



enjoy the journey

Designer Ann Willoughby explores the amazing power of collaboration. Her rules of the creative road? Make a place where ideas flourish. And trust the process.

ann willoughby

On a star-filled night in fall of 2002, I leaned against a 150-year-old hand-hewn timber beam at the Willoughby Design Barn. There before me sat 50 designers, scientists, writers and architects laughing uncontrollably, their mouths stuffed with Dubble Bubble, Tootsie Rolls and Necco Wafers.

Why on earth would these prominent design leaders from across the U.S. be acting like a group of five-year-olds at a birthday party?

Because Kevin Carroll, the masterful storyteller from Nike, was dancing around in the warm light of the copper and pine barn, throwing penny candy to a mesmerized crowd of onlookers “getting in touch” with their favorite childhood memories.

Dan Maginn, the barn’s architect, smiled at me from across the room while chewing on a Slo Poke. Dan and I had dreamed of this kind of moment throughout our three-year collaboration on the design for the barn. Here we were at the AIGA Boundaries conference in the newly completed barn, surrounded by some of the smartest and most creative people in the design field. There was only person missing: Gordon MacKenzie. But through Kevin and Dan I felt Gordon’s presence that night. What started seven years earlier had come full circle. It all started with a book.


the creative paradox

When Gordon MacKenzie came bounding into our office in the spring of 1995, he brought a 6-inch-thick manuscript and a stack of rejection letters from just about every publisher in New York. In frustration, Gordon and his wife, Louise, had decided to use part of their life savings to self-publish his book, "Orbiting the Giant Hairball." We had agreed to design it. I had no idea what lay ahead.

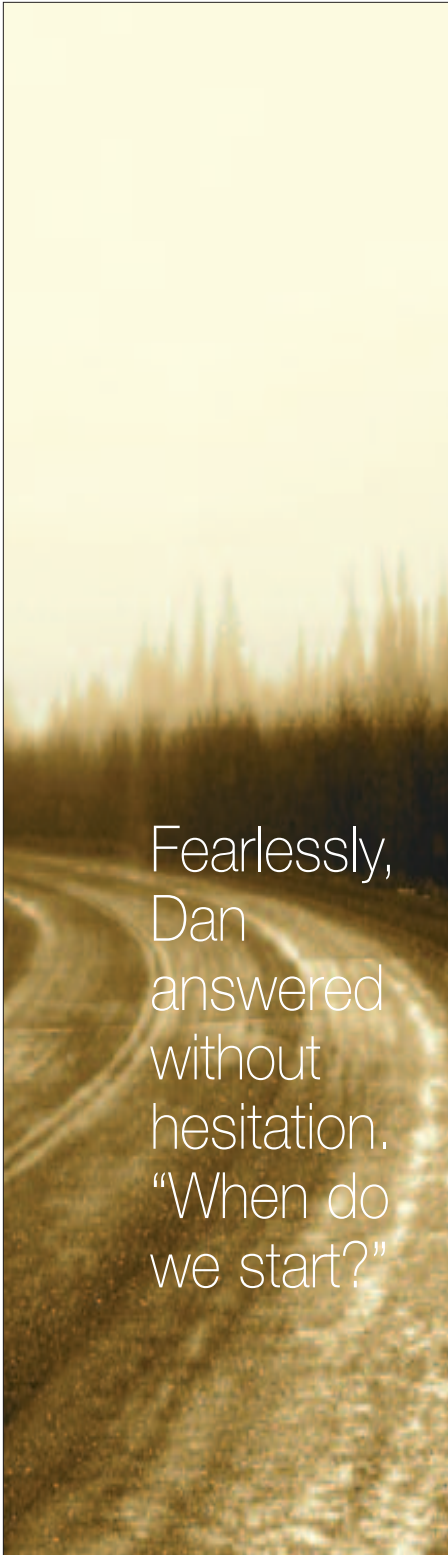
Gordon had worked for 30 years at Hallmark Cards, where he'd created a position of his own: Creative Paradox. A talented storyteller, writer and artist, Gordon's second career as a wildly successful speaker had taken him all over the world. His simple stories tapped into the creative yearnings of anyone working in an organization where procedures, policies and profits collided with personal growth and creativity. Now, after failing to find a publisher, Gordon had asked Willoughby to design a book that would combine his witty parables and serious message with the same vitality he brought to his presentations. It was a tall order.

Throughout the next few months, lead designer Michelle Sonderegger and I had lengthy conversations with Gordon about the project. We wrote a design brief. We determined the scope, budget and time line. We prototyped a few concepts, and it soon became apparent that this was not the typical designer-client relationship. From the outset, there were no clear boundaries among writer, designer and illustrator — or "galvanizers," as Gordon called us.

Once we chose a final direction, Gordon practically moved into our office and became a member of the Willoughby family. Normally we wouldn't work this way, but with Gordon it was more than OK. Gordon was full of enthusiasm and appreciated the design process. He loved ambiguity and relished the collaboration it took to work the process of working through a design and collaborating with the client had become more interesting than the through problems. Our friendships deepened as our mutual trust grew. Toward the end of the project, I believe we were all saddened as the final files were prepared for Stinehour Press in Vermont. For the first time, end product. Gordon had changed me, and our company, in a fundamental way that I was only beginning to understand.



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the courageous architect

“Orbiting the Giant Hairball” began to impact my life and the decisions I made about family, work and friendships. After the book was printed I began to read and reread it, sometimes daily. On page 47 Gordon wrote, “Orbiting is following your bliss.”

I called Gordon. “I think I know what my bliss is,” I announced. “A barn.”

“Oh, yeah? Tell me about it,” Gordon encouraged.

“Well, not just a barn, but a place where people come to celebrate and learn. A place where one is inspired and the spirit soars.”

“Sounds like bliss to me. Any chance we could do some of my conferences there?” Gordon asked with sincere enthusiasm.

Gordon and I had become comfortable building on each other’s ideas, and soon there was a kitchen, bath and painting studio planned for the barn.

The next day I called Dan Maginn, a young architect I had met through my daughter. Dan had recently founded a new firm, el dorado, with four other architects he had met in a welding class. At the time, the el dorado portfolio included public art installations, workstations and one residence. I liked the way these architects thought, and their passion for design was apparent in everything they took on.

“Dan, what would you think about designing a barn?”

“On your farm?”

“Yes, but I have no idea where to put it, and it has to be, well, unlike any other barn in the world.”

Fearlessly, Dan answered without hesitation. “When do we start?”

I wasn’t completely prepared for what happened next. I was now the client, just as Gordon had been when he first came to Willoughby. But I was changed because of our experience with Gordon. I had learned how to be a better client and designer. I had also learned how to ask the right questions and to “trust the process,” as Dan and I reminded each other during the three years we worked together.

Fortunately, Dan was a natural collaborator, as Gordon had been, and we started the barn design without preconceived ideas about the final visual appearance. We developed goals and constraints first. Next we listed needs: a painting studio, a bathroom, a place to dance, dine and learn, a place for the tractor and a workshop for tools. Dan was an active listener and asked provocative questions. He taught me how to site a building and how to see the seasons, materials and light with a fresh eye. I pushed back at times, and so did Dan. In the end, what we created together was better than anything we could have imagined.

the corporate catalyst

During the design of the barn I shared my experiences and plans with Gordon. He was elated and supportive. We talked about how his book and now my collaboration with Dan had changed the way I understood and approached design.

Then came the terrible news.

Gordon was diagnosed with bladder cancer in 1998. He visited the barn once, when the copper roof and siding were being installed. We talked about a lot that afternoon. He was getting weaker and had stopped traveling and speaking. That day he told me about a young man, Kevin Carroll, who worked for Nike. "I'd like for you to meet him sometime," Gordon said.

A few months later in July of 1999, I stood by Gordon's bedside with his beloved wife, Louise. Not knowing how to adequately express my gratitude and love for him, and his influence in my life, I promised Gordon that I would continue his legacy with the lessons from his book. He died that night, and three days later I gave his eulogy. Stacked in my almost-completed barn were several cartons of the remaining copies of Gordon's original-edition, handmade books, a gift from Gordon and Louise. Since then, I've given away almost all the books to people I thought Gordon might have liked.

I finally met Kevin Carroll in person at the HOW Design Conference in 2002. Bryn Mooth had asked me to come backstage about 15 minutes before Kevin went on to give the final keynote address in a cavernous roomful of more than 3,000 designers. Gordon had given this same keynote a few years earlier, so it was poignant to finally meet Kevin in this situation. There, in the dark corner of the side stage, I found a wonderful new friend.



In those first few minutes, Kevin and I mostly talked about Gordon and how his friendship had transformed each of our lives. In Gordon, Kevin had found a mentor and soul mate. They shared parallel roles in their professional lives, fostering creativity at two internationally renowned corporations. (Gordon's title at Hallmark was Creative Paradox, and around Nike Kevin was known as the Katalyst.) Gordon had encouraged Kevin to continue on with his work as a storyteller to entertain, enlighten and challenge business leaders to bring more creativity to the workplace.

I shared with Kevin the story of how Gordon and I had become close friends during the 17 months we spent designing his book. Before Kevin leaped onto the stage that afternoon, he asked me if we would design his upcoming book, "The Rules of the Red Rubber Ball." Immediately, I knew I had another chance to honor Gordon's legacy. At the time I had no idea what good friends Kevin and I were to become. Nor could I imagine the joy of our collaborative journey ahead. **mm**

Kevin's book and identity program was completed in 2004. The design has won many awards, including the HOW Perfect 10 in December 2005. "The Rules of the Red Rubber Ball" is now in its second printing and is being published and distributed by ESPN under a long-term contract with Kevin Carroll.



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