Teaching has come up in some of our discussion, but I'm wondering if you might address it more directly and tell me what you think the role of creativity should be in education.

André: You know, I look at our society and I have my view of what our society, world society, and then, Americana. And from time to time, I have differing views about what... This should be worked on, you know, whatnot. And ultimately, in calm moments and the best of my rationality, whatever that is, I always come back to, "Man, you got to talk to children." When you experience a four- or five-year-old child and they're already narrow- minded, that's heartbreaking. You know, they're not a threat to you. You can't take it very, very personally.

But in the universal sense, you take it personally because it's like, "Oh man, what's wrong? This is not right." It tells you two things. It tells you how fast, how early you can corrupt innocence. That kind of corruption means that you have actually strangled, stifled, all kinds of individual gifts, directions, stuff from that person and stuffed them with bullshit. Creativity for, in the first place, we should all pay attention what kind of definition we put on creativity.

And so, when it comes to young children, you could try to teach them that it is simply self- expression. You are born and you are different. You know, one person, you know, wants only to draw and the other person is already doing numbers, you know. Somebody else wants to get a stick and dig canals in the dirt, you know, in the backyard. Sure, you have to have certain practical, every, you can't have your kid blowing up your house with a chemistry set. But all those things need to be encouraged. The grown-ups need to be vigilant.

It's, oh, fascinating, you know. Not wrong, not right. It's an extreme extension of that silly, "Oh, no, no, no. You have to be right-handed. You can't be left- handed." I happen to be a right- handed person, but I never had necessarily that issue. But all kinds of people, you know, the extension of that, you know, extrapolate from that into real, you know, deep emotional creative stuff. I don't think it's a matter of teaching children how to be creative. It's a matter of letting the creativity of the child flourish, blossom, come to fruition. Sure, we steer, you know... That business about, you know, practicing and people ask you about that and my mother forced me to practice, you know, I wouldn't be a pianist if it weren't for my mother. That's only for direction. No, you know, it's time for schoolwork and you have to do an hour of this.

But that doesn't mean that when the hour is up, you should do the same narrow forcing, you know. Letting children be creative means, yes, you see that this creativity is a big one. Yes, you can push that and aid that so it can blossom fully, but that should not mean that you say these are not worthwhile and these are off limits and don't... No, you can't spend time with that. No. Besides, if this is a big time, this is easy for you anyway. You spend a certain amount of time, it's going to, you know, it's going to mushroom in productivity.

Your free time, you can, you know, the free time is not nothing time. Look, if you're very narrow-minded, let's say you're, as a parent, you're a failed Monet and your child is a fabulous drawer, painter, craftsman and whatnot, but they also want to make sculpture. And you think, well, okay, one or two of them, but

pretty rare, you know, Degas. It's unusual and all that, but most of them, no sculpture. Please don't let the kid... No sculpture. That's, you know, that's, we do that with our kids, we do that with our students.

Sometimes if you get a talented student and they're bright, you know, they notice that you're encouraging them to explore in that direction. They almost look at you like, "Well, what's wrong with you? You know, you're supposed to force me to... not expand." I had a student who was quite shocking to me. I mean, she came to study the piano with me, you know, and she got more and more and more into toy piano. And when she started, I'm sorry, you know, my rationalism, "Are you shitting me? Toy piano?"

You know, and then she brought these pieces and I, you know, I had to learn them so I could say something to her and it became interesting. And I think that she was happy and a little bit surprised because when she came to me, she said, "Well, I'd like to, I'd like to do my recital—a regular piano and toy piano. What do you think?" And I'm sure, you know, even if she knew that I was, you know, tried to be an open person, she probably thought I would say, "Well, that's great, but maybe not here." You know what I mean? And so I said, "Yeah, absolutely."

And question, "Will you go to bat for me about the toy piano?" Yes, we all need to help the student be more creative. We should all be willing to have our students play for our colleagues rather than that, you know that funny kind of... You know, if you have a student and they play a piece that you know, and maybe some of us, we recorded, and you hear them, they have heard, I don't know, hard to define, something that you never got. Wow!

That's what you call further encouraging creativity or trying to be destruct. If you're threatened, threatened by the creativity of someone else, and so they try to kill it rather than... "Sorry. I never thought about that. This is really fabulous. Go, go, go, do, do more and I'll watch and, you know, maybe I'll learn something." You know, that's, you know, actually it's the power of creativity that is. Anyway, sorry, way off base.

Debbi: [47:25] That comes full circle to what you were talking about with your mom and your teacher, having different perspectives. That's how we add to the palette of our lives that we can draw from to paint our... You know, we're finding our voice. And toy piano is now a hue in the palette of her life... and yours.

André: Yes, and it's a big deal.

Debbi: You've expanded yourself by, I love that.

André: I actually have a toy piano at home underneath the big piano.

Debbi: [48:02] We have spoken about all kinds of creativity, but before we wrap up here, I do want to ask you specifically about your creativity at the piano. How do you use your instrument to express yourself creatively?

André: You know, Joseph Hoffman said, "We're all playing a percussion instrument and trying to make it sing." Basically, almost, almost, all the music written, and certainly all the old music written. It's not, it's not purely percussion by any means, by any means, and all these long lines, and he's shitting me, and you know, hold this note for four bars. You're not going to hear that four bars later. All that stuff. So the process of, the process of transcending the reality limitations, actually it's living in unreality.

You play a note and you... it's complicated, but you have some conviction. Of course you have to learn how to put them down and go like that, of course not gonna sound long, but you play it in such a way that it sound longer and you develop the belief that if I listen to this note like a cello note that can make increase in tone, volume, sound, what have you- it will be heard longer. So there are practical things to that I mean. So it is process, the process of transcending the instrument.

That's the creativity, I think, of playing the piano, making it sound singing, so music becomes pure. At some point you lose some 100% recognition- it's a piano and get taken over simply by the sound and that you pretend successfully to have listeners hear. They use their, because of how you play, they use their

imagination and creativity to hear something that isn't really true. I mean, when Houdini make the elephant disappear. You know, are you kidding me? There was an elephant and now there's not?

Or if there's nothing there and you bring the elephant back. That's how you play the piano to be really good pianist. Pianists don't actually like to talk about that so much. That's why sometimes the ones who are good players are not very good teachers. Because they're good players, because they're talented, and maybe they're talented enough that they never had to analyze. Sometimes they're not even sure exactly, but it's process.

The beauty is, yeah, I sort of know how to make that sound good, but now maybe it would sound better if I really figure out. Yeah, you know, the turn would be a little bit more like singer or felicitous if I did this note. You know, you, that you have to have a blueprint practicality for fantasy, flight. Flight of fantasy isn't just flight of fantasy. That's what I try to teach my students.

[Excerpt from André playing Liszt, *Totentanz*]

André: My first teaching was when I was 26, at Tanglewood, and I do think it was Tom Dickinson, as a kid, I mean, and he brought Liszt *Totentanz* to the lesson and I had played *Totentanz* in the concert, Franck *Variations* and *Totentanz*. And you know, in those days, you know, I was strong and I played... I played *Totentanz* really... you know, a little bit frightening because I think what should happen—tear up the furniture. And so, he played for me. And then, you know, we, we talked, and I said, well, you know so here, in the beginning, and I started, you know, parsing. I started deconstructing and this one has to be louder than that one. And then you have to go down here because to get there and after you know, like I don't know, 30, 40 seconds, he said to me, “But you didn't play like that” and I said, “That's the point. I did. I'm telling you what I do, so that I have a plan. And it does sound like the fresco in Pisa in the Camposanto, where the, the woman with the bat wings and the scythe, comes down and mows down people should sound like ‘aaaaaahhhh.’ You have to have a plan to make ‘aaaaaahhhh.’ You can't you yourself be ‘aaaaaahhhh,’ it doesn't work.” That's sort of interesting and sort of fun. By the way, I made a side trip, I... to Pisa just to see them. They're pastels. There's nothing frightening about them whatsoever. I read for years about the frescoes of the... of death over the battlefield and that's what *Totentanz* was about and the horror.

And I went in there and they're like little bucolic, little pastels on the wall. No fear. No hair-raising. No nothing. I mean I thought, “What?” Anyway, sorry.

Debbi: That's great. I can't thank you enough for this.

André: Thank you. My pleasure, my pleasure. It's easy for me.

Debbi: [54:14] That's a wrap for this episode of *Defining Creativity*. I'm so grateful for the always generous and gracious André Watts, and for you, the audience, for tuning in to our discussion. Thanks to August Fackler for composing and recording the music. Join me next time as I talk creativity with a children's author and former public radio reporter from Minneapolis, Minnesota, Mary Losure. Meanwhile, be open to possibilities, make connections, and embrace your creativity however it manifests itself in you.