

CAKE

*A reflection
on aspiration and ambition
in the life of an artist*

by
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You're listening to this today because you have a gift. That gift is creativity, and it's come to you wrapped up in luck: the good fortune to have been born in a place, and in an era, that gives you the chance to use it.

Your creativity is a gift in two senses, of course. It's a special ability - you're "gifted" - but it's also, quite simply, a gift - something that's been bestowed on you, freely and without obligation. You didn't ask for it, after all. Perhaps it took you a little while even to notice it sitting there, and to unwrap it. Sometimes you're grateful for your gift, but I'll bet there have been days when you wished you could send it back - because, as we all know, being talented doesn't always correlate with being happy. Whether you see your gift as coming from chance or from genetics, as a random twist of fate or a sign of divine providence, it was given to you, from the beginning. You didn't order it; you didn't earn it. It was just there.

When a gift is so generous, and so potentially life-changing, it's not always easy to accept it. "*Maybe I don't deserve this,*" you think. "*Surely there has to be a price,*" you think. Ambition for success is the way you make yourself pay for the gift of creativity.

Never make the mistake of thinking that creativity and ambition are the same thing. One is all about the gap; the other is all about the void. So what's the gap? It's that frustrating, tantalising, inevitable distance between the ghost-work whose hazy form you first intuited, and the real work you managed to create. As artists, we live in a kind of Plato's Cave. All of those true, faultless creative works reside outside, and we can know them only by the shadows they cast on the walls of our minds. Based on those fuzzy glimpses, we create our cave paintings - sometimes beautiful, sometimes enduring, but always approximate; stylised; reduced.

The Gap, to a creative person, is both reproach and inducement, carrot and stick. To sense that we're narrowing it, even just a little, is one of the deep rewards of a sustained creative practice. Wanting to close the gap isn't "ambition". It's *aspiration*: the longing for a higher goal, for something above,

something hard to reach. The word aspiration originally referred to the act of breathing into something, and isn't that just what artists do? We create these approximations, these sometimes Frankensteinian mockups, and we breathe our will and our little wisdoms into them, hoping they'll live. And just sometimes, they do.

If ambition is nothing to do with creative aspiration, then what is it? To go back to etymology, the word ambition emerged to mean "a striving for favour; an eager or inordinate desire for honour or preferment; a thirst for popularity," and it's in this sense that I use it today. Where creative aspiration is all about what we can *do*, ambition is about what we can *get*. Ambition isn't about the gap; rather, it's about the void, that vacuum within us that we're unable to fill ourselves; the painful, self-doubting emptiness that clamours for external praise and recognition and reward, but is never really satisfied by them.

Where creative aspiration uses an internal, intuitive scale to measure things, ambition is enslaved to worldly metrics - your "level of success" - and the world's yardsticks just happen to be perfectly proportioned for beating yourself with. I'll say it again: ambition is the way you make yourself pay for the gift of creativity.

You make yourself pay; remember that. Maybe you're haunted by the parent who doubted you, or the teacher who belittled you. Maybe you want to be listened to, because nobody listened when it mattered. Maybe you have a pressing sense of your own mortality, and a need to make some mark before it's too late. All these things are salt to the thirst of ambition, but nonetheless, *you* are the one making yourself pay.

I say that ambition is the way that you make yourself pay - but what's the price? That comes in many currencies. Sometimes it's the hearts of the people who love you, as the occupying forces of consuming ambition shut you away from friends and family. Sometimes it's your happiness, as the oxidising forces of thwarted ambition corrode your natural optimism with bitterness and cynicism. Sometimes it's the integrity of your art, as the corrupting forces of rewarded ambition steer you in directions that cut across your aspiration and scar your creative soul.

Your life as an artist will be a constant tension between creative aspiration and worldly ambition: the private rewards and the public ones. Some people say that for artists, worldly success is the icing on the cake. I say that recognition and prizes and sales and all those worldly things are not icing, but cake itself.

Imagine, for a moment, the most amazingly delicious chocolate cake you've ever tasted. It's stuffed with butter, sugar, cream and real dark chocolate; it's moist and rich and intense. You devour your slice of this cake, and then you look down at your empty plate, cleaned of even the last crumbs.

"Oh.... No more cake."

Later in the day, you can't even properly remember what that amazing cake tasted like - not really. What you feel now is a mournful yearning for more cake, which is intensified by the low mood of a post-cake sugar crash.

The enjoyment of worldly success is like the enjoyment of cake. It'd be pretty crazy to demonise cake. Cake's for celebrating, for sharing. Cake's a brief but indisputably satisfying pleasure. Have you ever been on some fad diet where you weren't allowed to eat anything even vaguely enjoyable? I'm guessing you spent every minute of every day thinking about food. Possibly about cake.

If you're pricked by the spurs of ambition, then trying to pretend that you're oblivious to worldly success is like crash dieting. What happens when you do that? You find yourself resenting your best friend for eating a donut in front of you. You find yourself angry at supermarket confectionery displays and restaurant menus and TV commercials for chocolate. Come ten PM, when you're tired and right out of willpower, you find yourself standing in the blue glow of an opened fridge, attempting to stuff a whole camembert into your mouth. In other words, you don't eliminate your craving; it just becomes covert, destructive, occasionally out of control.

The hardest thing about the cake of recognition is that in most artforms, there's damn little of it to go around, and it never seems to be shared out equally. One of the great challenges of the artistic life is managing to enjoy

the rare slice of cake that comes your way, without being snared by its addictive sugar-hooks, and without growing bitter at its scarcity. For most of us, this is difficult - and it stays difficult. Sometimes, to mangle a proverb, it seems you don't get to have your cake *or* to eat it.

The gift of creativity is a commonplace; I believe it's an innate part of being human, even if many never fully release it in themselves. The burden of ambition is also commonplace; perhaps it, too, comes pre-configured in the standard human package. The most blessed, and the most unusual, are those who can welcome the gift without picking up the burden; who can feel liberated rather than obligated by their talents; who can vest their will and find their fulfilment in the stretch of creative aspiration rather than the clumsy grab of ambition; who can know cake without also knowing craving.

Most of us are not those people, and we struggle and stumble, lurching between vainglorious triumphalism and black despond. We feel indebted by the universe's gift of our talents. We forget that the best way to respond to a gift is not to get something more, but to give something back. As a creative artist, how *do* you give something back in similar coin and in fair proportion to your gift? It's simple.

You continue in your hero's quest to close that unclosable gap. You strive to make the near-misses of your art more near, less miss. You give the world your best "almosts", your wild hints at the ineffable. Most importantly, you find your courage. When the void yawns within, you look unflinchingly into it, knowing it for what it is, acknowledging its bottomlessness and the futility of trying to fill it. When ambition sneaks up from that void to goad and castigate and wound, you face it down and you stand your ground; you keep making your art. You find your courage, because you understand that an artist must, above all else, be brave.

If you can do these things mindfully, patiently, and with your whole heart, you will find yourself well-nourished as an artist - with or without cake. I wish you courage for the journey, and much joy of it.

About the author

Kona Macphee is a thingwright and creativity evangelist. She grew up in Australia and now lives in rural Scotland, where she works as a freelance media producer and runs Muse Tuners (www.musetuners.co.uk), an agency providing one-to-one writing and creativity support.

Kona's three poetry collections, *Tails* (2004), *Perfect Blue* (2010) and *What Long Miles* (2013), are all published by Bloodaxe Books. *Perfect Blue* received the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize for 2010. You can find out more about Kona and her books at www.konamacphee.com.

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