
Creativebug in Conversation with Lisa Congdon and George McCalman with C

Chapter 1 - Creativebug in Conversation with Lisa Congdon and George McCalman

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- All right, it's one o'clock, we're gonna go ahead and start. Lisa and George, if you wanna turn on your video and your audio. Welcome, everyone. This is our first time doing this, we're really excited. We had over 2,000 people RSVP to this event, so you're probably watching it now. Before I introduce my guests, I just wanted to give you a little rundown of how the next hour is gonna go. We're gonna be chatting with Lisa Congdon and George McCalman, who has so graciously agreed to give us a couple hours of their time today. I'll have a break about 20 minutes in, for questions, and then we'll do another round of questions towards the end of the hour. So, feel free to just comment in the chat feature of YouTube, and Erica is gonna be hopping on in about 20 or 25 minutes to ask your questions to both Lisa and George. Welcome, you guys, it's so good to see your faces. I feel like it's been so long since I've seen either of you in person (laughs). - Because it's true. - How are you doing? How are you both coping? - I'm doing fine. I mean, that's such a weird question 75 days in. - Seriously. - Because I feel like every week my answer is slightly different. Yeah, so the first two weeks were the hardest for me. I'm happy to say those are far behind me. - Right, and how are you even counting the days and weeks anymore? - Yeah. It's sort of like, sadly, the new normal. Although, like most people, I feel like I'm getting a little antsy for certain things that were normally a regular part of my life. - Yeah, yeah. George, are you feeling that that's similar to you too, your experience? - Yeah. You know, it really is, it's a day-by-day scenario. And I would say, emotionally, the first month, if I'm being honest, it took me a while to really get into a groove. And so, I think I was more shocked, as we all were, by how much our lives had fundamentally changed. And also, an awareness of those of us that were able to shelter in place and an awareness of those of us that were not. And so, just kind of sitting with all of that and trying to have an awareness for myself and my community, but also the larger world, is really, it's a really difficult thing to manage emotionally on a daily basis. So, it took me a while, but I'm, daily, I'm in a much better flow of productivity versus checking in with myself, it's good. - Yeah, both of you, I feel like both of your professional and personal lives speak to that kind of balance and recalibration of sharing your experience and kind of how does that speak to a larger global audience. For anybody who isn't already familiar with Lisa Congdon and George McCalman, they're both very active artists in their community, authors, soon to be author, George is working on a new book, which we're gonna talk about a little bit later. I think, Lisa, you've done at least eight books at this point, right? - Mm-hmm. - Both illustrators, lettering artists, instructors on Creativebug, of course. And, just community movers and shakers in your world. And I feel like both of you do such an amazing job of using your personal experience to kind of through your art and really calling out personal and larger issues to kind of your general communities. I feel like a lot of people are hanging out on social media right now. Do you find that your communities, that's where you're kind of interacting with people, since you can't have the one-on-one interactions you're used to? - Well, for me, I'm still in contact with my closest friends and colleagues, you know, on Zoom, and phone, and FaceTime, and that kind of thing. And, recently I've been doing some socially distanced walks with people, which is nice. But, yeah, I feel like social media's always been an important community for me, and my audience is an important part of my art practice, actually, but it's become, I think, even more so in the last couple of months. There is sort of this way that we're all connecting and sharing experiences and commiserating and trying to

stay hopeful together. And, I feel like, for me, Instagram has been a really great place to do that, to share kind of how I'm feeling and to sort of connect with other people about how they're also coping. So it's sort of taken on a greater level of importance than it's, and it was already important to me, but it feels even more important now. And I think one thing that's striking, and this is sort of related to what George was saying earlier is like on the one hand, because this is a global issue, there isn't one country in the world that's not affected by this. So, on the one hand, that illuminates the disparities, you know, that are already prevalent in our society, or in societies all over the world. But it also is this thing that, it's like when there were those wild fires in Australia, we could say, "Well, we feel really bad "for the Australians because they have the dealing "with these horrible wildfires, but "that's a problem over there." And like, this is something that literally everyone, to some degree, is dealing with, and I think there's a way that that is made the world much smaller. At least in my lifetime, that I've never experienced before. - Yeah, I feel like it's unprecedented, that's something that you just keep hearing everywhere, never before (laughs). - Never before. - Yeah, George, you've been doing a really great job of kind of sharing your emotional journey through this time on social media as well, how has the response been for you? - You know, the amazing thing is I had already, that's basically what I'd been doing for the last four years. - You're a good sharer (laughs). - Well, just kind of merging my creative practice with my emotional one, you know, they've always been streams running alongside each other, and then I kind of did some landscaping and then they ran into each other. And so, me making sense of my emotional state is what allows me to do my artwork, they're not separate things. So, for me to be talking, if I'm sharing this on social media, it's because I'm attempting or am making sense of it for myself, first. It's entirely a conversation with myself, that's really what is the honest truth about it. I'm not really doing it with anyone else in mind. I'm always surprised, quite frankly, to find out that things resonate with people, but that's never my first instinct or my first inclination. And I hope that is always the case, 'cause then it's really honest that way. - From the outside, Lisa, I feel like a lot of the things that you post to speak to some of your personal experience. I know that you have been dealing with cancer this year, which is just like a total life changing event, and then the world changes on top of that. And, for some of us, kind of navigating those hardships, and also the really joyful moments of our lives, like celebrating milestones, birthdays, births of a child, like I had one of those this year (laughs). How do we balance these personal milestones, both good and bad, but still at a distance and having this separation from our communities? I know you said you've been doing some daily practices of walking and hanging out and Zoom calls and so forth, but that doesn't always kind of fully celebrate these moments, or help you kinda grieve certain things in the same way that you would, how are you guys coping with those things? - Well, it's interesting that you should bring up the cancer situation. By the way, I'm fine, my treatment is over-- - Yay! - It actually ended the day before quarantine. I'm cancer free now. - That's awesome news. - But yeah, I got a diagnosis in December, and then in January I started my surgery and then radiation, fortunately I did not have to have chemo, which was, I'm so grateful for now. But, at any rate, it's interesting, people have been asking me like, "How are you feeling "about being done and being cancer free?" And it's weird, I was reflecting to a friend the other day that I didn't really even have a chance to celebrate that, because literally the day I ended my last radiation treatment was the day before the first day of quarantine. And I was immunocompromised at the time, and so, I had to stay inside anyway because I knew the virus was a dangerous thing before the stay-at-home order in Portland happened, or in Oregon, which is where I live. But, I think normally my wife and I would of gone out to dinner and popped some champagne and celebrated and really had a chance to process it. But, it was like the ending of

one very heavy thing in my life was sort of followed by the beginning of another very heavy thing, and a heavy thing for everybody. And so, that was weird, and I don't think I've actually had been able to fully celebrate and process what I went through before because I immediately went into dealing with grief over I have a show that opens next week and no one's gonna be able to come see it in person, and, well people will, but it won't be the same, and letting go of other projects and things that ended after the virus hit and things like that. I basically went from one heavy situation to another, and it'll be interesting, when life does sort of return more to normal, how and if I'll be able to process all of that, because I don't feel like I really have yet. So, for me, that's been an interesting road. And, I'm observing, my sister turned 50 the third week of quarantine. You know, it's like one of the biggest birthdays of your life, you know? And she's planted at home with takeout with her family, and of course she made the best of it, but you see these things happening all around you, weddings being postponed and big things, and people's museum shows being canceled. And, it's just really phenomenal how the amount of loss people are, you know, from every segment of society are experiencing. - George, have there been things that you have not been able to fully celebrate or mourn because of what's happening, or have you found ways around that? - Well, I think collectively, to Lisa's point, we're all in mourning right now, there is a global grief going on right now, and it is either external, in terms of the world around us, or families that have been stricken by COVID, or it's really personal, you know, a show that was about to open, a date that was about to happen, a wedding that was about to happen, that everyone has been affected in such an acute way. And there's really no, there's no selfish, there's no self-involved, it's a really real, honest thing when you had a thing that you thought was going to happen, whether that's traveling to see your family over the summer, or your kid's summer camp, or some personal milestone for you. And so, I have felt very much that I am in the midst of a collective grief that we're all experiencing, and that has really allowed me to settle in my own, to just feel comfortable that I am in mourning right now. I mean, there were a few things, I run a design studio, in addition to being a full-time artist, and, there were projects that just went away because it didn't make sense for it to continue. I was fortunate in that we had projects and brand initiatives that were already in process, so we continued. It was strange, actually, as so many of my friends and community members lost their work, I had continued mine. And so, I'm there working, I'm getting up, I'm having thousands of Zoom calls a day. - Right. - And talking to people that had not produced anything in a month. You know? And that's a really strange, discordant thing, it has been very disorienting for everyone, the people who have work and the people who don't. - Yeah, it's interesting, I feel like there are these kind of two extremes. I was in your boat, George, I also had projects that were continuing, and a show that was scheduled, and even though I won't be able to have an opening party and all of that I decided to go ahead with the show and make work for it, it's a gallery show. And, I had to change how I was doing it, but I moved forward. And so, I actually have been super busy. My wife works for a virtual reality company that's sort of blowing up because everyone's interested in virtual collaboration and it's, her company makes a tool that allows you to do that. So we've been sort of going, going, going, going, and then I know other people who's work lives literally stopped and have been just waiting for unemployment checks. And so, yeah, there was this discordance about, you know, I had enormous amount of gratitude, but I also was feeling an enormous amount of pain for the people in my life who were struggling financially. And, I think a lot of people have been in that situation, one or the other. - I like what you said about just everyone is in some state of mourning, because I think it makes, like you said, it's giving you the kind of permission to settle into your own mourning, whatever that looks like for you, and I feel like I've seen on social media, people say like, "Oh I'm complaining about "this

thing, it's really bothering me today, "but ultimately I'm grateful that I have my family, "I have my home to be in, to be safe in." And, I see that there is like this shame or guilt that's starting to accompany people's admissions of being frustrated, so I like to hear that, okay, we can just say everyone is having to deal with something that's hard right now, regardless of how big or how little, respectively. So, I think that's like a good reminder. - Brene Brown, shame researcher Brene Brown, who I love, she talks about the fact that there is, grief isn't comparative. And in fact, when you make it comparative, you take away, it's like your ability to have empathy for yourself or to accept and process your own grief actually, and George is a great example of this, he said this, basically, a few minutes ago, allows you to be there for other people and accept others, 'cause if you're judging yourself for having grief, you're gonna judge other people, but if you accept your own, you're going to be more able to sort of be there for other people and their grief. And so, allowing ourselves to, giving ourselves some grace, in this situation, to have our feelings and know that they're valid, even though somebody else's situation might actually be worse, is important. - Right, absolutely. Yeah, yes. - And, it's having the awareness of the both of those things, because I'm starting to see a compartmentalization of how people are sharing what they're going through. There is the kitchen table talk, where people feel comfortable just sharing the kind of more superficial aspects of this, but there is an awareness if they register too much of that, like if you're in your second home talking about how difficult you're having it, maybe you should keep that to yourself. - Yeah, exactly. - Maybe you should not be sharing, publicly, that that's difficult for you. - Know your audience. Know your audience in that particular situation. - Tone deaf, that can happen. - Generally that's a good policy in general. - Yeah. - Yeah, exactly. Keep your privilege in check. - Absolutely. - Keep it to yourself. (laughs) - Well, I was wondering if any new kind of routines, either personal routines or artistic routines, have kind of emerged out of just this, I mean, I know you're both very still busy and active in your work, but kind of how that looks has changed a little bit, given the shelter-in-place and so forth. And I know, Lisa, you had started a COVID journal, which has been super interesting to follow along with. George, I don't know if you had any particular practices, other than the shift that has happened in your SF Chronical, SF Observed. So I don't know if either of you would like to share some of the things that you kind of have grown out of this new state of being. - Well, I really had to learn to work from home because I actually, while I do occasionally work from home now, I had a big studio a couple miles from my house now for a while and it has a shop in the front of it, and I was pretty actively there and working there. And, I'm lucky to have a decent sized house to work in, but it was this adjustment of like, especially getting ready for an art show, I couldn't make as many big pieces as I wanted, I had to sort of pivot and make some things that I could do from home, so that was a big kind of adjustment for me. And then, I decided the day before quarantine that... (motorcycle engine roars) There was a motorcycle outside my window. That I would start a coronavirus journal, and I actually just stopped doing it last week because I'm learning to let go of things that don't feel like they're serving me anymore, or that I'm not finding joy in anymore, but for a long time I kept this journal, it's pretty big, you can see relative size. - Torso sized. - Yeah. And everyday I kinda, literally everyday, even on days when I took a day off, like this particular day, I wrote something about what I was experiencing, how I was feeling, my fears, my hopes, the things I missed, statistics from COVID, that were shocking to me, mundane everyday things. And that was super helpful for me and I ended up sharing it everyday on Instagram, in my stories, and then I have a story highlight so people can go back and look at them. And it ended up being helpful for me, but then I heard from a lot of people, I mean, I was doing it entirely for myself, but I heard from a lot of people that it was helpful for them to read as well because it made them focus on something else or

realize they weren't alone in their feelings, or whatever. And they weren't works of art, they were just spreads of me writing and maybe sometimes drawing some funky little pictures, but-- - I love that. I feel like it had some vulnerability to it that maybe a finished piece of art doesn't have in the same way. - Oh yeah, for sure. - Like today, like I'm gonna go on a Zoom call and then I'm gonna make pizza, and also I don't feel like doing this today. - Yeah, and for lunch I had this really gross thing because we didn't have any food in the house, you know, 'cause we're scared to go to the grocery store, or whatever. Yeah, so that was super helpful. And, there came a point where I was like, I feel done with this. I really appreciated it had the lifespan that it did, but after a while anytime you commit yourself to doing a daily project, it becomes a job. And then, there were days when I didn't really wanna do it and I was like, or not in the mood, and I would just write "Not in the mood," but then that got old after a while. And so, then I was like, "Maybe it's time "for me to wind this down." And so, so I did. But I was almost done filling up the book, so, got pretty far. I got like 60 something days in. - Well it seems like it served it's purpose for you and for the greater audience. How 'bout you George? New things emerging for you? - A lot of new patterns. - Oh wow. - Working from home was something I was doing for the first couple of years that I, it's funny to say this on Creativebug, but I've really only been a self-defined artist for four years, and Lisa was one of the people who was kinda part of the ground floor admission of that. And I actually wanna tell that story later on because it was a really deeply - Ah, thank you. - Meaningful thing. But, working on my dining room table, which is where I am right now, was my normal, up until two years ago when I got an art studio, where I was able to separate. So, moving my operations back into my home, where it is an expression of my psyche, I have my laptop, with my notes around my design (laughs), my design projects. And then, the utter chaos of my notebooks and pens and paints is right on the other side of my laptop. And I basically just go back and forth between the two. One of the interesting things that I've discovered is that I stopped drawing for myself, I stopped drawing for myself immediately. And, I had always been drawing for myself, and so, the last four years. And I recognized that it was just my incubation period, I'd learned how to not be judgemental about my own practices. I used to get very frustrated with myself if I was not performing the way I thought I should. And now I, you know, my column, which used to be the reason that I was always drawing for myself because I was always out and about in San Francisco. Now that I'm mostly at home I started primarily drawing, I basically transitioned to a pandemic culture beat for the newspaper. And so, I'm drawing a lot of the stories around how San Francisco culture is transforming, San Francisco which is where I live. And so, drawing for a reason outside of myself has felt more important than drawing for myself right now. And that's what I'm recognizing. And I'm fine with that. - Yeah, I feel like a lot of people's priorities are shifting and being reevaluated during this time. I can't believe 20 minutes has already gone by, it feels like three, but I do wanna take a break so that we can ask some questions from the audience. I'm gonna turn off my video. Erica is gonna join us and ask some questions and then we'll hop back into our conversation with George and Lisa. - Hey there. - Hi. - All right, let's get into it. So we have a lot of questions from everybody watching right now. But the first is from Chelsea, and she's sort of wondering what piece of advice can you give to freelance illustrators and artists during this difficult time? - You go ahead first, George. - My advice would be do your story anyway. Freelance illustration is a really grueling (laughs). I used to be a magazine art director and I've assigned thousands of illustrations. And so, working with artists for the first 14 years of my career was my full-time job, and I received thousands of pitches. I'm used to being on the receiving end. And now that I'm an illustrator, and I occasionally pitch stories, what I'm realizing is that it's really important for me to do the story, whether it ends up in a newspaper or a magazine

is almost secondary. Because of social media, we have access to release our stories on our own terms, and I think that that's really important. Outside of that, do your research, find out the art directors, the editors. Be fine with rejection, that's in a nutshell. What do you think, Lisa? - Yeah, I would echo everything that George just said. And, make the work you wanna get and use this time to make that work. And, to work on your portfolio. I mean, if you have the, you know, I've written a lot recently on Instagram about how times of stress are, you know, it's like a it's an enormous inhibitor to our creativity. The free-flow of creativity is always helped by relaxation and openness, and that's a really hard thing to have right now. So, to go easy on yourself if you're feeling stumped, or blocked, or not your usual creative self. But, if you can find it in yourself to make stuff, and to draw stuff, use this time to get there and to work on your website, and to collect all of the resources around the places that you'd like to do work with. And, take advantage of that time. And, my last bit of advice is make a routine and a schedule for yourself. If being productive is important to you during this time, and that's something that you value, then getting yourself on a sort of regular routine is really helpful. So you have like certain hours that you show up and do different kinds of work. - Totally, love that. We all need a routine, for sure. Another question, this is specifically for George. So, how do you go about observing people discreetly in order to draw them? And this listener said she always sort of weird staring at people, unless it's sort of a sanctioned life drawing event. So how do you go about that? - Well, I have gotten really good at pretending to not draw people in life. And the truth is that my column is not always a live illustration in the moment. If I'm say, going to an event and it's an event that's filled with several hundred people that are in motion, there's no way I'm going to get that accurately, so what I do is I usually have a composition that's in my head first, and I'll take the reference that captures that moment. It's not the photo that I used, it's my actual composition that I then capture via a photograph. And I most times will adjust the reference, but the reference is mainly to get skin color, clothing, body language, because I'm also acting as a recorder. And so, it's not just about my impression, that there has to be an accuracy to what I'm doing. And so, it is a way for me to fact check what I remember. - Love it. - But there are times, and there were times before this quarantine, where I would just sit at a bar, I'd look for places where people are stationary. If I'm sitting at a bar, people are most likely to be there for over an hour nursing their drinks. And, people are not gonna be moving around or fidgeting, so I actually have a vantage point and a way to represent someone over the half hour that I'm drawing. - Awesome. Love that people watching. - People watching. - Lisa, a question for you. Do you prefer digital drawing to analog now, or do you choose your medium sort of depending on whatever the project is at hand? - You know, it's interesting, that's such an interesting question, I actually wrote about this a little bit yesterday on Instagram. I started drawing digitally in 2017, so about, almost three years ago now. And I did it partly because I needed to speed up my process and partly because I was having some tendon issues in my arm from using the mouse pad, or the track pad on my computer to edit and Photoshop, which is just a really bad idea, ergonomically anyway. And I needed to sort of break out of these habits because I was using mostly watercolor and ink and gouache and then scanning my work, and then manipulating it in Photoshop, cleaning it up and getting it ready to send to clients or publishers. And, that process was so multi slab and it just was overwhelming me, given the amount of work I had at the time. And so, several of my friends were starting to draw in this program, called Procreate, on their iPads. We got together pretty regularly to draw together, I got to watch what they were doing, I became super fascinated. I had sort of previously always been kind of anti-digital drawing and then decided to give it a try, and within weeks I was addicted at what you could do and how quickly you could do it and how quickly you

could make changes, and edit, and my work transformed as a result. So, I am so grateful to digital drawing for all that it has brought to my creative repertoire, and I'm never gonna stop using that tool. That said, I sort of let go of painting for a while, at least painting on paper. I mean, I'm not including my fine artwork, my pieces that I make that are meant to be originals, but for illustration I was really just sort of relying on digital drawing, and then, recently just started to really miss painting on paper and using watercolor and gouache and ink. So, I'm on a little bit of a sabbatical right now, and I decided that I would start, I actually bought these watercolors recently for Case for Making, which is this company in San Francisco that makes these pure pigment watercolors. Lindsay Stripling, who teaches for Creativebug is always talking about them. So, I finally bought some of those and I've been painting. And I really, I do love working in analog, it just depends on the project because so much of the illustration work I do has to be turned around pretty quickly. And, I have this agility, in digital drawing, that I don't have in analog. And so, I think I've come to rely on digital drawing a lot. And now you can even make digital drawings look like watercolors and all kinds of things. I mean, it's amazing what technology can do. But, part of the reason that I like analog, and that I'm sorta wanting to get back to it, is there is a certain attention that it requires, and an intention as well. You can't just, you know, if you make a mark you don't like, you can't just undo it. So, there's this way that you have to show up and be present with your work and slow down and really think through everything that you're doing in this very methodical way, that you don't have to do with digital drawing. And so, I missed that, and it's a muscle that I feel like I have lost, or that's gotten weak because of digital drawing, so I'm trying to sort of build that muscle again, of slowing down and being very intentional and kind of thinking through every step of my process, because I can't just hit undo. So, that's been an interesting transition back to that medium for me. - I wanna echo what Lisa said. There is a rigor to analog practice that digital anything cannot replicate, they're not interchangeable, they're very different practices. I'm a graphic designer by trade and so I work a lot digitally, which is why I don't do digital illustrations, it's the other opposite extreme of what I do. And, it requires a full attention, where I can't be doing anything else, I can't be carrying on conversations, it's a very meditative, very intense practice. And it just requires my full embodied attention. - Yeah, agreed. - Definitely. So, one more question, before I pass it back to Kourtney. This is from Chris, and he is wondering how either of you kind of come to know when your work is actually finished, saying he has lots of unfinished projects and would love to kind of hear your advice on that. - Well, I mean, I personally, I like to walk away from things for a while. I mean, it's hard when you're, like in my case, or in George's case, often we're finishing stuff 'cause we gotta turn it in, it's due. So, we don't really have time to think about is this really done or not, like it's done enough to turn in, right? But when you're talking-- - Good enough. - When you have time and you're not sure, I think stepping away from something and coming back to it. I also think if you have a trusted partner, or friend, or roommate who you can say, "Does this look done to you?" Oftentimes, I get a completely different perspective if I ask somebody else their opinion about something, not that you have to take their advice, ultimately it's up to you, but if you're really struggling with knowing whether something needs to be pushed further, asking somebody else their opinion is often a great tool. George, I don't know if you have other tips. - No, I agree with everything that you said. And, the delineation that I would make is, for my fine artwork, I find that I require outside perspective, in a way that when I'm doing my own column or more kind of editorial work, I have an innate sense of when something is done. I don't need anyone's feedback, I just innately know when something is finished, and then I push it aside and I move on. But, if I'm doing a painting, a large-scale painting, I find, and I share, I'm fortunate to share a studio with another fine artist, and

we really riff off of each other's work. And I'm really grateful to have someone else, 'cause I know that I would probably struggle with it a lot more if I didn't have Georgia to just kind of reflect what she's seeing. And I agree with Lisa, stepping away from your work is really super, super important, because getting your own new perspective, fresh perspective, on your work is really an important part of being an artist. You have to be critical and kind to yourself and find what the balance is between the two, and that dialogue with yourself is a really important part of your own evolution. - Awesome. That's great advice, for sure. All right, Kourtney is back and I'm gonna hop off. Everybody, keep asking questions in the comments, and we'll get some more answers in our next Q and A. - Those were great questions, everyone, nice job. And I like that we kind of talked about how do you know when something's finished, because I wanna move on to your new beginnings, you guys are both working on a lot of projects. I know George has a new exciting book that you've been working on. Can you tell us a little bit more about that project and where you are in your process with that? - I can. And just to tie it back, Lisa was there basically at the very beginning of this process. So, I was a magazine art director for 14 years, and then I opened my own studio, design studio, for a few years, and then I had a mid-life crisis and decided to take a sabbatical, forced sabbatical, I fired all of my clients and I just started my career over again. And, I did a series of self-imposed daily paintings of black history pioneers, that I called Illustrated Black History, and while I was doing it, several friends said, "Oh, this should be a book." And I assumed that it already was. And when I did my research, I found out that there was no contemporary telling of American Black History outside of academia and children's books. And so, long story long, that's the book I'm working on right now. And, so I'm in the kind of middle to tail end of the process right now. I actually, strangely just, coincidentally, just completed the cover last week. - Wow, that's a huge milestone. - A huge milestone. And, the book is coming out February of '21, so it's due in another few months. And I'm transitioning to devote myself, more or less, full time to working on it for the next couple of months. - How wonderful. How many portraits are in it, do you have a count? - Well, the set answer is 150,