

WHO IS THIS INNER CRITIC AND WHAT THE HECK IS IT DOING LIVING INSIDE MY HEAD?

by Chris Zydel, MA

I came across a startling statistic recently, which is that more than 90% of all children consider themselves to be creative yet only 10% of adults see themselves as having any creative capacity.

So what happened? How do so many of us lose our connection with the basic truth that we are all born creative and that it's not meant to just go away once we get our adult badge?

Have you ever noticed that there is a voice inside of you, constantly on patrol, which is advising you to not trust or believe in yourself? Telling you, over and over, that you are not good enough, talented enough, smart enough, CREATIVE enough? The voice of criticism, judgment, invalidation and shame that makes you feel like you are somehow intrinsically defective and just basically not OK?

Well that, my friends, is the voice of the inner critic. It is not the voice of rationality, or reason or reality. It is not a voice that is just trying to be helpful.

This voice has one job, and one job only, and that is to make you feel bad about yourself. Period. To make you feel bad enough about yourself so that you won't go ahead and do the thing you really want to do, which is to express yourself creatively. So if you are trying to do something creative and you start to feel bad you can bet your bottom dollar that it's the critic at work.

For example, if the last time you painted or drew something was when you were 4 years old, guess what? Even if you are now 35 years old, when you screw up your courage to finally take hold of a pencil or a paintbrush, you are most likely going to pick up where you left off and draw or paint like a 4 year old. AND THAT IS OK. Really. To be able to create you need to give

yourself permission to start exactly where you are and 4 years old is as good a place as any to begin. Except it's not OK to the critic. The critic expects, even though you haven't touched an art supply in over 30 years, that when you finally do put that brush on the paper, your finished piece should come out looking like it was done by Michelangelo. Which is, of course, preposterous. But the critics main currency is not rationality. It mostly deals in manipulation, intimidation and fearmongering. It doesn't really need to make sense. It only needs to convince you that it's RIGHT.

So how is it that you find yourself so raptly listening to and believing a voice that is essentially the voice of a raving lunatic?

Inside most people's psyches there is a huge imbalance of power between the real self (the source of your creativity), and the inner critic. The inner critic was formed when you were about 2 years old, so in that internal psychic landscape you are still a child and the critic is a scary adult authority. You believe this irrational voice because at the moment when the critic speaks, you have become the 2 year old, the critic becomes the adult, and the inner child believes everything, no matter how unrealistic, that the adult is telling it! As soon as the critic says "Boo" that inner child just collapses into fear, shame and self doubt.

There is a debate that I often hear about the best way to deal with the critic. Many people are proponents of the theory that you have to befriend the critic, that the poor thing is only trying to do it's job, and just needs a little compassion and understanding. And once that happens it will become the domesticated critic, willing to go off happily into some corner and weave baskets or be a crossing guard for children. The problem with that approach is that it doesn't want to recognize how DANGEROUS the critic is, dangerous to your self esteem and dangerous to any hope of a happy, healthy creative life. And that the critic will remain dangerous until the internal power balance is rectified.

You need to grow up, gain some power, and develop some cojones before you can effectively deal with the critic. You need to learn to use your teeth, to growl, to become dangerous yourself. To become the fiercely protective

warrior, who will not allow ANYONE, including some punk in your psyche, to knock you around and abuse you. You need to be able to learn to say NO! NO I won't listen to you, NO I won't let myself be limited by you, NO I won't let myself be defined by you. You have to be willing to be ruthless and forceful. To say things like shut up, buzz off, get out of my life and never come back. But before you can stand up to it you need to be able to recognize it for what it is. The critic is not, and never was, the voice of your true and essential self. THE CRITIC IS NOT YOU! And that even though the critic speaks with great authority it DOES NOT KNOW WHAT IT IS TALKING ABOUT!!!! . Again, the number one thing to remember in dealing with the critic is this.... its only job is to make you feel bad.

The inner critic is born out of a deep place of fear. The critic thinks its job is to keep you out of harms way at all costs. To keep you protected, shielded and secure, which it does by not allowing you to venture into uncharted territory. But to stay protected you also need to stay small, stay stuck, stay where we are, because where you are is safe. Where you are is FAMILIAR. The critic's job is to keep you from ever leaving what is familiar and usually that means never trying anything new, never experimenting, never making mistakes, never being confused or unsure of yourself, no adventures, no going out on a limb or taking risks. All of the types of things, in fact , that are ESSENTIAL if you are going to be creative. The critic also has a huge problem with the unknown. And if it ever does consent to leave home, it wants to have a clearly marked map, again anathema for the creative journey.

The paradox is that it will stop at nothing to keep you safe. It tries to scare you into safety. It thinks that if you go off-road without that map that you will die somewhere in the scary forest. So you find the critic acting like the parent who's 3 year old child just ran out into the street. "Don't you ever do that again. What is wrong with you ? Are you stupid? If you ever do that again I will kill you"! The critic won't let you grow up. it doesn't trust you to take responsibility or think for yourself. it convinces you that if you take risks that you will end up in major disasters.

The critic is also the part of you that knows what the rules are in your family, culture and society. It's the part that keeps track of whether you are being a good person, an acceptable person, a grown up responsible person. Since we are talking about the creative realm, the critic is also the part of you that knows (or thinks it knows) what the rules are about being creative or being an artist. The critic as art god!

The inner critic has definite opinions about what good art is, about who is talented and who is not. According to this voice, who is talented is certainly not YOU! A person who is capable of making art is not the person who looks back at you from the bathroom mirror every morning. The critic can certainly convince you that you making art is a monumentally bad idea. It whispers in your ear that you don't have any good ideas, no real capabilities and that you trying to be creative is a total waste of art supplies!

Now this voice can be very convincing and daunting. It knows exactly where your weak spots are and how to reduce you to a state of quivering, nauseating anxiety. It has spent its whole life inside of your psyche and has been studying you exhaustively, so it knows what will really get you going and what messages you are likely to ignore. It's not going to try and get you where you feel confident. It is only interested in your vulnerable, psychic underbelly.

For example, I am a very warm, friendly, outgoing person who has a large dose of compassion as part of my nature. So if the critic would say to me "Chris, you are an incredibly cold and uncaring person and you will probably die old and alone", I would just look at it quizzically and say "Huh? What in tarnation are you talking about!" There's no place for the accusation to stick. I am very comfortable and relaxed around my relational capacities.

But it's a different story when it starts in on my writing capabilities, saying things like, "What do you think you are doing? Why are you even bothering to write? You have nothing original or interesting to say, other people have already said this better than you ever could, and you never even learned

where to put the commas!"

Suddenly I start to feel my gut clench and anxiety crawling up into my throat. I begin to pant, my eyes start to bug a little and I am responding internally with something along the lines of "Oh my god, OH MY GOD, you know it's right, it's right, it really knows what it's talking about this time. This is ridiculous, I should just stop this before I add to the ongoing travesty of trying to put my own original words and thoughts on paper.

AAAARRGGHH. I should just STOP RIGHT NOW!"

Now at this point I have two choices. I can either quit writing and go do the dishes, vacuum the dust bunnies, raid the refrigerator, call my Aunt Hilda, (who hasn't heard from me since the last time I tried to sit down and write), organize my sock drawer... you get the picture. Anything to stop me from continuing writing. Or.... I can smile and say "Cool. I must really be on the right track. I must really be challenging myself to grow in some deep way otherwise that darn critic would not be so interested, so hell bent on getting me to stop. It must be very threatened right now." So I bare my teeth in a particularly nasty snarl, face it down once again, and continue writing.

I have also learned over time to see the critic's showing up as a good thing, because it only really goes into high gear if I am breaking new ground and taking some big creative risk. It is still extremely unpleasant, and the show is always the same (for an art god, the critic is actually not all that creative). I always feel nauseous and anxious and like I want to run out of the room, but I have learned to recognize this voice for what it is. It is a firebreathing dragon that you need to battle every time you challenge your internal status quo. EVERY TIME! Every time you try something new or scary, every time you take a chance creatively, every time you try to reach beyond your familiar territory, your inner negative voice will be right there trying to get you to stop with the same bag of tricks. You would think that over time the poor thing would get bored, but the good news is that if it's something that you expect, then you can much more effectively deal with it. You won't feel blindsided or betrayed every time it shows up. It's helpful to have the attitude of "OK,OK here we go again. Well, let's get the

heavy breathing over with so that I can get on with what I really want to do which is to CREATE!"

This attitude is not the attitude of the scared, cowering child. It's the attitude of the sometimes haggard, beleaguered adult, who knows that reality has its share of difficulty and unpleasantness, but feels confident in being able to deal with it. It is the grownup part of you that is actually powerful enough to handle the voices in your own head. The part of you that is fierce enough, and courageous enough, to stand up to the critic and defend you. Who knows that it's OK to feel scared and unsure at times, and also knows that what's truly important is making every effort to stay true to yourself and live your life from your essential core.

The most obvious form of the critic is the inner voice that says things like you're no good, you have no talent, that is stupid, ugly, trite, kitschy, why bother, you'll never amount to anything, you're not as good as other people ,you'll never be creative. It's the voice of never, that's impossible, it's hopeless, you'll never make it anyway, you're too old, you have no talent, you should have started this years ago.

It's important to recognize these messages for what they are. They are not the truth, they are just designed to make you feel bad, to paralyze you, and to keep you from taking the next step, writing the next word, painting the next stroke. However, one of the reasons that the critic is able to maintain its stranglehold on your creative self esteem is because it often gets a helping hand, and from a most surprising quarter. The critic gets tons of assistance from the person who you would think least likely to support it. That mystery person vigorously nodding their head and agreeing wholeheartedly with the critic? Hey, wait a minute ...it's YOU!

It is a truly amazing phenomenon watching someone passionately defending their critic. "But it really IS ugly", I hear people protest, as I stand in front a painting they are working on, a painting that is exploding with life and energy. At that point my job is to model for them a firm, unwavering stance in dealing with the little monster who they are still certain is only trying to help. .. I always tell them that I have never seen an ugly painting,

which is the truth, because assessments such as ugly don't mean anything anyway. I remind them that this voice is just a way to.... one more time, MAKE THEM FEEL BAD!!! But no, no they are absolutely convinced and I can see them beginning to wonder if maybe I am just a slightly deranged person with monumentally bad taste. In these altercations, I always make it clear to my students whose side I am on, informing them in no uncertain terms that I will never, EVER agree with their critic. Confident in the knowledge that if they stick around long enough and experience me championing their unique creative process a few thousand times that my faith in their creativity will eventually rub off on them.

Another thing that I hear from people is the refrain of "But I want my art to be really GOOD! I don't want to lose the inner critic because then I'll just paint bad paintings, or write bad songs etc." But, truthfully, when you say we want something to be good what you are actually saying is that you want to make something that someone else will like, so that you can gain approval, and once again be safe. At the huge price of losing yourself. Since "good" is really code for pleasing some external authority, it is a pretty meaningless concept outside of the pint-sized world of the inner critic. So, since you can't create something good (or bad for that matter) you need to focus on what you can do , which is to create something that is authentic, dynamic, alive and full of energy. FULL OF YOU! But the critic can't help you with that, because to create something dynamic, authentic and alive, you have to BE dynamic, authentic and alive, which is the LAST thing the critic wants.

Often people confuse the inner critic with the voice of discrimination, analysis, or evaluation, but they are not the same thing. When I am writing, I make certain choices regarding what words I use, how I structure a sentence, how I put things together. So I am thinking as I write, as well as feeling, but above all else I am having fun. I feel creatively engaged, sometimes frustrated, but never scared or shamed. The voice of that kind of appraisal is not mean or cruel, it doesn't make me feel bad! However, I have to watch out because when I am involved in that assessment process the critic can try and slip in with its tricky ways.

For example, I have beaten off the most recent fire breathing dragon and am now happily writing and looking for a word to express what I want to say next. I come up with something that has energy and aliveness for me such as when I chose the word "dangerous" to describe the critic earlier in this piece. I can hear the critic coming in (although at this point I don't know yet that it is the critic), saying something like " Don't you think that word is a little too intense? People are going to think you are over the top, too much, kind of weird and out there". I find my finger hovering over the delete key, getting out the Thesaurus, trying to find a word that's more to the critic's liking. I'm starting to feel just a little tiny bit crummy. Just a whisper of feeling wrong and unacceptable. It's not too bad, really, just a small leak in my energy, but because I am so focused on the critic right now I catch it." AHA!" I say, " I smell a critic rat gnawing away at my self confidence, at my own authentic creative flow and I won't have it. I will use that word dangerous, even if you don't like it."

Now I still feel a bit uncomfortable, because I am going against the " authority", ("What if it's right this time...."). However, if I'm going to be teaching about this stuff I need to walk my talk, but even more importantly, I know that giving in to the critic, even in this seemingly inconsequential way ("It's only ONE word after all"), is a slippery slope. I like to think about this process as learning to feed the creative soul (which means listening to and trusting your intuition) and starving the critic, so every single time I give in to those fearful demands or suggestions, I am feeding the critic. And as I slowly fall asleep to myself, as I'm unconsciously shoveling the food of my attention and acquiescence into it's voracious, plug-ugly mug, it starts getting bigger and bigger and BIGGER, sucking the creative life force right out of me and before I know it, I'm organizing my sock drawer.

CREATING A CRITIC FREE ZONE

You need to make a conscious choice to take the critic on, because it's not going to just go away on its own. You can avoid confrontations with the critic but only by staying in the circle of limitation and safety that doesn't

challenge it. If you want to grow creatively you need to engage directly with the critic.

There are two different archetypes you need to recruit to help you in your battle with the critic. The first archetype, the warrior, is the part of you that is capable of setting boundaries and is effective at self defense. It is not interested in putting up with B.S. (either yours or the critics), is willing to be angry and assertive, and will do whatever it takes to prevail and to win. You need to develop your warrior self because you are safeguarding something very precious, the treasure of your unique, authentic, creative self. The warrior energy is essential to fight the dragons of conformity, fear, low self worth, learned helplessness, underachievement, and victimization that manifest when the critic gets the upper hand.

The second archetype is that of the nurturing, all accepting, cheerleading good parent. This is the aspect of yourself that believes in you unconditionally, who stands by you no matter what, who hears the still small voice of your creative intuition and encourages that voice to become loud and confident and strong. It is the part of you that loves and values everything that you create, just because you created it, and not because it will make you money or get you on Oprah!

Engagement with the critic is always difficult and requires commitment, focus, intention and discipline as well as specific strategies and tactics. One of the primary goals in critic work is differentiating between yourself and the critic so I've included a few tips and exercises that can help you with that process of separation.

Give it a name. It can be a descriptive name like Stinky or Killjoy or Blowhard or a real person's name. The important thing is to distinguish it in your own mind as an independent entity.

Draw, paint or sculpt your critic. Really get in touch with the energy of it and don't be afraid to make it big and ugly and wicked. Have fun!

Make a list of all the different messages that the critic gives you. Writing

them down allows you to get some distance from them, observe patterns, and begin to see the absurdity of these communiqué's.

Write a letter to your critic. Using some of the messages from the previous exercise, fight back. Tell it off. Stand up to it. Practice being fierce and angry." I'm mad as hell and not going to take it anymore!"

Involve yourself in a creative project and then purposefully search for the critic. Be very vigilant. Go on a critic hunting spree! Practice being the predator, not the prey. When you find it... well, I'm confident by now that you know what to do!

Choose a day where you refuse to engage with any critical assessment of yourself about anything. And I mean ANYTHING!!. When you hear any internal criticism whatsoever, be relentless and JUST SAY NO! As you go about your daily routine, every time you hear the critic speaking, say out LOUD something like shut up, get off my back, leave me alone, I'm not listening. Using your own voice in this way gives you an energetic power boost that helps to break the critic's spell. You may appear to be a nut basket to those you are living with, but it's better to be a little kooky than to spend the rest of your life caged and contained by that voice. (Make sure that you let your domestic companions know what you are up to so that they don't think you are talking to them!)

Ask your friends and family to help you out. If they hear you saying something critical or disparaging about yourself, give them full permission to bring it to your attention and to command you to stop. This could become a very popular activity with your tribe as they will really enjoy having a legitimate reason to boss you around!

One of the critics more clever disguises is to manifest as some kind of physical distress such as overwhelming tiredness, a splitting headache, backache or nausea right at the point when you are getting ready to tackle a creative project. So instead of sitting down in front of your computer to write, or standing in front of your easel to paint you are compelled to lie down on your couch and take a nap with a cold compress on your head!

People are often surprised to learn that these symptoms are just another demonstration of the critic at work. If you push through the physical discomfort, and continue with your creative expression, you will be astounded at how quickly the headache, tiredness or nausea disappears.

The critic also shows up as procrastination, (I'll get to it tomorrow) excuses, (but I just don't have the time) and putting other things first (my grandmother, cat, pet goldfish really needs me now), anything to keep you from getting started on a creative venture. You need to recognize these undermining tactics for that they are and bring the warrior self in to carve out some inviolate time where you make your creative life a priority. Draw up a schedule. Put your creative time on the calendar and practice not letting ANYTHING interfere.

Don't compare or compete! The critic loves to point out how this or that person does whatever it is that you want to create better, or more brilliantly than you. When you are in the critic's thrall you have no capacity to judge your own work. For example, this article keeps getting longer and longer and longer. When I started this I had no idea I had so much to say and it just keeps coming. So here I am feeling pushed around and bossed around by this muse of mine, this voice of my intuition that I am now wishing had stayed "still and small", and all I can do is surrender. I want it to stop, to leave me alone but it wants what it wants and I am only its often sullen, sulky, whiny instrument. But I'm the best it's got right now, and I need to honor that. If I don't do this it won't get done, because the truth of it is no one else can do this like I can. I'm not saying that no one else can write about the inner critic or difficulties with the creative process. Lots of people have done so and will continue to do so in a myriad of whiz-bang and wonderful ways. But no one else can say exactly what I have to say in the way that I can say it because they are not ME! I have my own take on this that it is important for me to express it even if the critic is trying to tell me that someone else has already done it better, and no one really cares what I think.

Surrounding yourself with critical people. A surefire recipe for creative paralysis is having both internal AND external critics. So one of the critic's

favorite tactics is to enlist a posse of people to help it with its job of making you feel bad. You can identify these folks by their habit of always seeming to find fault with your creative expression. What you need to flourish and grow creatively is to surround yourself with a wildly enthusiastic audience who applauds every creative move you make. If you have people in your life who can't be your cheerleaders, then ditch em! OK, OK, so maybe you can't just ditch your mother. But you must never, EVER show these naysayers any of your creative efforts. Not ever. I really mean this.

Catastrophizing: If you are going through a challenging patch creatively, feeling stuck or bored or scared, the critic will jump in with doom statements like "It's always going to be this way. This will never change. In fact it will only get worse. You should just quit now." If that doesn't work and you continue plowing ahead with your creative project it will pull out the death and ruination card." If you stay on this path of creativity you will lose your job. Become a bag lady. A plane could crash into your house. You could die of some horrible rare disease. In fact ,what is that weird pain you are feeling in your left toe? " Of course all of this is completely ludicrous, but the critic is counting on years of training in slavish devotion to anything it says to blind you to the ridiculousness of these statements.

Demanding that you do the impossible. The critic loves to set you up for failure by giving you creative assignments that you couldn't possibly fulfill based on a skill level you couldn't possibly have and then berating you mercilessly when you fall short of the mark.

Too much, too big, too scary, too, too! Whenever you hear the critic saying you are too ANYTHING, turn it around and try to be even more of what it doesn't want you to be. The critic says what you are doing is trite or kitschy? Fine! Pull out all the stops and show that old judging mind what kitschy is really all about. Gleefully make it jump up and down. Practice being too much.

Always, always, ALWAYS be very suspicious of the critic's motivations for giving you a particular message. Whenever you hear the critic mouthing off always ask the question "WHY? Why is it going after me now? How

have I threatened it, how am I getting too big or powerful or otherwise stepping outside of my familiar box?" Never engage with the critic in an argument on its own terms. The only interaction you should ever have with the critic is some version of telling it to take a hike. Remember... it is not rational, so don't interact with it as if it is. Giving it that level of respect feeds the critic and diminishes you. You can't win an argument with a crazy person... even if that crazy person is lurking inside of your own head.

And finally...the critic will never go away. This process of fighting back is not meant to ultimately get rid of the critic because that just isn't possible. The inner critic is just one aspect of your unruly monkey mind. It's part of the hardwiring in being human. So there's no shame in having to deal with it again and again. You need to have compassion for the struggle, and recognize that although you can't get rid of the critic itself, you can change your relationship to it, so that it is no longer running your life. And after you've kicked its butt about 5 million times, you can then begin to have compassion for its scared, misguided, annoying self!

BEYOND JUDGMENT Ultimately, the creative process is all about love. It's about loving ourselves and learning to practice the art of what I call Radical Self Acceptance. Which means accepting all of who we are without judgment. We are not here to learn how to control ourselves more effectively. We are here to learn about and respect unconditionally the vast mystery of who we are. The truth of it is, we don't get to choose how our creative gifts manifest. Your creative style is as distinctive as your fingerprints and as much out of your control. You don't get to decide how many whorls you have on your thumb, or your height or your eye color or the sound of your voice. That was all part of the original packaging and your creative gifts are included in that. That is why comparison is so damaging. If you are doing it right it will be a surprise- even to yourself! The creative process is ultimately a process of self discovery, but you aren't going to discover much or anything new if you are constantly lurking fretfully over each and every brush or key stroke. Each of us is fantastically unique, with gifts that are so necessary to be shared, gifts that we need to fully claim during our too short time on the planet. No one can

give what is your gift to offer, and it is a crying shame that we waste our time and our precious, wild lives on staying scared and small. The most important thing you can do is follow your heart. Go where your excitement, your curiosity and enthusiasms lead you. The bottom line is that God, the Goddess, the Great Spirit has a mission and a plan for you and your creativity is the way that you can access that plan. We need you. We need each other. And you need to trust that your creative expression is valuable and necessary in ways that you may never fully understand. So stop listening to that whining critic voice and let your creative juices fly!

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