



Group or Solo Artist?

When it comes to your creativity, do you work and play well with others or are you a Creative Lone Ranger?

Band-A-Rama, aka Collab-A-Rama

Every spring in my hometown, Kenosha, Wis. (hang in with me, this little story goes somewhere besides just down memory lane), the public schools present Band-A-Rama, a cornucopia of musical collaboration where every kid in a Kenosha County public school band performs. The best part is the last song: John Phillip Sousa's "Stars and Stripes Forever."

When I was a kid, it went like this: the two high school bands started the song and their piccolo players got to play showcase solos. The junior high school bands joined in and the volume swelled and the cymbal players were in percussionist heaven. Then the tempo slowed significantly as the Beginners' Band (fifth and sixth graders) came in. At this point, there were well over 1000 kids in my day (over 1700 kids now) playing Sousa at top volume.

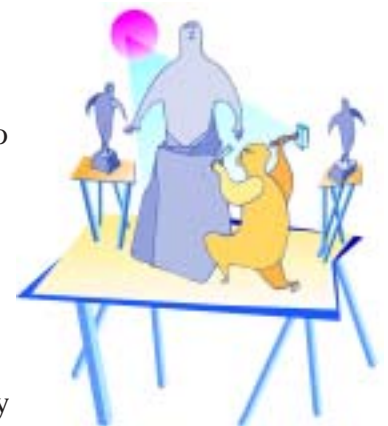
It was a rush, even for me (I'm not musically inclined and didn't stay with band past junior high school). There is a unique thrill in being part of something so big, with so many people playing at the same time. The sound of brass, woodwinds and percussion filled a huge auditorium, surrounding us and filling us. Sousa's "Stars and Stripes Forever" is without a doubt THE song to do this kind of thing with.

Solitary Arts

The collaboration of Band-A-Rama was a rare experience for me. As a writer, my creativity is much more solitary. Music, dance and other performing arts are inherently more collaborative, it seems to me, than writing and the visual arts. Sure, there are dance and music solos and monologues in the theater, but the whole production is based on companies. Likewise, writers might join together for a joint reading and artists might combine for a joint gallery showing, but our work is generally autonomous.

Writers create a cast of characters, but they're in our heads; theater and dance companies are a real cast of characters – real people you can bounce ideas off of and who have ideas of their own. My niece, Stephanie Engebretson, who is at 18 already a deeply talented choreographer, has told me about the synergy that happens when she and her fellow dancers create a new performance. Sometimes they can't remember who came up with each move and yet there it's the choreographer's vision (or director's vision in music and theater) that guides the whole.

Even among writers, I'm more individualistic than many. I write when I'm alone in the house or after everyone else has gone to bed. I don't go to coffee shops or other public spaces to get a 'people fix' in the background like some writers do. I don't like the stereo on in the background; even strictly



instrumental music is often distracting. It's just me and my imaginary friends (just like when I was four and my sibs had all gone off to school and dad was at work and mom was in the next room running the household).

Creativity Requires Both

Yet, I know Collaboration vs. Autonomy is a polarity all creative people have to learn to manage. (For an introduction to the idea of creative polarities, see Volume 13, Issue 1 of Imagination InkLinks that I sent out a few weeks ago. If you didn't get that ezine, go to www.RosanneBane.com and click on Newsletter or email me and I'll send you a PDF.) I have to admit that my bias for autonomy has at times limited my creativity.

The Upside of Collaboration



Collaboration gives you fresh ideas, more possibilities, multiple points of view, synergy, and relationships with other artists. One of the best parts of taking Improvisation classes at the Brave New Workshop was discovering how playing and sharing the focus with other creative people

gave me so many ideas and insights that I wouldn't have thought of on my own.

In *Creativity*, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi writes "The importance of seeing people, hearing people, exchanging ideas, and getting to know another person's work and mind are stressed by creative individuals."

Csikszentmihalyi goes on to quote Nina Holton, "You really can't work entirely alone in your place. You want to have a fellow artist come and talk things over with you – 'How does that strike you?' You have to have some sort of feedback. You can't be sitting there entirely by yourself and never show it. And then eventually, you know, when you begin to show [your art], you have to have a whole network."

The Downside of Collaboration

Of course, too much collaboration interferes with creativity. Too much collaboration can lead to 'group think' that



actually inhibits new ideas. Perspective can become so varied, it gets muddled and lost.

You can get the 'too many cooks' syndrome and encounter conflict when people feel their contribution was not appropriately accepted, valued or recognized. Collaboration can slow things down – there's a reason Robert Heinlein said "a committee is a life-form with six or more legs and no brain."

The Upside of Autonomy

All creative people need to be able to function on their own. All ideas need incubating and many are best incubated in one brain, at least in the beginning. No one else can give you permission to invent something only you have thought of.



Creative people have to take the initiative. We have to have the self-determination to keep showing up, to keep trudging through the development of our ideas to make that great idea something others can share and benefit from. And that's what makes creating so satisfying!

The Downside of Autonomy

Of course, too much autonomy means you only have your own perspective. You have only your own energy to draw on. It's hard to create in a vacuum. It's isolating.



Just today I got an email from Eileen P., a former (and hopefully future) student, asking, "Have you ever noticed how lonely it is to write a novel? I am surrounded by people who love me, and who I love, but this is a journey I take alone, you know? How do you deal with that in your journey?"

A novel can be a particularly lonely writing project, but all creative expression can get lonely if we don't find ways to collaborate. The suggestions I gave Eileen are specific to writers, but they can easily be adapted for visual artists and other creative people.

How to Cure Loneliness

It helps to have readers who support you. But you don't want to have readers too soon because they can influence the writing in undesirable ways. You have to have just the right sort of readers who can see

the possibilities in the roughest draft and encourage that without trying to change your writing to fit their own ideas. (It is always so much easier to tell another writer what to do than to work on your own writing. It's fun to come up with "Hey, I know what you should do with this. Instead of the main character being a circus clown, what if he's a rodeo clown?")

You have to be smart enough to ask for and insist on getting the feedback you really need. Rough drafts never need copy editing; they need congratulations, encouragement and questions that open up possibilities for the writer without imposing the questioner's perceptions. (For more info on how to get the feedback you need, go to <http://www.rosannebane.com/main/art-feedback.htm>)



It helps to be in a writers' group, especially a group that has a common commitment on how you will give feedback. Even though the actual writing is still a solitary act, you have companions who can celebrate and commiserate with your ups and downs. Some writers' groups meet to give each other

company while each person writes her or his own stuff. Writing classes can do similar things for you and many writers' groups are formed at the end of a class when people have gotten to know who they'd like to be in a group with.

There is a special kind of energy generated when several people are creating in proximity, even if they aren't working on the same project. I've seen that in the Writer's Workout, Meditative Writing and Improv Fiction classes I've taught at the Loft. It's part of what I intend to create in the Entering the Flow class this summer.

It helps to read what other writers say about their process. Knowing other people have experienced what you're feeling and come through it to reach the goal you want to reach mitigates that sense of being all alone. It gets you past the "What was I thinking?" feeling.

It helps to have a routine, to have solid writing habits. Once you get past the initial inertia, you get



into the zone with your work and you don't feel lonely. Habits are the best way I've found to get past that initial inertia. (Not surprisingly, the Writing Habit focuses on this very idea.)

It helps to train your partner or a good friend to ask you about your writing and to train yourself to answer that kind of question in the same way someone working in an office answers it. For example:

"How was your day, dear?"

"Good. I think I've figured out what to do in chapter five. Ruby is going to find another body. How was your day?"

"Okay. Bill spends so much time on the phone I can't see how he gets anything done and he's late getting back to me about our project..."

It helps to have a buddy. Some writers feel less lonely when they write in public places like a coffee shop or library. Some writers like to have the stereo or radio or even TV on in the background. I find that too distracting, but you might want to try it and see if it works for you. Some writers call a buddy right before they start writing and when they finish – just a quick:

"I'm starting now."

"Good. Me, too."

And later: "I just wrapped up. I guess since I got your voice mail, you're still going. Wahoo for us!"

Finally, it helps to have a creativity coach. I don't want to toot my own horn too loudly here (remember, I'm not all that musical and would probably be off key), but as a coach, I understand what it means to write a novel, to publish a non-fiction book, to get rejections, to struggle with showing up every day even when my life is in crisis or I just don't want to. Not only do I understand what it's like for me, I can empathize with what it's like for other writers and artists.

We need someone who can listen to us and read our stuff and ask questions that help us see what's going on in our process. Two weeks ago, I got to do that with Laura S., a client



who was considering adding a new POV character to her novel. I asked about the pros and cons of doing that, then circled back to ask about a comment she made earlier. In the process of talking it out, Laura recognized that adding another character would be a stalling tactic to postpone writing a challenging part of the book. It would complicate the novel unnecessarily. I didn't tell Laura what to do. It's her novel (autonomy), so my opinion doesn't matter. I listened and asked a question that opened a new perspective for her (collaboration).

It helps to have someone who can ask you questions that let you discover things about yourself. If you're really lucky, you have someone like that in your writer's group or your circle of family and friends. If not, consider hiring a coach and/or taking a class.

Balance the Polarity

Ultimately, being alone is a necessary part of creating. So is working with others. Being able to move fluidly between autonomy and collaboration is vital.



I recognize my preference for autonomy and I keep stretching myself to move into collaboration. I hope you'll help me out by continuing to send emails to let me know what's going on with your creative work and by coming to play with me this summer in a Loft class or in coaching!

Please contact me to talk about coaching or classes.
612-722-4139

Rosanne@RosanneBane.com



"E. L. Doctorow says 'Writing is like driving at night in the fog. You can only see as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way.' Rosanne's coaching is like tuning into a really good and clear all-night radio station to keep you company."

Gordy Paquette, Writer

Come Play with Me at the Loft!

For more information or to register, contact the Loft at 612-379-8999 or www.Loft.org (click on Adult Education).

NEW this Summer - Entering the Flow (10 am to noon, Wednesdays, June 18 to Aug 13, no class July 2) The energy in a room changes when five or more people move into a relaxed state of consciousness. You'll work on your own writing and gain the synergy bonus of doing it with other writers. We'll practice entering the flow and writing while in that blissful state in each class session. We'll apply some suggestions from *Where You Dream* as one of several launching points in our discovery of the writer's dreamspace.

Writer's Resistance (10 am to noon, Tuesdays, June 17 to Aug 12, no class July 1) You love to write, so why is it so hard to sit down and do it? Managing polarities (like autonomy vs. collaboration) is one of the topics we'll explore to acquire insight into the sources of resistance, the surprising forms resistance can take, what you need to overcome it and what you can do to energize your writing self and keep showing up.

The Writing Habit (5 to 7 pm, Tuesdays, June 17 to Aug 12, no class July 1) Our weekly check-in will give you safe and supportive witnesses (collaboration) to help you become accountable to yourself and meet your goals (autonomy). You'll experiment with 3 Basic Practices to tailor writing habits that make it easier to accept the solitude of writing. We'll explore the creative process, identify your priorities, generate plans, cultivate sustainable habits, and develop a support network to help you maintain your momentum.

Improv Fiction at Ridgedale Library (1:30 to 3:30 pm, Thursdays, June 19 to Aug 14, no class July 3) Improv Fiction is a great marriage of collaboration that expands the imagination with unexpected gifts from your fellow writers and the autonomy of in-class writing time to apply those possibilities in your own way to your own writing. We'll play improv games to engage our imaginations and inspire the writing. You don't have to wait for inspiration to strike; discover what you want to write as you write it!