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Interview with George Cotkin

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Professor George Cotkin

INTERVIEW WITH GEORGE COTKIN

Author & Professor of History

Dr. George Cotkin is professor of History and has been teaching at Cal Poly since 1980. His research specialties include American intellectual and cultural history. He has authored three books, the most recent entitled *Existential America* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003). He is currently working on his fourth book, *Where the Action Is: American Cultural Criticism Since 1945* (Columbia University Press). He was a Senior Fulbright Scholar at the University of Rome in 1994, and has recently been nominated by Dean Hellenbrand for the prestigious California State University Wang Family Excellence Award.

Kumi Okimura: What is your definition of a muse?

GC: I think of a muse as a source of inspiration.

KO: Why is the notion of a muse sort of “powerful”?

GC: I think the great fear of artists is that they may lose their creativity. There is a book titled *Drunken Muse* written by Tom Dardis that details the struggles of writers with liquor. They turn to it to relieve the burden of creativity. Of course, with abuse comes the deadening of creativity.

KO: You describe art as a “solitary enterprise.” What do you mean by this?

GC: You are alone with the printed page or the blank canvas. You have a responsibility to do something with it. Easier said than done—but something that must be done.

*KO: In your book *Existential America*, you describe “the upside of existential freedom” as “the freeing from the shackles of tradition, the possibility of a more authentic existence, and the headiness that comes with the freedom to create and be creative.”*

How does existential freedom serve as a source of inspiration?

GC: Many years ago, philosopher Marjorie Grene titled a book on existentialism *Dreadful Freedom*. Freedom is liberating, but with it comes responsibility, the recognition that your excuses are gone, that you must face issues and make choices. That freedom can be frightening, almost numbing. Sometimes you flee from it into an inauthentic existence. At other times, you accept it and choose to create.

KO: Do you think criticism inhibits creativity?

GC: Oscar Wilde once said “criticism is an art form.” It’s the notion of taking something (texts written by others), and creating something new out of it. It can be through daring juxtapositions, new analyses, whatever it takes.

KO: Do you agree or disagree with Wilde’s statement?

GC: Yes, I think that the best criticism rises to the status of art and endures. In some ways, criticism has become the cultural coin of the realm in the last half century.

KO: How do you respond to criticism?

GC: Well, like everyone else, I prefer praise. I have a circle of friends who comment on my work before it gets published. After it is published, then it is out of my life. I exult when I have good reviews and try to shrug off less than positive ones. I never respond to reviews, good or bad. I am already on a new project and have no desire to return to the old.

KO: How do you strive to prove to yourself, prove against the odds, the desire, the goal to create something better than you imagine it to be?

GC: It probably comes out of a desire to be accepted, to prove to myself, and to others, that I can do something important. Even when I do not succeed fully—and in my mind that is always—I try to do it better. I love the line from Beckett, “No Matter, Try Again, Fail Again, Fail Better.” Also akin to Sisyphus rolling the rock up the hill and then having it tumble down. But, as Camus relates the story, one imagines that Sisyphus is happy to be alive. I go through the anguish of writing because it does, in some way, make me happy, or at least feel alive.

KO: You used the phrase “luck and pluck” to describe your achievements—could you explain it?

GC: A writer named Horatio Alger wrote a host of books for young people designed to teach morals. Anyway, he used the phrase “luck and pluck” to explain how one got ahead in life. Luck, i.e. a chance happening that helped the kid; pluck, i.e. willingness to work hard.

KO: What do you think are the Muses of modern American culture?

GC: I think what inspires modern American culture today is ambition, success, money, and status. They are “secular muses.” I’m not saying these things inspire me personally.

KO: What inspires you?

GC: New York intellect Irving Howe once said he strove to write “a few words that would live.” I aspire to write something great, something important, something that will make a contribution. I haven’t yet, but I am still striving. I don’t have any particular things or rituals that inspire me to write, (like sharpening pencils, or playing music) but I do on occasion get inspiration from certain authors and books.

KO: Could you talk about the most difficult time in your life—how you were fighting cancer, how you had to take care of your parents, and had a deadline. You said you were inspired to sit down and write to make up for the time you lost. I love how you ended the conversation saying “when you have more time, you end up making less of it, and when you have less time, you end up making more of it.”

GC: Yes, it was, in a sense, a “perfect storm,” a confluence of events that suggested to me that I might not be able to finish *Existential America*. It certainly was an existential moment. Dealing with my own mortality and that of others, faced with less time, I became more directed than normal, perhaps realizing that I had no need to make a mountain out of a molehill. I worked when I could free a little space, but with much greater intensity and sense of purpose. The resonance of my situation is a kind of subtext for *Existential America*. 

Interview conducted by Kumi Okimura, a history and graphic communication major.

Photograph by Marta Peluso