

A Conversation with Colette Lafia and Naomi Rose about Creativity and the Spirit
Recorded in San Francisco on August 12, 2019

INTRODUCTION BY NAOMI ROSE

Ruach . . . ruach . . . ruach . . .

The Hebrew word “ruach” means both spirit and breath. This suggests that our very breath in-spirits us, inspires us.

This is Naomi Rose, a book developer and creative midwife who helps people who value the inner life write the book of their heart. For as long as I can remember, I’ve been fascinated by the mystery of creation, and sought to understand it and deepen it, both in my own experience as a writer and artist, and with the authors I am privileged to work with.

Today, I am blessed to be about to have a deep conversation with Colette Lafia, a spiritual director and the author of two books:

Comfort & Joy: Simple Ways to Care for Ourselves and Others

and

Seeking Surrender: How My Friendship with a Trappist Monk Taught Me to Trust and Embrace Life

She is also adjunct staff at Mercy Center, Burlingame. She holds a BA in Creative Writing from San Francisco State University, where she started a small magazine called *If Poetry*. So she dwells in both worlds, the creative and the spiritual.

Colette’s website is: www.colettelafia.com

Before I introduce Colette and open up our conversation, let me share with you something she has written:

From her newsletter of June 2019:

For three uninterrupted hours, I painted, stroke after stroke, layering color upon color. Something was guiding my brush, something that knew what to do. The instructor left me alone, giving me the space to explore what was moving within me and pouring itself onto the canvas. As I painted, I felt the creative faucet within open, and what had been dormant began to flow. A voice in me kept

saying, *Yes*, with each new stroke, and I could sense the rise of my spirit. That day, I painted a large midnight blue mountain sitting against a purplish sky. Through painting so freely, with childlike openness and curiosity, I felt I was touching God and God was touching me.

From the first brushstroke, painting offered me a spiritual connection to my deepest self. It has been a way of stepping into the unknown with curiosity instead of fear. It has offered me a way of being with myself that is accepting, encouraging, and loving. It has asked me to be both strong and soft. But more than anything else, painting continues to teach me to let go and trust, to not cling to any hoped-for outcome, but rather to be fully present in the journey, relishing every step along the way.

Kandinsky, the 19th century Russian artist, wrote in his slim book, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, “The spiritual life, to which art belongs and of which she is one of the mightiest elements, is a complicated but definite and easily definable movement forwards and upwards. This movement is the movement of experience.”

I’m struck by Kandinsky’s belief that art-making and the spiritual life are one—the “movement of experience.” The spiritual life is creative by nature—it’s an *experience* that is dynamic, mysterious, and generative.

THE CONVERSATION

Naomi: Welcome, Colette. I’m so happy to be here with you today.

Colette: Thank you. It’s my pleasure.

Naomi: Thank you for accepting my invitation to explore together—to have a deep conversation about the connection between the creative and the divine.

In my own work – largely, I’m a writer, as I know you are as well. And I also was to some degree trained as a visual artist. I have a couple of different streams in which the creative speaks in me. And at the same time, being raised both in this culture and by a family of very good writers who did not have this view, this inner sanctuary to draw from – I believed for a very long time, and operated as if to be creative was to some degree a battleground. That you had to demolish your ego, or withstand your inner critic – all these difficult things that would come up.

I don’t know if this is still the prevailing view, but I do run into it, periodically, reading about other writers’ experiences. And it does seem to me – more from my spiritual life, as I’ve attempted to bring my creative life into that, and allow myself just to be receptive – that once that door is open from within my own being, there’s so much willingness [from

the Spirit side] to pour down or give a glimmer, or something that then makes me want to jump up and begin with what I've received. Sometimes it's a sentence; sometimes it's a feeling. It's rare that I receive paragraphs, but I receive *something* that lets me go and go and go until I come to a natural stop.

When I read your books, both of them, I found them so beautiful, and so honest and open-hearted. And there's a part in *Comfort and Joy* – which is such a lovely book: many little suggestions for giving oneself and others comfort and joy – there's a chapter called "Creating." Maybe I'll read from it later or ask you to. But it's so clear: the *comfort* that you experience from creating. There's no self-battling at all.

So if I said anything that interests you, I'd love to hear from you. And we'll take it from there.

CREATING IS NATURAL AND ORGANIC

Colette: I think, for myself, that there's something very natural and organic about creating. I also work part-time as a school librarian, and I see with young children—especially my kinder and first-graders, they love to draw. They just want to draw, and it's very unself-conscious. But then I notice my fifth graders are much more judgmental of themselves.

So I think there's something, for myself, about tapping in or staying connected to that natural, organic creativity that I truly feel we're all born with.

I think, for myself, the battleground happens once it starts to become a "piece of work," and it starts to live outside of me, and I start to become judgmental of others looking at it, of critics looking at it. That's been my learning curve. And that's where my spiritual life has helped me, and continues to really help me to stay connected and trusting what's coming from me, and not – in some ways – over-identifying with it. But that's a slow process for me. I'll be very honest.

But in the *creating* – I think creativity offers us such a place of freedom and curiosity and joy.

"Creativity offers us such a place of freedom and curiosity and joy."

OUR RELATIONSHIP TO OURSELVES IS ESSENTIAL

And when that inner battle comes up, how do I respond to myself? Because I think there is a tension that comes up – when I want something to be a certain way, and it doesn't *want* to be, or it *can't* be, or that's not what it's about, and I find myself struggling to try to force it into something.

That relationship that I'm having to myself in that moment is really an important part of self-growth, for me. Do I use a condemning voice? Do I use a critical voice? Or do I find an encouraging voice, a loving voice, a tender-hearted way of being with myself that says, "Okay. Let it be. Be open. Let go"? So that's where I find, in some ways, [that] the

battling and how we actually *relate* to ourselves in the battling can be an incredible place of listening to a voice that's kinder and gentler, to move us forward.

“The relationship that I’m having to myself in that moment [of judging myself or what I’ve created] is really an important part of self-growth.”

Naomi: I think that's so important. And I certainly relate to what you said. But I don't know that I've been as *conscious* as all that about those different aspects that you're talking about: the joy and freedom of giving yourself room to create whatever is there in you, and feeling that connection. And then those times where it starts to want to *become* something – which often really happens – but then, what we do internally about that.

I think what you said is so important, and so incredibly universal. I don't know that it ever occurred to me to use that specifically as a way of working with myself. I *like* that! There's going to be so much grist for that mill.

Colette: It's interesting, too, because recently I was also at a workshop with James Finley, one of my spiritual teachers. And he talked about the same attitude, if you want to use the word “attitude,” that we can have with ourselves in meditating. Sometimes people will have a time of meditation or prayer that's filled with distraction. And although one is using the mantra, the breath – and earnestly wanting to come back – but it just slips. And then the time of meditation is over.

And he [Finley] says how you talk to yourself after that time [matters]. Are you condemning: “See, I'm no good at meditation! Again, another time of. . .”? Or is it a gentler tone: “Oh, that's what mediation is like. That's what painting is like. That's what making art is like.”

“How you talk to yourself after creating is like how you talk to yourself after meditating. When your mind wanders, do you tell yourself, “See, I’m no good at meditating?” Or do you use a gentler tone: “Oh, that’s what meditating . . . painting . . . writing is like”?

And I think it's, what is the *attitude* that keeps us open and connected to spirit when we're being creative, when we're praying, when we're meditating, when we're in relationships? Or what closes us down? Often I see it with the kids. And I've had this, I've struggled with this: such hard inner critic, and judgmental, and a feeling of not being good enough. That's something I'm constantly breathing into all the time. And I think it's part of the gift of self-awareness that creativity can bring us.

Naomi: I love that you bring those together. And I love that you are including the experience of meditation – the very varying experience of meditation – as an analogy for this. I find it very inspiring. I certainly know what it's like to have that inner critic rear up

and demolish everything that you've just done or thought or considered, without even sifting through it.

And I also know what it's like to make the effort to be kind, and soften that judgment, and look for – if you were talking to a child you loved, would you really do that? And I've come to the point in meditation where sometimes – when those thoughts are just going and going and going and going, and I can hear it for a moment – and I'll more or less laugh and say. . . .

I once read some article about meditation. It was very sweet. It said, "Here you are. All you're being asked to do is be with your breath. But then your mind goes to what you're going to have for supper, and then your mind goes to how you're going to meet a friend, and you're going to go to the movies, and what's playing? and what would you like to see? And, "Oh, a 'King Kong' revival is playing, maybe I'll go see that. . . ." And suddenly there you are, sitting in your chair, but you're actually with King Kong. So that has become a useful thing for me to remember when I'm meditating and my mind is all over the place, and I'll say, "Oh, I've just been spending time with King Kong."

Colette: [Laughs]

Naomi: But the idea that this could come into one's creative experience in life, that's so profound.

Colette: Um-hmm!

RECEIVING THE GIFT THAT COMES

Naomi: Because, perhaps one of the ways that the experience of creating is different from meditating is that you *are* receiving, but then you're *doing* something with it. Even if you say, "I'm the instrument," well then, the music is being played, and *you're* the one who's playing it. So there's a much more, as you say, *dynamic* relationship to what's happening.

And to even embark on that while feeling connected, and then do a U-turn and say, "Well, none of that counts" seems not only so unkind and so obstructive of the creative process, but maybe there's something that we really don't understand about who we are, in those moments.

That's some of what I'm getting as I'm attempting to digest what *you* said, which is so profound to me. For example, when I receive something that comes – a word, a line, a feeling – something that wants to be explored further – and I go to my computer or my typewriter, and I'll stand there in a state of complete absorption. But I'm still there. And I can direct [the writing], but not over-direct.

In those moments, I feel so connected. I feel like myself, it's not like channeling, I'm not gone. But something so much bigger, that I'm so grateful for a contact with, is there for

me in that moment. And my heart is completely open. I hardly know of anything more beautiful, except in relationship, should that happen.

“In those moments of inspiration, I feel so connected. Something so much bigger, that I’m so grateful for a contact with, is there for me in that moment.”

But when that voice comes in that says, “This really isn’t very good, what are you going to do with it, I don’t like what you did...” – all those things – the “me” that I identify myself as is not that same person [as the one who wrote inspiredly]. It’s what one of my teachers calls the “historical self” or the “biographical self” – all the places where I have felt like not enough, and said, “Well, but that’s who I am.” And whether I just stay with that, or things don’t get picked up, like, “I’m not a good writer, so never mind” – it’s such a different *identification* of who you are.

THE PRACTICE OF CREATING

Colette: Yes, it really reminds me of the value of practice. We say this in our spiritual [life]: we *practice*, we just practice, or we do the *work* of contemplation. And it’s a commitment. We just *do* it. Over 10 years, 5 years, something starts to happen. We can kind of name it, but we sense it very deeply. We sense it in our body, we start to sense it in our relationship to ourselves, to others.

And so I also considering that when you were talking. So often, with creativity, we think of a *product*. “Look at my painting: is it good or bad?” “Read my poem: is it good or bad?” We put it outside of ourselves and then allow for this dualistic way of looking at it: “good/bad.” Rather than looking at – as you were saying, this essence of connecting to creative spirit, creative energy, the wholeness that creating brings us.

So it really reminds me of really valuing the practice of creativity. The engagement of creativity. The practice of prayer, the engagement of that. And learning for myself to see it more holistically. Yes, I wrote a few books – and that’s really through what my husband loves to call the “maple syrup effect”: lots and lots and lots of material kind of being distilled. But does that make all that material and all those moments of expression meaningless because they didn’t end up in that book?

“Really valuing the practice of creativity. The engagement of creativity. Not as a product. Are all the moments of expression [you brought forth – as painting, as writing –] meaningless because they didn’t end up in a book? I trust to believe that all of it matters.”

Naomi: Wow!

Colette: I trust to believe, now, that all of it matters. And yet this is the part that got distilled for *this* expression of it. But are the *other* expressions meaningless because

they're basically in a box in my garage, in journals? I don't know. I think it's who you become, as you are willing to take the journey of creativity.

"I think what matters is who you become, as you are willing to take the journey of creativity."

It's just like who you become if you take the journey of prayer. All your moments of prayer, no one will see them – nobody *does* see them. They're not visible. They're not diplomas. They're not even paintings! They're not things that we're framing, and other people are saying, "Oh, you did *that*? Oh, you're *that*?" So it makes me kind of wonder about that.

So I think what you were saying is so important. And it's really only ourselves and other people that value that – who can say, "You know? This is important. This matters. This makes me my true self, my full self. The self God has created and wants me to be."

"We're the ones who can say, 'This is important. This matters. This makes me my true self, my full self. The self God has created and wants me to be.'"

Naomi: That is so incredibly beautiful. It's just lovely, lovely to take in what you're saying. And I have to say, for me, some of it is entirely new. I mean, some of the earlier things you said, I could quickly take it in, because there is some place in me that either knows that already or is not that far from knowing it.

But *this* idea – this is so amazing, and radical, I guess. The idea that, like one's prayers – which may well have a physical manifestation as the prayer manifests – but the act of praying is not something that can be shown to anybody. And yet it's such a deep reality and relationship.

And the totally new idea is that [laughs] – a little parenthesis here: Growing up in a house of writers, where books or stories were very close to [functioning as] God – and I'm not really saying that there's anything bad about it; it just, for me, eclipsed some things that were truer than that, and began to add in – as so much of our culture still certainly does – this *commodity* aspect.

So that the sacred impulse that leads to writing something – and then perhaps it becomes a book or perhaps it goes in a box in your garage (my sentences get so long, I can't remember the beginning if they're not written) – to treasure that impulse and its expression for its own sake, regardless of whether it makes it into a form that looks a certain way, that can be seen by others, that can be taken in by others – it never occurred to me. Ever.

Colette: Well, just think about it: I would say this is a new way for myself. Because I've always enjoyed being creative, I've always liked to be creative. And I found over the years, that being shut down – through judgment, or criticism, or it doesn't make money –

those have all been painful traps within me, and even closed me down for quite a while in my creative journey. And finally I came to a point where I was like, “Just claim it! Claim it as part of just being.”

“I found that judgment, or criticism, or ‘it doesn’t make money’ – those have all been painful traps within me, and even closed me down for quite a while in my creative journey. And finally I came to a point where I was like, ‘Just claim it! Claim it as part of just being.’”

And my art teacher – this woman I studied with, Leigh Hyams – she said, and I love this: “Painting allows you to become who you really are.” So if you think of doing something creative as just the process that allows you to become and be who you truly are, then that’s a different relationship to the doing of it than “Will it be published? Will it be bought?” I mean, yes, there’s a certain level of gratification when you make something and it *is* something, and others experience it by reading it or seeing it. There’s something about that; there is a circle that’s made, in that exchange.

Yet there’s something about just *creating* it that’s also a circle, that I’m starting to trust in. It’s like it’s allowing me to *become* who I’m meant to become, and *be* who I’m meant to be. And I’m trusting that. Or I’m choosing to *try* to trust that [laughs], I will say. That’s a worthy path too, is what I think I’m coming to this place with myself.

Naomi: Yes. That really shifts things, doesn’t it?

Colette: Yes! First of all, it shifts your *relationship* to yourself and to the engagement. It shifts your relationship when you’re making something, when you’re engaging with something.

It’s just like when you pray. I’m learning to find more openness in that space, not an outcome or trying to figure it out or trying to fit into something. But just trusting in the organic nature, and how just the engagement in prayer itself, and connecting to that divine Source within me – just that is shaping me.

So again, I feel it’s a more process-oriented way to relate to things. I’m finding that that allows me to be more – I don’t know if “excited” is the right word, but curious, and open, and just engaged. There’s really no end to any of this. It’s like, “Wow – I could pray forever. I could paint forever. I could write forever.” It just becomes generative, as I think we were talking about earlier.

“It’s a more process-oriented way to relate to things.”

So what keeps the spirit alive? Because by nature, spirit, creativity, is a living force. Its nature is to keep destroying and creating. That’s the dynamic of it. So how do we live in that same flow – with spirit, with creativity, with relationships, as you said? I’m curious about that. I’m just finding where one orients, or where one positions oneself, where one

places oneself in relation to these things is really kind of the heart of it. The kernel. That's what you were saying.

“Where one orients, or where one positions oneself, where one places oneself in relation to these things – writing, painting, prayer – is really kind of the heart of it. The kernel.”

RE-FINDING YOUR CREATIVE CONNECTION

And that's a big shift for me. Because after I published my books, and then I've written another one – things closed off for me because of certain things that happened in the publishing arena. And I really had to take a pause, in the last couple of years. And I had to really reclaim the journey for myself. It wasn't that this publisher was going to pick it up; it wasn't that I was going to become the next one invited to the “Oprah” show. Yes, some people, that's their path.

I came to the point with my own journey that whether one person, ten people, a thousand people, a million people read my books – it was all valid. But for a long time, I was orienting myself from the outside in; and I noticed, “Wow, this is just destroying my creative spirit.”

And I had to re-find my connection to my creative spirit in the last few years. I just finished the manuscript of a new book, and I faced a lot of fear, a lot of doubt. I had to regain, reconnect with an inner trust; reconnect to a voice; reconnect to a path that I was following, and that I was being *asked* to follow. And I had to *claim* my journey; claim my voice; claim my *place* in the creative landscape.

So it takes courage and commitment. And I think it also takes *shifting* – shifting how we're seeing something, how we're seeing ourselves in relationship to our creative life, to our creative journey. Do we see it as a *journey*? Roads and curiosities and seasons and weather – or do we just see it as a *place*? That I just arrive? So it's a shift.

“It takes courage, commitment, and shifting how we're seeing ourselves in relationship to our creative life. Do we see it as a journey? Roads and curiosities and seasons and weather – or do we just see it as a place, where I just arrive?”

Naomi: It's such a big shift. And even that distinction where a journey is roads and whatever other beautiful things you said – roads and mountains, versus a place – as soon as you said that, I thought: “Oh my goodness! When I'm not connected, that's what I do to myself.”

And currently, for me, it's so subtle that your saying “a place” opens enough of that door that I feel like I could begin to explore it. And it's so important! Because the ways – it's really moving! – the ways that we have been trained to commoditize ourselves, it's not different from commoditizing what comes out of us.

And I don't mean there isn't a place for "I really want to write a book, a book really wants to be written from me, I want to get a good publisher / I want to self-publish, this is what's involved...." Clearly, that's part of it. And some of my work is involved with that, helping people to self-publish.

But that's what happens on *that* end of it. And if that end creeps in too soon, then I think it's really a problem. I don't know if it creeps in too soon for everybody, but I have noticed that there's a viewpoint.... Because of self-publishing, there's more focus on writing books. Anybody can write a book. Literally, anybody can write and publish a book. So there's more "Ten Ways to Write a Book," and all that.

Colette: Right.

Naomi: There's a school of thought that says, "Before you even *begin* your book, write the back-cover copy. Decide who is it for, who is your audience? Do the marketing and then write your book, because you'll know exactly what to do and who it's for!" If you did that, it probably would be true; it would come out very well-branded: "This is what I'm doing, this is who is for," and it would be exactly for those people, and they would buy the book.

So perhaps for some kinds of books, maybe that *is* a good way? "How to Use the Internet," things like that?

But if what you're really talking about is that deep, spiritual relationship to the deepest you that you at least wish for, wish to make contact with – none of that pertains, at that point. You just have to say, "That's like putting on the jewelry after you've taken the bath; but this [writing the book] is the bath."

THE ENGAGEMENT WITH YOURSELF

Colette: James Finley said to me, "It's also not just what the book is *about*, but it's your experience of *writing* the book – who you *meet* in the writing. And who you're invited to be meeting, in the writing of your book." Who wants to show up? How, again, you learn to treat yourself as you work through writing your book. So what is it that writing this book wants to *teach* you and tell you about what it means to be you on your journey, at this time in your life?

"It's who you meet in the writing. And who you're invited to be meeting, in the writing of your book. What is it that writing this book wants to teach you and tell you about what it means to be you on your journey, at this time in your life?"

This is very different.

I value the creation of a book, the physical creation. I mean, you're sitting there with two of my books right there, and I'm obviously praying that my next book will find a way to manifest itself.

Yet I really agree with what you said: it's in the writing of the book that so much happens. You don't want to shortcut that. You don't want to – I would say – miss out on what writing wants to offer you. Does it want you to face fears? Does it want you to be more courageous? Does it want you to become more authentic? Does it want you to listen more deeply? What does it want to tell you? How does it want to shape you? How does it want to teach you? How does it want to be your spiritual teacher, in creating the book?

“You don't want to miss out on what writing wants to offer you.”

Because, in many ways, that has a big life -- in some ways, more than the book! Because that will affect you and then how you interact with all the people you're meeting in your life. That has an important place. It's important.

A HOLISTIC PERSPECTIVE OF CREATIVITY

So again, I think it's what you and I have been talking about: it's taking a holistic perspective of creativity, and seeing all that it wants to offer you by being creative. For many people, just the encounter of fear – like, “I'm afraid.” Even just working with that energy, meeting the fear, breathing through the fear, writing even though you *do* feel afraid, learning how to say things you were scared to say – there's so much in that!

And then, loving yourself after you've said it. Comforting yourself after you've said it. Just the cycle. It sounds so simple. And it could be something you said in just a paragraph or a page – [gasps, then exhales:] “Can I say this? Do I dare? Wow! This is really *in* me.”

The exploration that happens when you're creative. When you make a painting, it's like, “I'll take a risk! I'll throw that yellow in, and that blue! I could destroy that whole painting but – I could also meet an edge in myself and break it open. And that's where I'm going to meet myself. And that's where I'm going to meet *God*.”

“And if the whole painting doesn't look good, that experience of making it is what settles in my soul.”

So I really think there is – just as I feel with spirituality: we have a natural relationship to the Divine. We're kind of born with it. You know – you're a kid, you're looking around, you're playing in the ocean – you feel it, you just *feel* it. You feel it in your little body, and your bones, and your heart. You just [inhales deeply, exhales:] “Wow! I'm *alive*! I feel the water. I see the blue sky. Look at the birds overhead. I feel the sand on my feet. I hear my parents screaming at each other.” It's all part of it.

And there's something pulsing with life, Creation, God – it's all kind of *there*. And then somebody starts shaping it, and framing it, and telling you it.

But it's the same with creativity. A kid just wants to take a crayon and make a big – “Oh, that's a face!” There are so many parallels, to me, between the creative and spiritual impulse. We're all given. We're given this *gift*!

So when you talked about becoming *receptive* – I think that's really the place to start. It's such a deep place to start.

CREATIVITY AS HEALING

I'd like to add just one more thing: how *healing* creativity is. Because both of my books were written from times of pain, and times of loss. And writing them was a way of praying, for me – both of them. It was a way of being intimate with myself in the face of a lot of loss, and letting God kind of meet me on the page, as I was confused and searching, and in some ways trying to just open up to really not understanding.

“How healing creativity is!”

My first book, *Comfort and Joy*, was written right after my sister died young of breast cancer, and I went through that journey with her. We were both just in our early thirties. And it was also a time when I was just beginning to face infertility, which is what I talk about more in my second book. It was also a time when I was experiencing fierce insomnia, something I never had experienced in my life. And it's interesting that I'd write a book called *Comfort and Joy* during such a time of *discomfort*! [Laughs]

And yet I never planned to write that book. It was a total surprise. I was really someone who was writing children's-book manuscripts, picture books. And I wrote a good handful of them. But they never clicked in the publishing world. I did try to send them out and connect with people.

And so this book kind of surprised me, started to come to me. And I just trusted it.

So that's the other thing I would say to people: Trust what actually surprises you. Like, “What? *This* topic? Me?” I never planned on that. But if you just trust it – trust the way that creativity knows is right for you, what comes to you. There is a lot of trust that comes with that.

“Trust what actually surprises you. ‘What? This topic? Me?’”

And it's very, very healing. I think creativity is really a healing force. I love that you use that word: there's a *wholeness* that it connects us to.

Naomi: I'm so glad you shared that. Having read the books, I can certainly see and feel the reality of what you said. The books aren't just moving and touching and inspiring, but it really does feel – especially with *Seeking Surrender*, my experience of reading it is that there really is a sense of the not-knowing. Of just being right there with the not-knowing. And then, something opens up. And continuing in that way. And coming to peace, through that.

I really loved that book, so much of it. Maybe we could talk about that at some point.

But I do think you're putting the emphasis in a whole other place than the literary emphasis. And I hadn't known until I went to your website that you, yourself, have a literary background. For me, it's so utterly perfect and such a Divine gift to be talking with you, when you really have the experience on both sides. And it seems to me that you're speaking of using the writing – at least, among other things -- as a vehicle for the realness of your being to show itself to you. Which is a very different thing from saying, "I want to write me a best-seller." Or even, with all sincerity to say, "What kind of stylistic form would be best, here?" And there's nothing wrong with that. It's just a little bit removed.

WHAT IS YOUR STARTING POINT?

Colette: Yes, I think it's what we've been talking about: *What is your starting point?* Because that will come; but first, giving yourself freedom. "What is my material? What is it from deep listening that wants to be said, to be spoken?" And allowing that, as you were saying, to come out more. And then, organically, allowing it to be shaped.

Because there are so many different styles that you could use. But to try to be true to your material first, instead of forcing it into something, as you were saying.

And so both of my books were written that way. And even my new book – first, gathering; spending my time gathering. "What *is* it? What's my *material*? What's *exciting* me? What's *interesting* me? What's *drawing* me?" And then looking at the material. In my first book, I used the vignettes. In the second one, I did the letters. In this newest book that I've just completed the manuscript, I used parts of my spiritual journals.

So, trying to find the pieces that are really true to what you're speaking about, at this time. And then allowing yourself to let that shape and form in an authentic way.

And again, I realize all these things are a business, I do – just like spirituality is a big business, nowadays. But I just, for myself, want to claim *my* voice and *my* experience. And the person that God has created me to be, and that God *knows* me to be, already – that I *am*. I want to *live* that person. I want to *know* her, as much as I can.

"Through what I create, I just want to claim my voice and my experience. And the person that God has created me to be, and that God knows me to be, already – that I am. I want to live that person. I want to know her, as much as I can."

And so these are expressions of that truth, of that person. And that's a real shift for me. To see my creative creations like that. For a long time, I wanted to *be* somebody. I wanted the *label*, I wanted the *accolades*. And when that kind of fell apart for me – I'll be quite honest, that fell apart. And it's been a gift, that that fell apart. Because it's

reoriented me in a way that feels so much more life-affirming, now. It's like, "Wow, it's been a good shift."

I remember my art teacher said this, later in her life. We'd spent time with her in Mexico – she spent the last ten years of her life painting in Mexico, in San Miguel. We were talking. She said, "Yes, I would have liked to have been more successful. But that's really not what it's about. That really didn't matter. It was *making* the work. And what making the work did to me as a human being."

That's taking the journey – the journey of painting, the journey of writing, the journey of praying. In some ways, she was saying, "*That's* what I'm going out with." Because she was at the end of her life.

It was a really wonderful teaching. And I'm allowing that way of seeing it and being with it – I'm allowing that to find more room in me.

Naomi: I cannot think of a better blessing.

Is there anything you would like to say about your most recent book? Or is it premature?

Colette: I'm probably not quite sure how to speak about it, because it's just finalizing and going to come out. But I think what I said before: the journey of writing it has been so important to me. Because reclaiming and reconnecting and repositioning myself while I was writing it has been so important to me – to find the courage and the voice. And kind of praying my way through writing this has been really, really so important.

So it's not only what the book is about, but the journey of actually writing the book, in this particular case, that feels such an important part.

Naomi: That's what you've been saying all along.

Colette: We'll see how it goes. Thank you so much.

Naomi: All right, back to what I was saying: This has been an extraordinary blessing for me. It goes so much deeper and beyond what I would have known, consciously, on my own. And it's just such a beautiful gift and opening to explore more for myself, what that could be to really allow that inner relationship to be primary. And let it deepen, on some level, the most important thing we get to *have*, as human beings; but it often doesn't get very much attention.

I'm so grateful to you for so much of this. And one aspect of that is to bring that into something that – at least, in my training and experience – typically has had so much outer-directedness to it. It seems like it could be a whole real transformation, both of one's sense of oneself and experience, and what it would be like to say, "Okay, this is my writing time, but it's not about being productive. It's about that meeting." That's so beautiful.

“What it would be like to say, ‘Okay, this is my writing time, but it’s not about being productive. It’s about that meeting.’”

Colette: That’s so beautifully said, Naomi. Thank you for that.

IN CLOSING

Naomi: So if the timing works for you, maybe I’ll end with that chapter on “Creating” in *Comfort and Joy*. I’m happy to read it, unless you would like to.

Colette: I’d love to hear it in your voice.

Naomi: All right.

“It is early morning, still dark outside. After tossing and turning for hours, I get out of bed and head to my art studio, which is tucked in the corner of the garage. I begin drawing, and as I press the charcoal into the white surface of the paper, I feel the warmth of comfort spread through my body. The intimacy of working with my hands softens my hardened bones, melting away the thick layer of tension that had built up during the fitful night.

“The morning light begins to appear, gracefully and deliberately like a dancer. And in that mood of awakening, I am drawing without hesitation. Pure instinct. Trusting every mark – a smudge, a smear, thick dark lines, thin gray lines. The drawing is already in me as I open my hands to receive it.

“I draw as a way of listening, listening to something I cannot hear otherwise. I sometimes close my eyes when I draw and sink into not knowing. I feel the sensation of the charcoal pressing on the paper, sometimes with a feather-light touch, and other times with a forceful drag. It’s in the listening that comfort can be heard. It is in a private moment of surrender that comfort can be received.”

This feels like a beautiful distillation of what you’ve been saying, and I’m so grateful for the larger expanse of it. Thank you so much for being willing to have the conversation. I’m beyond thrilled.

Colette: Thank you.

Naomi: This has been Naomi Rose, book developer and creative midwife. My website, should you want to find out more, is www.naomirose.net

I have been speaking with Colette Lafia, spiritual director and author of the books, *Comfort & Joy*, and *Seeking Surrender: How My Friendship with a Trappist Monk Taught Me to Trust and Embrace Life*

Colette's website is: www.colettelafia.com

Thank you so much for this deep conversation about creativity and the Divine, Colette.