Thrife

Creating a Thriving Spiritual Life
Week One

Safety, Support, and Community

Signing the Contract

Let's take a moment now to sign our contracts together. A promise with yourself, with Source, and with each other. By signing this I already feel the support and encouragement that is shared between all of us who are doing this. I'm excited!!!

This week initiates the recovery of your creative soul. You might feel giddy and suspicious, elated and skeptical; your moods will swing. The reading material, tasks, and exercises will help you feel safe, secure, and a sense of community, while we do this. We will ground ourselves in being created in the image of God – a creative yourself – enabling you to explore your innate creativity with less fear.

Shadow Creatives

As children, it was rare if we were nurtured and encouraged in our creativity, first by our family, and then by ever-widening circles of friends, teachers, and communities. We were probably more criticized than encouraged when it came to creativity. We heard "That's not a good idea", instead of "Try it and see what happens!" We were told to "Be sensible", instead of "Explore your dreams." This is not to blame our parents or teachers. But we need to recognize that acknowledgement of our efforts and attempts, achievements and triumphs, toward creativity, towards our true self, was often lacking. It created a *disconnect* from our creative soul. *We became what our family and culture wanted us to be, from the outside-in, rather than discovering who we were created to be, from the inside-out.* We became what Julia Cameron calls Shadow Artists, and I call *Shadow Creatives*.

Julia Cameron tells the story of "Edwin (Cameron, p. 25-26), a miserable millionaire trader whose joy in life comes from his art collection." As a child he was gifted in the visual arts, but he was urged to go into finance. For his 21st birthday, his father bought him a seat on the NY stock exchange. He has been a trader ever since. He is very rich, and very poor. Money cannot buy him creative fulfillment. He surrounds himself with artists and artifacts. He would love to be more creative, but believes that is the prerogative of others, nothing he can aspire to himself. A generous man, he recently gifted an artist with a year's living expenses so she could pursue her dreams. But he was raised to believe that the term *artist,* or *creative,* could not apply to him. He cannot make that same gift for himself. She then adds, "Edwin's is not an isolated case." That might be the most important thing to hear. This is not rare.

There are many of us who are *Shadow Creatives*. We're just a little too intimidated to become creative, artistic ourselves. We are often low enough in self-esteem to even recognize that *we have a creative dream*, something that gives us a sense of purpose and meaning. Unable to recognize and acknowledge that we possess the creativity we admire in others, we are often drawn to those who are actively pursuing their creative dreams and careers. We date them, marry them, hang out with them, surround ourselves with them. We choose "shadow careers" that get close, but do not allow us to live out of, the creative gifts of our souls.

Julia Cameron wrote something that hit me with the force of a shock wave. "Very often audacity, not talent, makes one person an artist and another a shadow artist." (p. 27) When I first began to paint, I would see someone's art hanging in a café, or a gallery, and I'd think, "That's not that good". But I was also envious of them for putting their creativity out there! What would it mean for me to be "audacious"?

I approached a local café owner. Can I hang my art here? I showed her some of my small paintings. "Yes! You can hang in my café!" I hung my paintings with fear and trepidation. *But I hung them!* A week later a friend said, "Tim, one of your paintings is gone!" And I said, "What? They stole it??" "No," he laughed. "They bought it!!" My first sale! *And something shifted.* I *can* be an artist!!

I'll return to my story soon, but another story comes to mind, about a woman getting in touch with her creative soul. A young woman working in a corporate job in San Francisco asked to see me for Spiritual Direction. At our 4th or 5th meeting in her office, she shared a growing discouragement about her job. I asked her, "If money wasn't an issue, if you could do whatever you wanted to do, what would that be?" And she immediately said, "I would teach!" She sat up in her chair, her eyes brightened, as she recalled as a child, she would line up her dolls as if they were in a classroom and she would teach her dolls! She talked animatedly about her desire to be an elementary school teacher for five minutes! And then she stopped, sat back in her chair, her shoulders slumped, and she said with a quiet voice, "I should just be thankful for what I have." I said, "Can I show you what just happened?" "What happened?" she asked. I mirrored back for her how animated she had been when she talked about teaching, followed suddenly by a dramatic change in body language and a softening of her voice. I asked her, "Whose voice is that?" It took her a few seconds, but the truth dawned on her and she said, "It's my Mother's!!" That was when she began to see that she had equated her Mother's voice with God's voice, and she began to realize her desire for teaching was something the Divine had given to her. She is now, happily, a teacher.

Back to my story. A year later, the café bought out the neighboring business, doubling their size. I asked the owner if I could hang another show, and she was happy to let me cover the new wall space. I had begun painting on larger canvases, and I had several 3x4 paintings to hang in her café. The word "audacious" came back to me. I had been reading about the relationship between an artist's value of their own work and the pricing of the work. So I took a huge chance. I did something *audacious*! The most I'd charged up to that point was $1,000. I pushed the price of the larger pieces to $2,000 each. I sold three of them. My valuing my work, helped others value them.

Audacity, courage, valuing our creativity, are some of the things that can give a sense of safety. Stepping out and trying something outside one's comfort zone strengthens the creative soul. Mark Nepo, one of my favorite writes, says that a bird doesn't sing to be heard, it sings

because that's what a bird does. *To find what your creative soul longs to do, and do it, is to be a bird singing. It's natural, because we are creative!*

We *Shadow Creatives* can judge ourselves harshly. We can beat ourselves up for years over the fact that we have not *acted on our dreams*. Just ask me!! I have an art installation, *Seeing is Believing*, that's been sitting on the back burner for 15 years! I have a novel, *Trust Me*, still in the works! I have a screenplay, *The Labyrinth*, growing a long beard in a file folder on my computer! And I often criticize myself for letting them sit there! But when I finished my first book, *Like a Child: Restoring the Awe, Wonder, Joy, and Resiliency of the Human Spirit*, and produced my first music CD, *True*, I remember being much kinder to myself. Being cruel to ourselves only reinforces us as Shadow Creatives. Remember, and I say this as much to me as you, it takes nurturing, not criticism, to unleash the creativity in our souls. We often did not get sufficient nurturing, but still we blame ourselves for not acting fearlessly anyway. The Censor knows where our jugular is! We *want* to: organize a non-profit, teach children, write a novel, become an activist for universal health care, create music, become a yoga instructor, fight for racial justice – you name it - but we are afraid to take ourselves seriously. We are invited to listen deeply to our soul, created in the image of God, and learn to take that soul, and its particular creativity, seriously. And for many of us, taking our souls seriously means we need to *learn to play*!

Protecting the Creative Child Within

Our creative soul is like a child. We need to find and protect that child. Learning to let ourselves be creative in our unique ways, is like learning to walk. We begin by crawling, then baby steps, and – of course – major fall-down-and-go-boom-booms! Horrible first paintings, can't organize a non-profit in a paper bag, poems that would shame a Hallmark greeting card. The Censor will use these as evidence that we're a fraud. We measure first paintings against a Van Gogh, a reorganization of the company against a Big Eight accounting firm, a new transformational course against an established and well-loved curriculum! We want to be great, fabulous, on Oprah, right out of the gate!

But judging ourselves for early, and often ugly, creative efforts is, really, a form of emotional abuse. As recovering creatives, it is necessary to go gently, kindly, and slow. We are healing old wounds, not adding new ones. Mistakes are necessary! Stumbles are normal! These are baby steps! Progress, not perfection, is what we ask of ourselves. It is an awkward, tentative, even embarrassing process. But take to heart this little truth*: it is impossible to get better, and look good, at the same time.* In order to recover our creative soul, we must be willing to be a not-very-creative soul. Give yourself the permission to be a beginner. Go through the bad creativity, in order to truly be a creative, and perhaps become very creative and alive. One of my mantras when I first started painting was, "I am willing to make bad art, in order to make good art!"

The Enemy Within: Core Negative Beliefs

When we feel blocked in life, it is often because we feel safer that way. Let that sink in. We may not be thriving, not happy, but our life is familiar, and we feel safer with the familiar. We fear the unknown. "If I fully recover my creative soul, what will it mean? What will happen to me, my relationships, my career, my family?" We have some pretty awful notions about what *could* happen. So, rather than find out, we decide to stay blocked. This is seldom done

consciously. *It is more often an unconscious response to internalized negative beliefs.* This week, we will work at uncovering our negative beliefs, seeing their effect on us, and learn to discard them.

Here is a list of commonly held negative beliefs: "I can't be a successful, prolific, happy creative soul because…"

1. Everyone will hate me.
2. I will hurt my friends and my family.
3. I will go crazy.
4. I will abandon by friends and family.
5. I don't have the training or the experience.
6. I don't have good enough ideas.
7. It will upset my father and/or mother.
8. I will have to be alone.
9. I will do bad work and not know it and look like a fool.
10. I will feel too angry.
11. I will never make any real money.
12. I will get self-destructive and drink, drug, or sex myself to death.
13. I will get cancer, auto-immune disease, or a heart attack, or the plague.
14. My lover/spouse will leave me.
15. I will die.
16. I will feel bad because I don't deserve to be successful and happy.
17. I will have only one good idea or piece of work in me, and the rest will be junk.
18. It's too late. If I haven't become a fully-functioning creative soul yet, I never will.
19. People will think I'm selfish.

None of these core negatives need be true. They come to us from our parents, religion, culture, fearful friends, and our own experiences. We need to confront these negative beliefs. Negative beliefs are exactly that: beliefs not facts. *What we are is scared.* A good friend of mine John Common wrote a song, and the words of the chorus go like this: "You're not broken, you're not broken, you're not broken, you're just scared." How true that is. Core negatives keep us scared. The bottom line is that core negatives – personal and cultural – always go for your jugular. They attack any vulnerability, self-doubt, weak spot.

Here is a list of some core negative beliefs and their positive alternatives.

Negative Beliefs	Positive Alternatives
Creative Souls are:	Creative Souls can be:
Drunk	Sober
Crazy	Sane
Broke	Solvent
Irresponsible	Responsible
Loners	User-friendly
Promiscuous	Faithful
Doomed	Saved
Unhappy	Happy
Born, not made	Discovered and Recovered
Selfish	Community Oriented

Underneath our *many* negative beliefs, is a *core* negative belief. We have to make an either/or choice. "I can be romantically happy *or* live into my creative soul." "I can be financial successful *or* be founder of a non-profit, a teacher, writer, painter." By doing this, we devise a price tag that strikes us as too expensive to pay. So, we remain blocked. Behind this blockage is either/or thinking. But it is possible to have both, to be both.

If internalized negativity is the enemy within, I want to introduce you to some effective weaponry. Try it before discarding it out of hand.

Your Ally Within: Affirmative Beliefs

Enough about the *enemy* within, the Censor, the Accuser, and all those negative beliefs. Let's focus on what we do have! An *ally* within: God's life in us, as us, the Spirit, created in the image of God. As blocked creative souls, we often sit on the sidelines judging and critiquing those who are living into their creativity. We might feel animosity, jealousy, and envy, and our resentment can run high. But in many ways this is another stalling technique that reinforces staying stuck in our current impasse. We tell ourselves, "I could do that better, if only…" but we never get to the "if only." We could do better if we would let ourselves do it, if we *believe* we can do it!

Affirmative beliefs will help us allow ourselves to do it. An affirmative belief, commonly referred to as an *affirmation*, is a positive statement, or more precisely, *a positive disposition*.

Some of you may already be rolling your eyes at the idea of "affirmations". We remember, with great belly laughs, the Saturday Night Live skit titled "Daily Affirmations With Stuart Smalley" by actor Al Franken. Stuart Smalley would look in the mirror and say, *"I'm good enough, I'm smart enough, and doggone it, people like me!"*

But let me invite us to do a little math. Yes, math. What is the percentage of *negative beliefs* running in our brains, compared to the percentage of *affirmative beliefs*? It's obvious, right? It is so much easier for us to say negative things to ourselves. We've all probably been asked to *Complete the Sentence*, for example, "I am not…" I bet we could fill pages and pages of what we're not: "I'm not good enough, smart enough, handsome, beautiful, kind." But I would also bet we would struggle to fill in *one* page of "I am…" statements in a positive way! "I am kind, thoughtful, generous, creative, playful." And, my guess is, that many of our responses to the positive "I am…" statement, would come out negative! "I am… a failure, a recluse, a selfish person, untalented, lacking in depth." It seems so clear to me! If we can become one-tenth as good at affirmative self-talk and belief, as we are at negative self-talk and belief, we will notice an enormous change – for the good!

The same goes for our thoughts and feelings about others. Do we tend to find fault, or find the good in others? Do we criticize or praise? Do we tear down or lift up? There is a relationship here between the two. If we have a positive disposition about ourselves, we tend to have it towards others. This is "Love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself," in action.

Another story to demonstrate the difficulty most of us have with affirmations. Before a youth mission trip, we asked the parents to write a "Love Letter" to their teenager.

Grandparents, relatives, and other important adults were invited to do the same. The letters were assembled in a packet, and were to be given to the teenager at the end of the trip. We were very clear to the letter writers - this letter is all positives, no negatives! This is what you LOVE about your son or daughter! But how sad we were when we discovered how many parents could not for one day out of the year, simply say what was lovely, admirable, good, desirable, and creative in their child. They couldn't refrain from criticizing and expressing their disappointment. This is often what we do with ourselves, and with others.

Poet Diane Glancy, speaking to a group of clergy, said, "You build a world in what you say. Words – as I speak or write them – make a path on which I walk." True. But you also build a world in what you say in your head, to yourself, and about others. What kind of path *have* we created, and what kind of path *are* we creating?

Affirmations help us create a sense of safety, security, community, and hope as we recover our creative soul, and recognize the creative soul in others. When we first start working with affirmations, they will feel dumb, hokey, embarrassing. That's interesting to notice, because we so *easily, without embarrassment*, and – more importantly – *without consciousness*, bludgeon ourselves with negative affirmations! "I'm not gifted enough/not clever enough/not original enough/not young enough…" Ad infinitum!

Saying *good* things about ourselves, and others, is notoriously hard to do! Try these and see if they don't sound hopelessly syrupy! "I deserve love; I deserve fair pay; I have rich creative talents; I can have a rewarding creative life; I am a successful business owner – my company is green, pays women and men equally well, is racially diverse up and down the pay scale, and serves the community around it." Did your Censor perk up its nasty little ears? The Censor/The Accuser loathes anything that sounds like *real* self-worth. And it goes into attack mode: "Who do you think you are? You are not those things and you know it!" Julia Cameron calls these Censor outbursts, *blurts*. You will be amazed at the rotten things your subconscious will *blurt* out. Write them down in your Morning Pages. These blurts flag your negative core beliefs, and by investigating them, seeing them, and using affirmations, you begin to become free of them.

Where did your blurts come from? Mom? Dad? Siblings, teachers, your youth pastor? When I first started doing this work, I discovered several blurts that immediately came to consciousness, and I realized how long they had operated just below the surface of my consciousness. I can hear my father say, "You're a disappointment; I thought you knew better." "You never finish anything!" "Don't get your hopes up, so you don't get disappointed." Investigating the source of our negative blurts can unearth long forgotten experiences, sometimes as serious as emotional abuse, child abuse, sexual abuse.

Julia Cameron gives an example (p. 35). Paul had always wanted to be a writer. After a brief flurry of creativity in college, he stopped showing his writing to anyone. He wrote journal after journal, but buried them in a drawer. When he started working with affirmations he was immediately shaken by a volcanic blast of disparagement. When he wrote, "I, Paul, am a brilliant and prolific writer," his subconscious immediately responded with something that felt very familiar: "You're just kidding yourself, a fool, no real talent, a pretender, a dilettante, a joke…"

Where did this core belief come from? Paul looked into his past, and located, with great embarrassment, the person this belief came from. A malevolent early teacher had first praised his writing, and then set about a sexual seduction. Fearful that he had invited the man's attention, and ashamed that his writing was rotten too, Paul buried the incident in his unconscious, where it festered. No wonder, then, when someone praised him, he feared they had secondary motives. He didn't trust the praise; they didn't really mean it. This core negative belief, that he was only kidding himself that he could write, had dominated his thinking for a decade. Once Paul brought this monster up from the depths, he began to work with it, through affirmations. "I, Paul, have a real talent. I, Paul, trust and enjoy positive feedback. I, Paul, have a real talent…" The positive affirmations felt uncomfortable at first. But soon they helped Paul find the freedom to participate in the first public reading of his work. When he was widely praised for it, he was able to accept the praise without discounting it.

Pay attention to your own list of blurts. They are very important to your creative soul recovery. Each one of them has held you in some form of bondage. Each of them needs to be dissolved, or turned into an affirmation. For example, a blurt that runs, "I, Mona, am untalented and a phony" might be converted to the affirmative belief "I, Mona, am genuinely talented."

Here is a list of creative affirmations. Try a few out, or create your own, and use them after writing your Morning Pages.

1. I am a channel for God's creativity, and my work comes to good.
2. My deep dreams come from God and God has the power to accomplish them.
3. As I create and listen, I will be lead.
4. Creativity is the Creator's will for me.
5. My creativity heals myself and others, and encourages others to be creative.
6. I am allowed to nurture my creative soul, and the creative soul in others.
7. Through the use of a few simple practices, my creativity will flourish.
8. Through the use of my creativity, I serve God.
9. My creativity always leads me to truth and love.
10. My creativity leads me to forgive others and to forgive myself.
11. There is a divine blueprint of goodness for me.
12. There is a divine blueprint of goodness for my work.
13. As I listen to the Creator within, I am led.
14. As I listen to my creativity, I am led to my Creator.
15. I am willing to create.
16. I am willing to learn to let myself create.
17. I am willing to let God create through me.
18. I am willing to be of service through my creativity.
19. I am willing to experience my creative energy.
20. I am willing to use my creative talents.

Try them. Yes, they'll feel embarrassing, awkward, unreal. But just try them for this week. What do you have to lose?

Weekly Tasks:

1. Morning Pages every day.
2. Take yourself on a creative soul date.

3. List three old enemies of your creative soul, and be as specific as possible as you write down how they criticized, judged, and shut down your sense of creativity.
4. List three old champions of your creative soul, and be as specific as possible as you write down the ways they supported and encouraged your creative self.
5. Imaginary Lives: If you had three other lives to live, what would you do in each of them? Examples: a cowboy, an author, a pilot, a performance artist, an economics teacher, a coach, a scientist. Then, during the week sometime, pick one of these imaginary lives and do something that you would do if you chose to live your life that way. A cowboy, go ride a horse. A poet, write a poem.

Check-In:

1. How many days this week did you do your Morning Pages? Seven out of seven we always hope! How was the experience for you?
2. Did you do your creative soul date this week? Yes, of course, we always hope, and yet they can be remarkably difficult to allow yourself. What did you do? How did it feel?
3. Were there any other issues or events this week that you consider important to pay attention to? Briefly describe them and why they were important.