

Creating in Social Complexity
Mixtape: A poetic lens on creating in complexity

INTRODUCTION: COMPLEXITY BRINGS US TO OUR EDGE

Marc Rettig I'm Marc Rettig, and I'm making this mix for students in the MFA in Design for Social Innovation at the School of Visual Arts.

I think there's a neglected door into complexity through the personal experience of its challenges. Some people love big ideas and are able to translate them to their situation. Others have a difficult time making the connection between life and ideas like say, emergence.

Experience has its own language. And really I think that's one of the things poetry is for. To help us find language for a true experience. Most poetry doesn't teach. Instead, it gives us a chance to recognize. "I've experienced that! At last I have words for it."

Here's the poet David Whyte, from a talk he gave to the Association for Clinical Pastoral Education in 2019.

Whyte on identity at our conversational edge

David Whyte It's interesting to think of your identity lying not within you or without you, but at the very place where you meet the world. And this is what I call the conversational nature of reality. The fact that whatever you desire of the world will not happen exactly as you would like it to happen. But equally, whatever the world desires of you will not happen exactly as it wants you to happen.

And what actually happens is this meeting between what you think is you and what you think is not you. And actually this is the only place where things are real. Not in the abstract of what I've made up for myself about the world, nor in the abstract of what the world has made up about me. But in the very place where I meet the world, that edge, that physical sense of edge, that psychological sense of edge, the place where I'm actually uncovering and re-understanding both the world and myself at the same time.

Marc Rettig The place where I'm uncovering and re-understanding both the world and myself at the same time. I find that poetry helps me operate at that place. And that's why this mix is almost entirely made of poetry.

And since we can't be in the same room to work with these poems together, I'll offer my side of that here. The connection I'm feeling between the poem and our conversations in class, conversations I have with others trying to do the same work.

3:00 There are four chapters in this mix: wonder, creating in complexity, and lost, and then trust. They have a kind of progression. But really you can take them in any order.

PART ONE: WONDER 3:07

Sound: Yard party at Jose's house

Marc Rettig

Reading the world
as if it were a book
written before words

That Sparrow
perched on the withered stalk
in the garden.
Isn't the Bird itself
a song to the beloved?

I'll read that again.

Reading the world
as if it were a book
written before words

That Sparrow
perched on the withered stalk
in the garden.
Isn't the Bird itself
a song to the beloved?

That's a poem by Gregory Orr, and I love it for the way it starts with a giant invitation to see differently. Reading the world as if it were a book written before words. And then it scopes all the way down to a single sparrow and ties that sparrow to a fresh way of seeing. The bird itself a song to the beloved. In just a few lines. It's quite a ride.

By the way, the sounds in this mix, call them music, are things I've recorded over the years all over the world. They're all for me, moments of wonder. And wonder is why we started with a poem by Gregory Orr. More than almost any other poet except maybe Mary Oliver, Orr helps me connect to the wonder of the world, the wonder of it all, shadow and light. For all our talk about complexity, let's not lose that sense of wonder.

Orr made a book called Concerning the Book that is the Body of the Beloved. And here's what he says about that title.

Orr on "the book"

Gregory Orr
6:00

There's a thing called the book, and what it is is this giant invisible anthology (this is my religion) that contains all the songs and poems that were ever written. They're there to sustain us. Their purpose is to praise the beloved and to resurrect the beloved. We live in this mystery of love and death and being a body in time, and we also live inside the mystery of language and what it can do. So that's what these poems are about. They're about the beloved and us as we move through love and death and resurrection and through poems and songs.

Marc Rettig

Reading the world
as if it were a book
written before words

That Sparrow
perched on the withered stalk
in the garden.
Isn't the Bird itself
a song to the beloved?

Sound: Pond frogs in the frog pond

Orr, *Crocus and Dandelion*

Here's two more bursts of wonder from Orr. I'll read them one after another. Oh, and I should say about the first one, in case you're not familiar. A crocus is a flower that grows in some parts of the world and its little purple blossom is often the first flower of Spring. They peek up and bloom right through the snow. Here's Orr.

How the crocus pops up
Leafless stock and purple
Blossom cup out of bare mud!

As if it couldn't wait any longer.
Not even the grass has ventured forth.
Ice and snow could still return.

What does the Beloved care?
So eager to begin again,
To welcome the new life.

...

The dandelion, too.
First, it's a plush sun,
Then, before you know it,
It's become a ghostly globe—
And of its two forms,
Who can say
Which is more lovely?

As if you had to choose
Between the glorious world
And the words that resurrect it.

Those two poems contain key ideas that Orr returns to over and over again. One is the irresistible force of life. What does the Beloved care so eager to begin again to welcome the new life?

And the other is the fact that we are participants in creating life. Our lives are part of the book for Orr. And by speaking or writing, we add pages to the book.

He says, "...As if you had to choose between the glorious world and the words that resurrect it." We don't have to choose because our words are part of the world.

9:00

I'll end this section on wonder here. Consider it an invitation into the poetry of wonder. An invitation to pay a certain kind of attention to the things around you. All those processes. Everyone and everything in the process of becoming the next version of itself. In that certain kind of attention, you're at the meeting place David Whyte described in the introduction to this series. The place where you and others, you and the world, meet and mingle and get into conversation.

In this new year (I'm recording this in the first days of January), it's maybe a good invitation to respond to. An encounter we can choose any time. A conversation waiting for us to join.

PART TWO: UNFOLDING 10:00

Sound: Moving cattle up Shonkin Creek

Marc Rettig

It has been a theme through our conversations about creating in social complexity, that rather than carpenters or engineers of life we create through the way we participate.

And here's my favorite poem about that. It's by an American poet named A.R. Ammons. Archibald Ammons.

It's not an easy poem. Most people don't catch its meanings on first reading. So how about this? Uh, first I'll just read it straight through and then we'll come back and take it a piece at a time so we can gather the creating in complexity nuggets. Here's Ammons.

Poetics

I look for the way
things will turn
out spiraling from a center,
the shape
things will take to come forth in

so that the birch tree white
touched black at branches
will stand out
wind-glittering
totally its apparent self:

I look for the forms
things want to come as

from what black wells of possibility,
how a thing will
unfold:

not the shape on paper — though
that, too — but the
uninterfering means on paper:

not so much looking for the shape
as being available
to any shape that may be
summoning itself
through me
from the self not mine but ours.

12:00

Well holy smokes, there's a lot happening in there. For most of this mix we'll just take in the poems. But this one touches so strongly on these themes and it's so dense and surprising, well, let's work with this one a bit.

I look for the way
things will turn
out spiraling from a center,

It's a kind of... he's talking about a kind of creative attention in the midst of emergence. A reminder that creativity is first a work of attention. "I look for the way things will turn out, spiraling from a center,"

the shape
things will take to come forth in.

Now this is a poet speaking of writing as though it's something he's observing. That's happening outside him, even though he is a participant and he's the source.

...the shape things will take to come forth in
so that the birch tree white
touched black at branches
will stand out
wind-glittering
totally its apparent self:

If you don't know birch trees, their bark is white and streaked with black marks. And they are Ammons' example of something turning out from a center—the shape something took to come forth in, according to its nature. The birch tree becomes its full self. "Totally its apparent self."

It's lovely to think of our creative work this way. Lovely to think of ourselves this way. When we try to create, industrial culture has given us this idea that we need to somehow express our will on the world. There's this feeling of exertion or striving to so much of what people call creative work. And Ammons was a teacher for thirty years and a poet for probably fifty years. Both teaching and writing are famously arenas of striving. But Ammons reports a different way of seeing creative work.

He says,

I look for the forms
things want to come as

from what black wells of possibility,
how a thing will
unfold:

I mean, oh. I mean “black wells of possibility.” Hidden and deep. Poetic imagery of water, like the well as deep source. Often the source we are afraid to look at, are afraid to enter. Seeing the well as containing possibility and from that deep, invisible source, the work of creation unfolds.

not the shape on paper — though
that, too — but the
uninterfering means on paper:

15:00 So it's not about the form. Ammons says “paper” because he's a writer. For you, it might be the shape in Photoshop or the shape in the community meeting. He says, not the shape but the process. The means. The “uninterfering process.”

Uninterfering. That confused me for a long time. What is it not interfering with? I think it's not getting in the way of the unfolding from the well of possibility. It's not interfering in the way something unfolds into a form, totally It's apparent self.

In these courses and a lot of my conversations with colleagues, we work with social challenges. And in design we work with challenges of making. And we can have this idea that things won't change unless we work for change. An idea that the shape and quality of what gets made depends entirely on our abilities. But when I read Ammons and other poets we'll get to in a minute, I think, “How narrow and arrogant and unseeing, to think we are isolated agents of change.” Something bigger is going on.

“Not the shape, but the uninterfering means.”

not so much looking for the shape
as being available
to any shape that may be
summoning itself
through me

Not looking for the shape. Not trying to force a specific shape onto the form, onto something's becoming, but being available to any shape. I love that. Openness in creativity. Openness in uncertainty. The shape comes from the thing becoming itself, and don't get in its way. Be available as that shape summons itself through you.

And this last line.

from the self not mine but ours.

18:00 And not yourself, but ourself. Us together. Poetry comes from us, through us and I think so too any creative work and very much so co-creation in social situations. We're part of something bigger than ourselves. And that something is a process and we are ourselves processes who participate in the unfolding of larger things into their own form. It's as though we're each a participant in life's creative process.

For me, this is the poetic lens on creativity.

Sound: Highwood Creek

PART THREE: LOST 19:00

Sound: Bad at whistling

Marc Rettig Ammons' view of creativity and work is beautiful, but it's also uncomfortable. Early in our course, we heard from consultant and coach Sonja Blignaut, who reminded us of something important about the experience of complexity.

Sonja Blignaut, from *Navigating Uncertainty: Pioneering Habits of Mind*

Sonja Blignaut I've been challenged by realizing how much we've been indoctrinated in a way to see stability and certainty as normal, and periods of instability and uncertainty as abnormal and it's supposed to be transient, so it needs to be temporary.

When things become uncertain, we think it will pass. It's almost like we believe that the mist will clear and the road will appear again. And it might look a bit different, but it will be a new stability.

And I think what we are starting to realize now is that uncertainty is the normal. And that is really difficult, I think, for us to deal with because we are used to dealing with short-term periods of uncertainty, but dealing with perpetual uncertainty that won't necessarily end, that creates a lot of anxiety.

21:00 And so what I'm seeing in the consulting that I do in my clients is this sense of people feeling completely unmoored. It's like they've lost their bearings. There's no more stable ground for them to stand on. And on, on the one hand, that generates a lot of anxiety, but on the other hand, that's more or less where I think pioneers come into their own. And where pioneering is what we need to do. So in a way, we are in complete uncharted territory. I have a friend, who he's in the psychodynamic space. And one of the things that he said that I really loved is that those who will thrive in the future are the ones who are able to turn anxiety into creative energy.

And this, I think, is the space of the pioneers. This is where we are in this uncharted territory and in the same way that it's anxiety provoking, there are also so many options that we can explore.

Lost, uncertain, paying attention

Marc Rettig Well, those are poetic themes—feeling lost, expecting certainty, but encountering only uncertainty, expecting a path and finding there's no path. There's a famous poem from Spanish poet Antonio Machado. It's a longer poem, but this is the part that's repeated most often.

Traveler, your footprints
are the only road, nothing else.
Traveler, there is no path;
The path is made by walking
By walking, the path is made.
and when you look back
you see the path
you will never travel again.
Traveler, there is no path,
only a ship's wake in the sea.

I sometimes imagine a wide plain of tall grass. We want to travel to the other side of that plain, but there's no path through it. As we walk our feet push down the grass, and when we look back we see the path we've made by our walking. There are many poems on that same theme. Try searching the web for "poetry about no path."

And well, that's a lovely image. And for me it's useful to notice when I feel bothered because I thought there'd be a path but there isn't one.

But Machado's poem doesn't capture the anxiety that Sonja Blignaut was talking about. Uncertainty is uncomfortable. We feel anxious not knowing where we are or what to do next. That's uncomfortable.

So I find myself returning over and over to poems about being lost or feeling lost. What I notice is that they often talk about a kind of attention. That being lost changes the way we pay attention to the world, or at least invites us to do so.

24:00

Here's David Whyte, from his recording called *Clear Mind, Wild Heart*.

David Whyte on David Waggoner's "Lost"

David Whyte

This is where the invitation, I think in poetry and our great contemplative traditions, is quite radical. Because it's saying you actually to find your solid ground in a kind of movement. You have to find it in the dance and the encounter itself. And it's the great pattern of which all of that movement is a part of that will give you an embracing sense of home in the world.

But to begin with it can be very difficult, to want to come out from behind yourself. And you're continually feeling as if the more brittle parts of yourself will not survive the encounter.

This is the kind of invitation that would be made in the old native tradition of the Pacific Northwest of the United States to a young boy or girl, to actually come out of themselves. And it's a teaching story that'll be told by an elder to a young boy or girl who asked a very practical question, "What do I do when I'm lost in the forest?"

In the Pacific Northwest, historically there have been huge forests growing along the edges of the coast and on the islands. Forests that were 150 foot high, full of hemlock and cedar and fir. To walk even just a hundred yards into those woodlands meant that you would lose sight of all four cardinal directions. You wouldn't know which way was north, south, east or west.

So it would be a very real question, life or death question sometimes for a child to say, grandma, grandpa, what do I do when I'm lost in the forest? In other words, how do I place myself in an incredibly complex world? And how do I do it in a way that won't kill me in the process?

And this is the answer that the elder gives. It's an old teaching story, as I said, but it's been rendered into modern English by one of our great contemporary poets, David Waggoner. And these are the words the elder speaks to the child.

Lost

Stand still. The trees ahead and bushes beside you
Are not lost. Wherever you are is called Here,
And you must treat it as a powerful stranger,
Must ask permission to know it and be known.
The forest breathes. Listen. It answers,
I have made this place around you,
If you leave it you may come back again, saying Here.

27:00

No two trees are the same to Raven.
No two branches are the same to Wren.
If what a tree or a bush does is lost on you,
You are surely lost. Stand still. The forest knows
Where you are. You must let it find you.

What do I do when I'm lost in the forest? "Stands still. Stand still. The trees ahead and bushes beside you are not lost."

Again here the same intimation in all our old myths. The promised land is just one step away from you. But you know, it will take everything in your existence to take that one step. Because it's the step to the edge. It's the step that involves meeting something other than yourself. Hearing a voice that is not your own.

When you put yourself in conversation, truly in conversation with something that is other than yourself, if you stop feeling that the world is just a projection of you, that the world was created only so that you could take your next step in existence, then you have a possibility of discovering something that would be seen as real.

What do I do when I'm lost in the forest?

Stand still. The trees ahead and bushes beside you
Are not lost. Wherever you are is called Here,
And you must treat it as a powerful stranger,
Must ask permission to know it and be known.
The forest breathes. Listen. It answers,
I have made this place around you,
If you leave it you may come back again, saying Here.
No two trees are the same to Raven.
No two branches are the same to Wren.
If what a tree or a bush does is lost on you,
You are surely lost. Stand still. The forest knows
Where you are. You must let it find you.

There's so many pivotal lines in this short poem, but one of them is, "if what a tree or a branch does is lost on you, then you are surely lost." The elder is inviting this child to a particularly fierce kind of attention of the world. He's saying you must see, hear, feel every moment of your existence because this forest will take care of you. It will provide shelter, medicines, food for you to eat. But it will also kill you as soon as look at you. The world is a very fierce place and you don't last very long physically or metaphorically if you're not paying real attention.

I forgot I was lost

Marc Rettig
30:00

There's so much in there. I include that passage in this mix, a mix made for students of something called Design for Social Innovation, for two reasons. One is the idea that we started with, what Greg Orr reminded us of. There's something huge that contains us. For Orr, The Book of all Life, which he calls "The Body of the Beloved." In Whyte's comments on Waggoner's poem, it's the forest. We can pretend we are

alone or we can recognize we're moving through an enormous context and start paying attention. No path? Stop. Notice. What will carry us together through uncertainty? That's the way we pay attention.

I've been sitting with this idea for four or five years. Here's a poem that came out of me in pieces and bits through those years. I forgot I was lost.

Forgetting I was lost,
I planned
and started walking.
No surprise I didn't arrive.
No surprise I noticed nothing.

Remembering I was lost,
I stopped
and looked at the world.
How lovely this place,
how lovely these people,
how messy my fears.

And that is how
I came home.

Sound: Walking in the snow at -20°F

PART FOUR: TRUST 31:20

Marc Rettig

Well. We have this wonder, and the mystery of creating by participating in the flowing complexity of it all. We have the fact that we'll often feel lost and so we must pay good attention. That's quite a bit more messy than the story I was given in the early chapters of my life.

That line in the last poem—"How messy my fears." Yeah. Once I started paying attention, I found the world and I found my fears, and then it says, "That is how I came home." Where in this messiness can we put our trust? What holds us up when we can't see where we are? We don't know how to get where we'd like to go. We're tired, or maybe we feel alone. Maybe heartbroken. Maybe just lazy.

All those things are okay. They're unavoidable in life. But if we truly think we're alone in them, our fire might go out. I know life has its seasons. There's times when we have no juice to give and times we can't help dancing. So yeah, we each experience uptime and downtime.

33:00

But this mix is about creating together in complexity. So I repeat my question. Where in this messiness can we put our trust? I have a little list of answers to that question, so three more poems. The first one comes from David Whyte. The introduction and poem, *Working Together*, is from his audio collection called *Clear Mind, Wild Heart*.

Whyte: trust movement in contact with forces that shape us

David Whyte

My own work involves much traveling and much time spent on airplanes. And I've often looked out over the wing of a plane with a landscape stretched out below and wondered about the invisible forces that hold that plane in place. And sometimes as you're descending, usually it's when you're descending

through layers of temperature and humidity, you'll suddenly actually get a striking view of those invisible forces made visible. You'll see a tight white line of vapor passing over the wing of the plane.

You see actually writ large and made completely visible the aerodynamics that are holding the plane in the air. And you realize that the forces that are holding you up, seemingly holding you up invisibly, are incredibly strong and incredibly powerful. And they're just as forceful as anything we know in the visible world.

I often think that a human being attempting to find their work in life in many ways is like a plane which has been shaped to pass through the air and to call on invisible forces. And there are marked times in a person's life where suddenly all the invisible forces become visible around them. And I do think in many ways that work is a form of important, almost sacred visibility for the invisible interiority of each soul on this earth.

We shape our self
to fit this world

and by the world
are shaped again.

The visible
and the invisible

working together
in common cause,

to produce
the miraculous.

36:00

I am thinking of the way
the intangible air

passed at speed
round a shaped wing

easily
holds our weight.

So may we, in this life
trust

to those elements
we have yet to see

or imagine,
and look for the true

shape of our own self,
by forming it well

to the great
intangibles about us.

Marc Rettig

Where in this messiness can we put our trust? Whyte suggests that allowing ourselves to be shaped as we move through the world puts us in partnership with forces that hold us up. As he said in the first clip, we find solid ground through a kind of movement. We find it in the dance and encounter itself.

For me, there's a connection. Creating in complexity comes through participation. Being in it, moving through it. And that very same participation puts us in contact with people and movements that we can trust to support us.

If you listen to people who are doing creative work, difficult work, most will say that their work and learning and is entirely made of relationships with other people, either directly or through the gifts of other people's writing. I'm still here because of others. And I am who I am because of participation in life with so many people. So we can put our trust in the way movement puts us in supportive, sustaining contact with the world.

Oliver: trust your Self

What else? This one might seem radical depending on where you grew up, how you were raised and taught. You can trust yourself. I'll put it to you as a question. What if you were already enough?

Mary Oliver has a famous poem about this called Wild Geese. Let's hear her read it to us.

Mary Oliver

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
For a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting --
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

39:00

Marc Rettig

That poem. It starts with a message to the voice in ourselves that tells us we aren't enough.

You do not have to be good.

And then makes a confident invitation to trust our inner nature.

You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.

And it ends by pointing out the confident gaze the world holds toward us and the invitation it's constantly making.

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting --
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

So there's a second bit of solid ground where we can put our trust: the fundamental wonder of who you are and the world's constant reminder that we do have a place in it all.

Sound: Geese over the Missouri at Fort Benton

De Chardin: trust the bigger story

Here's one more, a third invitation to trust. It's via a gent named Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a French Jesuit priest and paleontologist and teacher. I don't think the Catholics like him very much these days, or scientists either really. But he did make at least one poem that people still pass around to each other. Even Jesuits, and it's about trust.

One thing before we hear the poem. de Chardin refers to God. He's a priest after all. God may or may not be an idea that's important to you, and you may not have the same idea about God as de Chardin. Fine. I'll report that I come to this poem with an idea kind of like Gregory Orr and David Waggoner, and Machado and Whyte and many other poets we could have included in this mix. Mary Oliver. Whatever our idea about God, we're all participants in a world of complexity and emergence. The world is bigger than our idea of the world. We are bigger than the world's idea of us. The world is bigger and messier than our plans, and as Whyte says, "what you can plan is too small for you to live."

42:00

So when I read de Chardin and he speaks of God, I feel Orr's beloved and Orr's book of all experience and language. I feel the movement of relationship, of hurt and care, and effort and ease. It All.

That's me. I'll give you the poem and you can make it your. Here's de Chardin's *Prayer of Trust*.

Above all, trust in the slow work of God.
We are quite naturally impatient in everything
to reach the end without delay.
We should like to skip the intermediate stages.
We are impatient of being on the way to something
unknown, something new.
And yet it is the law of all progress
that it is made by passing through
some stages of instability—
and that it may take a very long time.

And so I think it is with you;
your ideas mature gradually—let them grow,
let them shape themselves, without undue haste.
Don't try to force them on,
as though you could be today what time

will make of you tomorrow.

Only God could say what this new spirit
gradually forming within you will be.
Give Our Lord the benefit of believing
that his hand is leading you,
and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself
in suspense and incomplete

O'Donohue: Like the river flows

There's so much more we could read together. I think of this as a small part of a much larger collection we could make. Well, I, I'm still collecting of poetry of creating together in complexity. We could spend an hour on poetry of attention, or the unavoidable grief of this work. The wonder of emergence in the world.

But I'll end by offering a poem that's so short, you can memorize it right now. It's by the Irish poet philosopher, John O'Donohue. I'll say it twice and after that, you might know it well enough to say it back yourself. It goes like this.

45:00

I would like to live
as the river flows
carried by the surprise
of its own unfolding.

Thank you for listening.

Sound: Laughing photographers