

## PLAY 20 Re-Create Oneself at Any Age

Maurice L. Monette  
June, 2020

### 1. “To play or not to play?” That is the question.

At 68, I asked myself, “Why not play 20?”

The idea to “play 20” hit me when I reflected on the fact that many 20-year-olds become able to identify themselves as professionals of some sort by the time they reach 25. Julia is suddenly an engineer. David has become a nurse. So, with all my experience at 68, why can’t I make myself the artist or writer I’ve actually dreamed of being? Why can’t I begin to identify myself as an artist or writer and become a respectable one within five years?



The inspiration to play 20 moved me to learn creative writing. I turned to a writing coach who taught me the basics of the craft and I began writing stories. After composing about 100 one or two-page stories in about a year’s time, I realized that I was creating a personal memoir. A year later, I self-published 80 of those stories as a book. Within two years I had become the creative writer I had dreamed of being. People I didn’t know would meet me on the street and say, “you’re the writer, aren’t you?” At first, I hesitated identifying myself that way, being accustomed to identifying myself as executive coach, organizational consultant, technical writer, and university professor that I had been for most of my life. But, of course, “I am a writer.” I write every day – and that makes me a writer!

Painting suddenly interested me too. I turned to a coach who taught me the basics of painting with acrylics. That led me to teach myself drawing, with lessons on the Internet. Within a year, people were buying my work. I had become an artist!

So, why should becoming a writer or artist (or whatever I want to become) at an older age be any more impossible than at 20? I’m now an artist and a creative writer.

Each of the following essays describes a joy or challenge along my Play-20 journey, provides samples of my drawings, and includes something important I learned about learning anything new as an older adult.

***Play 20, Lesson 1: Answer the question: “Do I really want to learn?”***



## 2. To take the first step

The Sketcher is one of my more recent drawings. The other drawings, by contrast, are some of my earliest. They are rudimentary; but when I created them five years ago I was very proud, because I had never before drawn a thing, except perhaps for a duck in elementary school. I hadn't painted either, except for a watercolor scene of "Jesus ascending into heaven" as interpreted by my child mind. It featured footprints on a rock and two bare feet dangling from the top of the paper. I share these early attempts not because I am proud of them now (as I am of *The Sketcher*), but to show how drawing (or any new skill) can improve with practice.

So, at 68, what made me want to draw? Admiration – admiration for the work of an artist in our neighborhood who used his balcony to dry his fresh paintings. "Wouldn't we like to produce beauty like that?" I asked my husband. We hired him to teach us. At first, he had us draw our own fists. Later he had us draw a person's back. You don't want to see the

messes I made of those: inaccurate shapes, no shading, sad proportions, oh my! Just when I was ready to toss my carbon pencil out the window, he had us work with pastels. Again, I produced no masterpieces, just lots of brown mud, which is what happens when colors are badly mixed. But, I persisted and, over the eight lessons, I did manage to produce kindergarten-level beauty. Drawing, the art teacher told me, is the basis of good painting. My first lines did not deserve applause. But my frustration with myself gave birth to a desire to meet my teacher's expectations. To succeed I had to conquer self-talk such as "I can't," "I'm too old," "I am not an artist," and "What will people think?" My teacher's encouragement and my own mule-like drive to produce beauty led me to overcome my fears and just keep trying.

***Play 20, Lesson 2: Take the first baby step with clear motivation.***





### 3. To be a baby again

The Internet was a great teacher for me as a beginner. I had never had a basic art course, so concepts like perspective, foreshortening, proportion, and shadowing were vague to me. I even knew nothing about which pencils or papers to use. I credit teachers like Ethan and Proko for introducing me to the basics of the craft. They offer free YouTube videos and inexpensive courses that are understandable to baby artists like me. I'd watch them, then practice, practice, and practice until I was able to copy what they did. Soon I was able to draw a house in perspective, from the front and the side and the top. I understood basic drawing principles and began to exercise the craft with one-point, two-point, and three-point perspective. These are notions I had never understood before. I also learned to draw circles, squares, rectangles, and tubes and also see these shapes in drawing subjects like the human body. Each new learning confirmed my ability to draw and encouraged me to practice and practice and practice.



I've used the phrase "baby artist" to refer to myself. Older adults often say that children learn more easily than adults. Yes, children do; but could that be because children are very eager to learn and because they know that they don't know everything? I noticed that I can learn if I am willing to become a baby again. Instead of making excuses about how not being able to learn, why not nurture a willingness to explore newness and begin again and explore the wide world beyond the womb? Being a baby can be fun. I particularly enjoyed watching myself acquire new skills and do things I had never imagined I could do. What do babies feel when they burst into smiles after taking their first solid steps toward an applauding parent? What wonder do they sense when unfolding each new skill? I practiced being a baby and I watched myself grow!

***Play 20, Lesson 3: Practice being a baby learner, letting go of adult hang-ups.***



#### 4. To emerge from paralysis

My very first abstract appeared out of nothing, and I do mean nothing, because nothing was all I could put on the canvas. My teacher came to me and asked if I needed help. “You look stuck.” “Yes” I said “Actually, I’m paralyzed.” “Well, pick five colors you want to use.” That was helpful, but because I didn’t even know the color wheel, I took a while even to do that. Graciously, he looked over my shoulder as I applied the first, second, and third colors in broad strokes that seemed to go nowhere. Nowhere, that is, until I got out of my head into my feelings and sensations and just painted. Paralysis gave way to emergence — and my first Female Nude.

I have had similar experiences as a new creative writer. The empty page is daunting. I learned in the first years of writing to simply sit quietly before the empty page and watch for what the emptiness elicits in me. Sometimes there emerges: “I have nothing to say.” “I can’t write.” “Why am I putting myself through this?” I’ve learned to notice those feelings and thoughts and let them pass. I’ve noticed sensations too — like the sensation of paralysis or the urge to get up and leave. Eventually something emerges that seems worth writing. Then, I write what is dictated. A creative force takes over and guides the writing. It’s like watching a television in my head and writing what I see.



I don’t want to give the impression that this creativity just suddenly emerges for the beginner. It may, but the normal course is to do rote learning first. My painting Pitcher and Apples is an example (after a few years of drawing) of following what a teacher demonstrates in a monkey-see-monkey-do fashion, that is, all of us painting the same thing as the teacher with brief see-then-do lessons every hour. Children first learn by copying. Then they might do it wrong on purpose. They copy, play, and laugh.

Perhaps learning to play is what the older adult in me needs most. Make a mess! Do it wrong on purpose. Make-believe I am a great artist. Pick five colors that speak to me now, no matter what the color wheel says is right and wrong. Show off and watch mom and dad laugh and applaud.

Besides learning to play, I also needed to learn the craft, in this case the craft of drawing. Teachers, Internet, and books helped me with that basic know-how. Eventually, play and craft conquered paralysis and enabled emergence — the emergence of the unique artist within.

***Play 20 Lesson 4: Have fun and play while learning basic skills.***



## 5. To copy

The pleasure I get from drawing comes from seeing beauty out there and then watching it emerge from me. I take great pleasure, for instance, in the beauty of the drawings of classical painters like Rubens, Michelangelo, da Vinci, Raphael, and Caravaggio. That's why, early in my attempts to draw, I sought out the sketches of these greats and started to copy them. I wanted to learn what these artists had done to create such beauty.

At first, I attempted to copy their human figures, at least the outlines. I would study the figures then begin to sketch, carefully observing the proportions and distances of the various features. I would turn the classical sketches upside down and sideways in order to more accurately recreate particular features, free from my preconceived notions of form. I delighted in my copies, but I could also perceive that I was not always seeing the intensity of the lines or the quality of shadows or shadings. So, I sought advice from other artists.

Copying the classics is not the highest form of art, but I learned from it! Choosing which classic drawings to copy helped me to identify my own artistic preferences, what sort of art I loved most, and which artists I preferred. Copying taught me to appreciate the simplicity of some drawings and the complexity of others. Still today, I love my copies. Plus, I am grateful that they taught me how I needed to improve.

***Play 20, Lesson 5: Observe, imitate, and copy the greats.***





## 6. To notice pleasure and pain, and to practice patience

Step-by-step. It was only as I became more proficient at drawing that I graduated from drawing still life and full-frontal figures to drawing moving figures.

This brings up the question of how I choose the subjects of my drawings. I choose subjects that I find beautiful, but I also choose those that I believe I can draw. I avoid a subject that seems too complex given my proficiency at a given time. Ugly subjects diminish my motivation, but overly complex subjects discourage me. I intensely disliked the porcelain duck and the brick subjects that my teacher had given me. He was my teacher, so I trusted and obliged; but no fun! Later at my pleading for an attractive subject he let me draw a bust of Michelangelo's David. My mistake! It took two months of hard work and I still never finished it to my satisfaction. I learned from the subjects, but again no fun!



Learning can be fun, but learning is inherently challenging — otherwise learning wouldn't be about incorporating the new and the different. Key to successful learning is managing both pleasure and pain: enough pleasure to feel motivation and enough pain to stretch the muscles without doing harm. Learning also requires patience. The word patience comes from the Latin verb *patior*, which means to suffer. My teacher would say his job was to make us students suffer. Patience is a willingness to suffer in order to reach a goal. Patience, mixed with fun, is what gives birth to a new skill like drawing.

***Play 20, Lesson 6: Choose a realistic learning plan that empowers learning.***

## 7. To apprentice

My initial attempts as a self-taught learner gave me the basics of drawing, but left me with the sense that something was missing. Fellow artists showed me that my lines were not always light enough or dark enough. Even after more “monkey-see-monkey-do” painting classes where I could paint a beautiful field of lavender, I still had problems with shading my figures. I knew that my problems were not simple and that internet lessons were not enough. So, I sought a teacher.

Since I admired classical realists, I sought out a teacher in that tradition. I found one. He had an atelier, an artist’s workshop. He requested that I send him a sample of my drawings, then he invited me to meet with him and asked that I bring more drawings. He took me on as his student.

Intimidation can crush a baby artist. It took all I had in me not to be intimidated by the fact that my teacher instructed students from art schools in New York City, Chicago, Florence, and China. He himself was a recognized teacher of classical realism. Now in his late 80s, he had a lifetime of experience; and here I was, a baby artist, barely able to walk. I wasn’t into drawing in order to show off, so I just put on my diapers and showed up crawling, three afternoons per week during the whole summer.



We started with the basics. He sat me down and instructed me about the different sorts of light and shadow on various shapes. Then he set up a brick and told me to draw it. Easier said than done. As I drew, he pointed out what I was missing. My eyes were not perceiving the variances of light. There was more to that brick than I ever imagined. My teacher would push me: “Look here. What do you see? Do you see that this feature is darker than that one? Look again... and again... and again.” Gradually I began to perceive the play of light and dark. I was beginning to see what the classical masters had taught their apprentices to see.

***Play 20, Lesson 7: Find the right teacher.***



## 8. To relax

For weeks I worked on a complex drawing of the David bust and practiced the classical realism approach to capturing light and dark. This arduous work has to do not with drawing the outlines of a particular subject or form, but of first drawing the darkest darks and lightest lights and then capturing the subtle shades. This is a practice that requires careful perception and especially persistence.

So, my teacher looks at my progress on this drawing and points to a detail. He asks: “Is this side of the shadow lighter or darker than the other side?” I look. I don’t see. He points out the difference. I don’t quite see. He repeats and shows how I’ve missed the point. I’m disappointed. He tells me to erase that whole section of my drawing and start over. “But, I’ve been working on this section for a week!” I protest. He insists, “Erase!” Imagine how I felt!

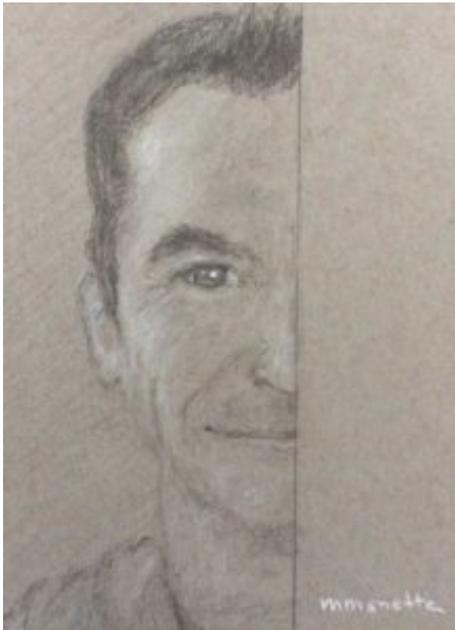
I learned in such instances to escape to the restroom. I lock the door, scream in the mirror, wash my face, drink water, and breathe deeply for five minutes. Then, I return.

Refreshed by the break, I remember that I am working with my teacher so that I may see what I don’t see. If I let anger and frustration fill my eyes, I won’t be able to see. So, I look again to where he is pointing and if I still don’t see what he sees, I take another break and try again later. Relaxation is not idleness. It is what enables the lowering of defenses and the rising of new awareness. “Sabbath” or lying fallow is never a waste of time.

The complement to relaxation is persistence. Relaxation opens perception and persistence launches attention back onto the work at hand. Take a break and do come back!

***Play 20, Lesson 8: Take breaks to sharpen perception and encourage persistence.***

## 9. To do what I love



As a new artist, I wasn't very particular about what kind of drawing I did. I tried faces, the human body, scenery, still life, and used a variety of media. Eventually, drawing with white chalk on black paper became one of my favorites. The idea of drawing this way came to me upon studying black and white professional photographs that use backlighting.

This style of drawing is minimalist. It attempts to capture the essential outlines and movement of the figure with a minimum of light. It is amazing how backlight on the side of face, for instance, can capture not only outline but also expression and gesture.

My drawings, however, are not just outlines of the face. Some of the chalk marks are much brighter than others. That's where the light is stronger and contrasts with the more subdued light. This sort of drawing has helped me to study the light in my figures without attending so much to the dark, as I would if I were simply drawing a face on white paper, in

which case I would be trying to capture the more complex variations of light and dark around the eyes, nose, cheeks, and so on (like in my earlier drawing of Jeff).

Sometimes, I model my chalk drawings on normal color photographs rather than on backlit black and whites. That's more difficult because I need to work even harder to perceive the brightest lights that I will capture with the chalk. In a drawing I did of a Wheaten Terrier, for instance, I had to study the normal photograph to pick out the brightest lights. Many of those lights were on one side of the figure. I didn't attempt to capture the darkest lights or the many variations of light. I just went for the very brightest. This drawing appeals to me because it is minimalist yet captures the spirit of the dog. When I look at the drawing I sense that my own pet Wheaten is right here with me.

I've been doing such black and white drawings for a couple years now and still find joy in doing them. I learned that not only do I love the minimalism of backlit black and white photography, but I also love to recreate such beauty with drawing.

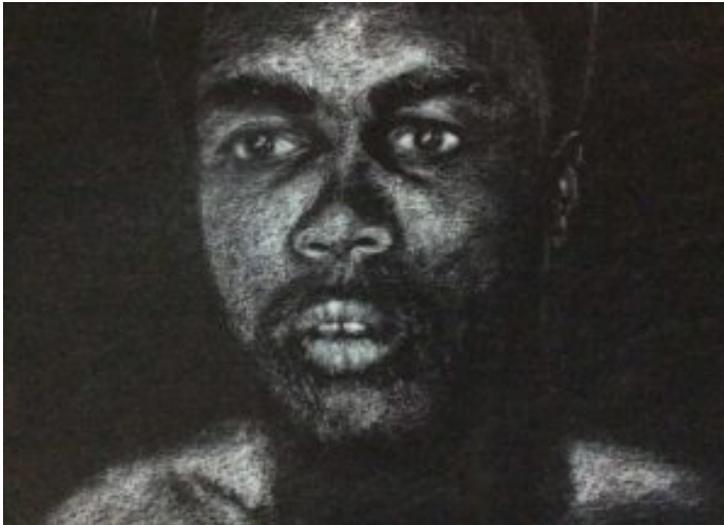
Though I prefer chalk on black paper drawing, I also sense a desire to try other styles, perhaps pencil drawing with much more color. Luckily, I do art for art's sake, not to make money. Unlike many young learners who might not have the freedom to learn out of love and joy, I can change my style at will. I can follow my bliss!



***Play 20, Lesson 9: Do what I love and follow my bliss.***

## 10. To manage feedback

Some of my drawings get nods from my teacher and others get corrections. I was surprised one day. I showed him my new drawings; and, he simply nodded in appreciation. (Now, I don't expect him to gush with admiration over my baby artist lines. A simple nod from him is enough encouragement for me.) But, as he came to this one drawing of a solitary man under a window, he pointed out that the sunlight on the floor was not accurate. "The light at the edges of the reflection should be gradually dimmer than the light in the center. That's how life works." His one comment about this one of many drawings did not send me into depression. At one time, it would have. I'm not so different from many people who get upset if only 99% of the feedback is positive. I might get upset if everything I produce is not well received, but I've learned to appreciate that both positive and negative feedback teach me something about how I can do even better next try. Whether positive or negative, feedback can be helpful. It can affirm what is working and/or point out ways to improve. I am grateful that people pay attention to my work and care enough to genuinely respond to it.



That said, my artist's creativity, like with any learner's creativity, needs to be nurtured and protected. Not everyone can be a helpful critic of art, so I choose to show my work to those who I think may have helpful comments. Also, knowing my own tolerance for critique is important. If I feel tender or vulnerable about something I've produced, I don't need to expose it to comments that might damage my creative spirit. I can show it to people I trust and whose sort of comments I know I can safely receive. My artist within needs safety just as my artist within needs feedback.

If my teacher's feedback about the light in my drawing hurt me a little, it hurt because my creative muscle was being stretched to gain greater strength.

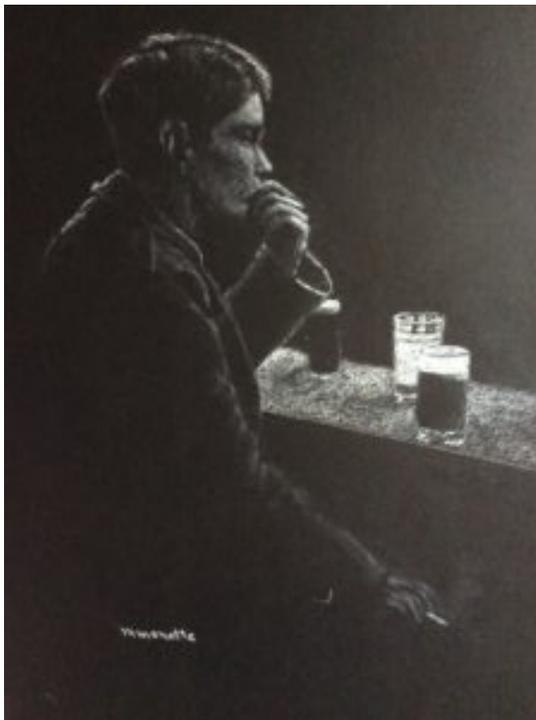
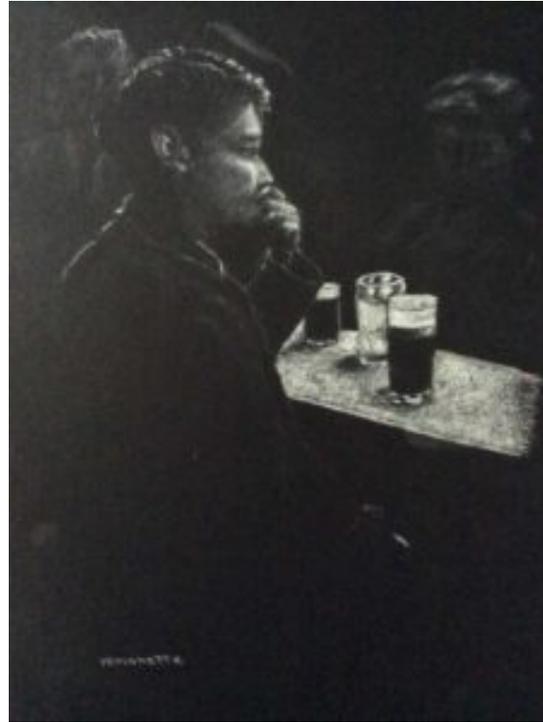
***Play 20, Lesson 10: Invite desired feedback from competent and trusted sources.***

## 11. To Persist

The rhythm of trying, resting, then trying again is not quite enough. The whole rhythm needs to be repeated over and over and over again. Creating new neural pathways in the brain takes lots of walking the same path over and over again.

Such has been my own learning process. I've taken notes, then I've reviewed them many times. I've sketched the human figure and kept sketching until I could do it quickly. I've drawn objects in perspective, then drawn them again. I've forgotten what I've learned and I have had to remind myself again. I've drawn some subjects over and over; case in point, a drawing of the Young Man at a Bar.

There's a certain tediousness to learning, at any age. The issue is not that I am too old to learn new tricks. It is rather that I am less patient with the effort I need to expend: "I've taken this trip before and I know the hardship it involves, so NO!" The learning process gets harder when the mind gets stuck on hardship. It's much more graceful when I focus on the excitement, the newness, small successes, and ultimate goals. As an elder, I know hardship well. I've been through 60+ years of it. But, don't I also know the joy of creativity and the pleasure of looking back at the marvels that I create?



People I know who have devoted themselves to learning all their lives continue to do so in old age. Those who have not been open to learning clearly have a harder time learning later in life. If living is about learning and growing, then as long as I'm not pushing up daisies I'm capable of exercising our human capacity to learn.

Repeat. Repeat. Repeat it again. Then one day I wake up and find that I've learned it and that I'm doing it as if I've been doing it all my life.

***Play 20, Lesson 11: Repeat until it sinks in.***



## 12. To schedule practice

One of the most useful practices I set for myself is scheduling. I've done that for writing articles and books, for learning languages, and also for drawing.

Now, I must hastily say that scheduling is not for everybody. My partner cringes when I mention scheduling, especially when I relate it to the word discipline. It doesn't work for him, at least when it comes to his creativity. It constrains him so that learning becomes drudgery instead of fun. He learns, to be sure. He's even taught himself how to write plays. But he learns in his own time and way.

I had early and rigid toilet training, plus I spent my teens and 20s in boarding schools where everything was scheduled with military precision. So, scheduling works for me.

First, I set a particular time of day and a particular duration of time to apply myself to whatever I want to

learn. When I was 15 years old I decided to learn Spanish. I got myself a *Spanish Made Simple* book and, every evening before bed, I'd study for five minutes or more. Yes, I'm now fluent. When I finished graduate school, I decided that I wanted to continue writing in my field and publish one article per year in a professional journal. I scheduled myself to start the next morning: 10 minutes, before going to my job. Within a couple weeks I was awakening myself and writing for 30 minutes. By the middle of the year, I had published one article; and by the end, two. I continued the schedule and even increased the time when I could. I began to publish a book each year. Perfect storm: I wanted to write. I learned how to write. I disciplined myself to do it. And, above all, I took joy in doing it. Much later in life, I switched gears from professional or technical writing to creative writing. I applied the same scheduling discipline.

I completed two drawings, one of an old woman and one of an old man, because of scheduling. I chose these subjects because initially I didn't think I could draw them! So many details in the original photographs. But, I set a schedule for myself and worked on them over several weeks. Eventually I could perceive more details and successfully replicated them in chalk.



So that I don't get discouraged or overzealous, I try to be kind to myself. I only set a schedule that I can accomplish gracefully. At first, I scheduled my writing practice for five minutes. It got a little something done. Some days were hard, others dry. But, I was amazed over time at my own accomplishment. It helped to give myself days off, as long as I did so on purpose, not just because I didn't feel like working. Just as when I exercise at the gym, my muscles need days of rest. Learning goes on, even during rest.

***Play 20, Lesson 12: Get into a rhythm, and rest frequently.***





### 13. To take off-days

There are days when I schedule myself to draw, but when I just can't muster the will to put pencil to paper. It's then that I fall back on studying drawing or researching art or just looking for drawing subjects. Even without applying pencil to paper and producing art, I count these efforts as fulfilling my commitment.

"Studying drawing" for me is about watching YouTube videos or reading a manual or reviewing notes on a particular topic. Professional chefs spend a lot of time reading recipes. Playwrights spend much of their time watching and reading plays. Studying expands my knowledge and increases my motivation to draw.

"Researching art" is for me about going to a gallery and enjoying all kinds of art from drawing to painting to sculpture. This expands

my appreciation of art and artists as well as my perception. Sometimes this practice gives me new ideas for my drawing.



"Looking for drawing subjects" is about searching my surroundings or perusing Pinterest for inspiring photos that I can draw. I look for subjects I know I can draw as well as subjects that stretch me a bit. Many of my chalk on black paper drawings have been inspired by professional black and white photos. My other face drawings mostly come from the Internet and from magazines.

These three activities – studying, researching, and looking for subjects – feed my art, so they count as fulfilling my commitment to myself to draw every day. Also, there is one more valuable activity: talking about art and drawing with other artists. Colleagues are a key source of information, inspiration, and motivation!

***Play 20, Lesson 13: Learning and commitment to learning deepen in many ways.***



#### 14. To draw mindfully

Drawing in white and black mirrors my personal life. I often find myself judging experiences in dualities: like black and white, good and bad, and beautiful and ugly. Either/or thinking seems to simplify life and make choices easier: I choose one of the two and I know for sure which side I'm on.

But, in drawing, duality is really not so clear. There are shades of light and shades of dark. Even on a simple chalk line, the shades of light show up on the sections that are closer to the light source. As the shapes being drawn shift away from the light source, light reflects on them differently. I had to learn to perceive the differences in light intensity. Black too is not always solid black. Sometimes shadow or fog settles over parts of the dark. I gradually learned to perceive how light the light is and how dark the dark is.

Black and white are not just opposites. They are also complimentary. Without dark, how would I see light? Without light, how would I know dark? The two are not an either/or choice. Both are necessary. I've met many people who, like Ram Das, speak of their darkest experiences (such as his stroke) as flooding their lives with grace: grace to experience life deeply, grace to know one's real identity, grace to recognize and accept the universe as it is. Experiences that at first seem like intrusions or curses can turn out to be eye opening gifts.

An old poster reads "God doesn't make junk." Neither black nor white are junk. Both together manifest life's beauty and death's mystery. In this and many other ways, drawing feeds my meditations.

***Play 20, Lesson 14: Learn a new skill and notice how the learning expands into other life domains.***





## 15. To create in community

My dialogue with my mentor:

*Me: Art? I can't do that. I'm not creative.*

*Mentor: Why not?*

*Me: Creative people come up with these incredible ideas that seem to come from nowhere and I'm not like that.*

*Mentor: So, you see that you can't just create out of nothing, ex nihilo?*

*Me: That's right!*

*Mentor: What if you didn't have to create out of nothing or didn't have to come up with something that purely originated within you alone?*

Art is a communal process. I realized this the first time I wrote and published an article. Technical writing, you see, was my early form of art. The article was not solely my creation. Writings of other professionals fed my ideas. My professor saw merit in my insights and encouraged publication. The journal editor determined that my article fit in the professional journal. Then, both of

these people reviewed my drafts and helped me hone my concepts and writing style. Finally, a professional review board decided on publication. Indeed, I alone had not written and published this article. It had emerged from a community gathered around my efforts.

The same dynamic occurs in most learning, including my drawing. Each drawing draws its inspiration from other people, other drawings, or from nature itself. The idea for one drawing may come from a photograph or nature scene or conversation. Even the materials for drawing don't just come from me. I use chalk, carbon pencils, colored pencils, various drawing papers, and so on. All of these are not my invention or of my making. I've just taken these materials and ideas and expressed them in my own way. Even when I copy the work of a classical artist, I am making it my own. Sure, it's a copy, but it is my own copy. So, I "steal." I take from others and combine it with my own unique input; and I give credit, of course, where credit is due.



No good art simply appears from nowhere. It comes from studying art forms and the work of other artists. It comes from appreciating these gifts from the past; and, from being quiet and present to the creative spirit within that seeks to explode into art — my art.

***Play 20, Lesson 15: Stand on the shoulders of others and express my unique view from there.***



## 16. To break down ego barriers

My learning to draw as an older adult did not require me to prove myself to anyone. I began because I wanted to learn and I was inspired to create beauty. I completed lessons on the Internet without having to pass a test. I didn't even have to satisfy my ego more than normal, because I knew that I had never drawn and knew nothing about it. I just had to accept my ignorance and open myself to a new venture. My ignorance did frustrate my efforts at times. I had to laugh at my ludicrous efforts; but, I didn't have to prove myself.

Except once. That was when a prospective art instructor asked to see my drawing samples. At that moment, I did have to prove my talent to him; but I did not worry about it at all. I was a volunteer learner and I knew I could find another instructor who would accept me. My only concern was to find the right instructor who could help me with the particular next steps I needed to take. I wasn't studying for a degree or under pressure to get my next job.



The greatest challenge to learning was my own ego. Ego became an obstacle when it tried in many ways to defend itself: I am an adult. I should not need to learn more. I have it all together. Why risk looking like a fool? I can't do it, so I'll lower my objective and/or not even try to achieve an objective. I'm too old. I can't learn new tricks."

Free from the need to work at a job, I have the freedom to "jubilate." (Jubilation is the term some Spanish speaking cultures use to describe what others call retirement.) Jubilated, I can learn for learnings sake.

***Play 20, Lesson 16: Learn for the joy of it!***



## 17. To be inspired

I dream about drawing. Sometimes the exact content of these dreams slips my mind by the time I wake. Yet sometimes the message remains sharp and directly affects my drawing practice. Such was the case for one recent dream.

The dream had something to do with an object I threw into the sky that did not return. The object was an initial draft of a drawing, one which was very unclear but building into something.

The next morning, I noticed that the message of the dream seemed to relate to a quote from a German mystic. God, he writes, seeks expression through us and our role is to get out of the way and let God's creativity emerge. In the dream, I waited; and what I had sent into the sky returned after a while, unexpectedly. The surprise return indicated to me a willingness of the heavens to make happen what needs to happen and bring my work to completion.



I think the dream was set off by a drawing I did that night before bed. It was a drawing of a street person kneeling in front of garbage cans with his arms raised in thanksgiving. (By the way, the drawing and its title "a prayer of thanksgiving" came from an earlier dream.) The next day, my preliminary sketch touched me as beautiful; and the dream encouraged me to work on it much more.

That experience encourages me to allow dream images to emerge, to notice them, and to paint them. It also inspires me to allow creativity to emerge from other activities that tap the unconscious, like mindfulness meditation and drawing prompts.

I'm now resolved to explore new sources of inspiration. I think I'll go sit in my garden, notice what catches my attention, be with it mindfully, and let the next drawing emerge. I may even try my hand at colored pencils and pastels!

***Play 20, Lesson 17: Let the unconscious inspire learning.***



## 18. To objectively measure the quality of my learning

People often ask where I sell my art. The last person who asked me said that he'd love to buy some of my figurative pieces. The next day I drew one and gave it to him. It was his birthday.

I rarely sell my art. The last time I did was for the benefit of a non-profit organization. Marketing and selling art do not interest me for several reasons. First, as a securely retired person, I don't need the income. Second, marketing and creating art are very different skills. Not everyone has both skills. I certainly don't. Third, learning about art and creating art are what give me joy.

I appreciate the compliment when people say my art is worth money; but, does the quality of everything in our society need to be measured by its value on the market? A professor of art tells me how much he appreciates the art that he's seen in China and Cuba

because more artists there produce art for art's sake and not primarily for the market. I too have known Cuban artists who produce primarily for the joy of it. When they need money, they paint colorful images of fruit to sell to tourists!

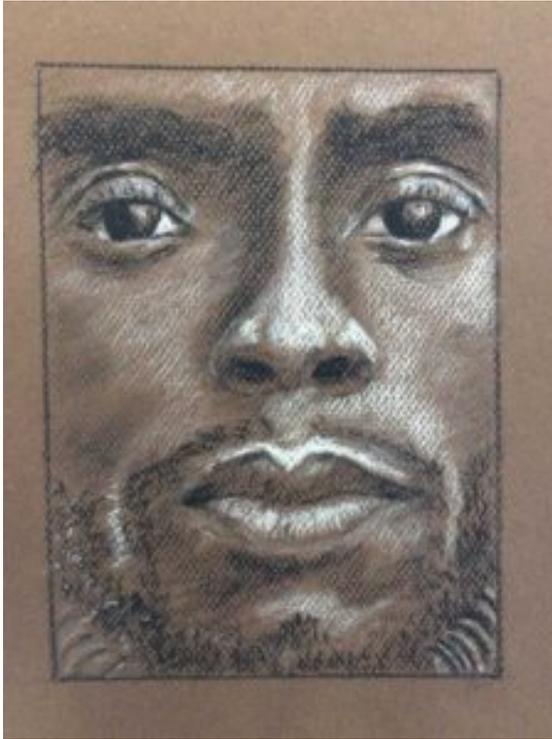
Giving away my art has been one of my greatest pleasures. When one of my works gives pleasure to someone my first instinct is to give it away. Fortunately, income is not important to me; for other artists it may be a necessity. I'd rather enjoy giving a portrait to someone celebrating a birthday, an anniversary, a housewarming or just because they love it. Giving away art doubles the pleasure I already glean from producing the art.



If selling art or exhibiting it publicly gives pleasure to the artist, all the best! But, as an elder with the privilege to engage in new learning, I personally consider it a blessing that I can pursue learning and produce art (or writing or whatever) simply for the joy of it.

So how do I objectively measure the quality of my learning? I request coaching and evaluation from knowledgeable people and they give me helpful feedback to improve the quality of my art.

***Play 20, Lesson 18: Soak up the pleasure of learning and producing. It may be enough!***



## 19. To choose freedom

I worked till 70 then retired. Though I enjoyed my work, I dreamed of retiring like my parents did, though they did it much earlier at 64. My folks didn't miss their jobs. Retirement for them meant freedom from having to earn a living, from commuting, from being restricted to two weeks of vacation, and freedom from many years of having to provide for family. Retirement meant long hours for being together, for rest, for travel, and for enjoying the simple things in life. I looked forward to the same *freedoms from* and *freedoms for*; but, like many other retirees, I also faced the fears of retirement. What am I to do with all that time? What if I feel isolated? How can I contribute to society without the social network that my job provided?

The challenge of retirement and aging for me has been to figure out how I can now realize my potential as a person and how I can still make a generous contribution to others and society. I am faced with

how to re-create my life, post-youth and post-retirement. I am not 20 anymore, but the challenge facing me is similar: what do I want to be when I grow up or, at least, for the remainder of my life? A fearful challenge it is and not unlike that of the writer facing a blank page or a painter, an empty canvas. Fearful, for me, because the challenge involves facing myself in the quiet of retirement and letting emerge a sense of who I am and who I am willing to be. Retirement challenges me to face anew who I have become. Writing a memoir has helped me to do this. It forced me to sift through the events of my life and express what life has meant for me. It prompted many clarifications and appreciations. It helped me to integrate my experiences and to reflect on what I had left unfinished. Out of that two-year project there erupted plenty of energy to pursue many new interests, including the urge to publish my memoir, then to learn how to paint and draw, then to learn difficult languages like German, Polish, and Russian; and then publish my memoir in Spanish; and then to learn how to cook Thai and Chinese and Indian food. I even took up yoga and mindfulness meditation. All of these were brand-new interests for me. To this day, in my mid-70s my curiosity continues to unfold, as does my desire to contribute to others, however modestly.





My experience of aging has not led to the previously dreaded isolation, boredom, meaninglessness, and fear of the inevitable. Aging instead has led to new adventures, personal growth, and deeper human connections. I am grateful for the *freedom from* that retirement provides, as well as its *freedom for* human realization and social contribution. While escaping from that freedom is sometimes tempting, I hope to have the courage to live in freedom and always be open to new learning.

***Play 20, Lesson 19: Choose the freedom to play 20***

## 20. To move on to what's next



Of late, I find myself satisfied with my chalk drawings on black. Satisfied and ready to move on. I probably will continue to draw this way occasionally, but I'm itching for a new challenge. I'm not retiring my pencils. I do want to keep drawing, but what?

Sometimes I just need to pause and take a sabbath and not focus on the next project. I sense the need to look back on the five years I've spent on drawing and reflect on what I've learned, what I've mastered, what I've appreciated the most, and what now attracts me about continuing to draw.

Unlike many 20-year-olds who want to make a living with art, I am not pursuing art studies for utilitarian purposes like getting a job in a design firm or earning a living by selling my paintings. As an elder I am learning art for pleasure. Some elders may want to or have to be earning money, but not I. My main motivation is to satisfy my curiosity, develop my potential, and in some way give pleasure to others and benefit society.

Some of my recent learning projects do however have a utilitarian streak. I spent a year studying Polish because I intended to go to Poland for a friend's wedding. It served its purpose. My baby Polish made the wedding party laugh! Learning gardening has a purpose too. I'm now growing a vegetable garden. Learning Indian cooking has a purpose. I want my diet to become more vegetarian and I want to please my spice loving palate. I've also been studying Russian, because someday I aim to visit Russian art museums and want to better understand the culture of a country that my country considers a competitor and even an enemy. These learning projects all have utilitarian purposes; but, in the end, I am pursuing them for the love of learning and with the intention of sharing with others the appreciation, understanding, joy and curiosity that such learning brings.

I don't worry about finding my next drawing project. The path will surely reveal itself as I walk it. It may be a little foggy right now and preventing me from seeing too far ahead. With each step the path will clear, as it eventually does for the 20-year-olds who begin in relative obscurity with only a glimmer

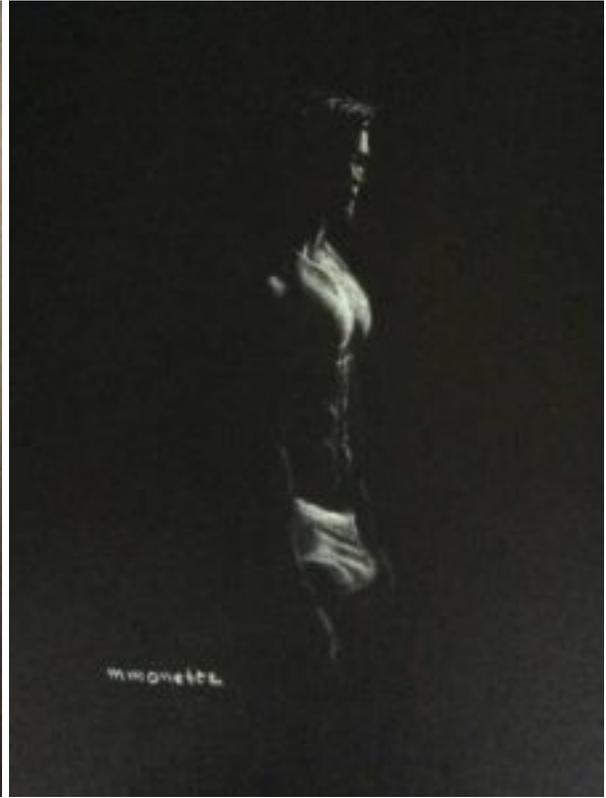


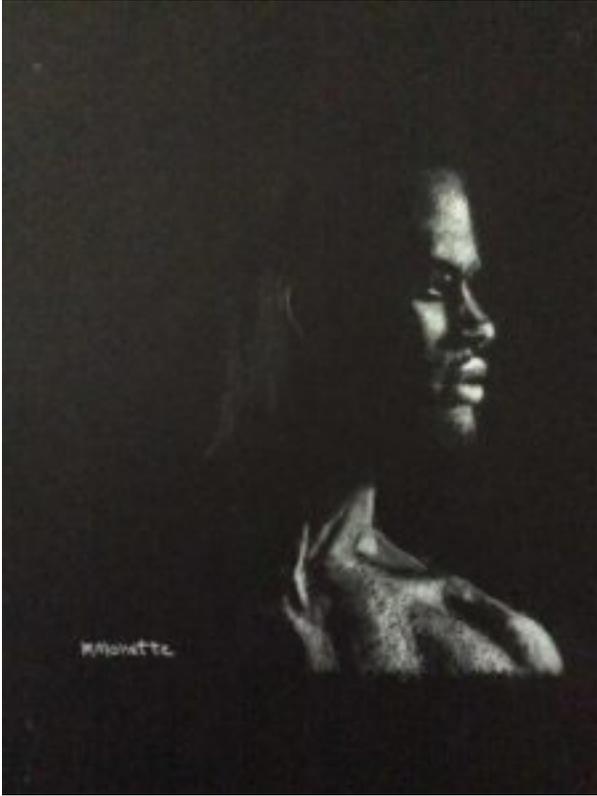
of the destination and end with greater trust in the path, a thirst for learning, and a sense of achievement and satisfaction.

***Play 20, Lesson 20: Seek learning and it will find me***

\*\*\*\*\*









\*\*\*\*\*

Maurice L. Monette's **Play 20** collection of framed essays and drawings may be scheduled for exhibition at places where seniors and/or future seniors congregate. For more information or to host an exhibit, contact [vimx@mac.com](mailto:vimx@mac.com).

\*\*\*\*\*

Maurice L. Monette has a doctorate in adult education from Columbia University and was director of graduate programs for adult learners at Loyola and John F. Kennedy universities. Monette is now an artist and writer living in Oakland, California.