



The Creative Approach

Much ability is wasted when people tell themselves they're not creative. It's a waste the world can ill afford. Taking the creative road means changing some mental habits. But think of the rewards!

□ The notion of creativity is so new in the historical scheme of things that it was not until well into the present century that the word began to show up in dictionaries. Writers and philosophers in the past have had a great deal to say about talent, imagination and inspiration, but only in relatively recent times have these been wrapped together into the phenomenon we call creativity.

The oversight can be traced back to old-fashioned snobbery of the kind that took for granted that the common man was incapable of "creating" anything. The sages of history believed almost unanimously that the universe functioned according to a cosmic pattern in which everything and everybody had a place, with themselves near the top. The place of ordinary souls in the natural order was decidedly not to bring new ideas and works into being. It was to stick to the labours assigned to them in the eternal plan.

The closest traditional thinkers ever came to the modern concept of creativity was their concept of genius, which was strongly influenced by snobbery and determinism. The word "genius" derives from the term for the presiding spirits which were supposed to have dwelt within people in ancient Rome. The individuals known as geniuses were thought to be endowed by the gods with transcendental intellectual and/or artistic powers. Like gentlemen, geniuses were born, not made.

If the occasional prodigy like Michelangelo was thrown up out of the masses, the anomaly was conveniently explained by the theory that he was divinely inspired. Otherwise men (almost always

men; hardly ever women) of genius came from the dominant class. This was hardly surprising, because they were the only members of society with the education and leisure to make the most of their talents. The bulk of the people had neither the time nor the opportunity to exercise whatever creative ability they might have had.

The prospect that there might be a vast untapped mine of talent and intelligence in the population at large was scarcely considered. Neither was much thought given to the possibility that talent might come in degrees, so that people of lesser abilities might be capable of making valuable contributions to the quality of life.

The advent of public education in the western nations in the latter part of the 19th century did little to change this attitude. The method of teaching by rote was not conducive to encouraging youngsters to use their imaginations. The idea that creativity in childhood should be actively nurtured would have been considered next to heresy in the age of "spare the rod and spoil the child."

It took the pioneers of psychology to see the plain fact that one did not have to be divinely endowed to conceive original works of art or inventions. William James was moving in the direction of our present conception of creativity when he wrote in his *The Principles of Psychology* in 1890: "Genius, in truth, means little more than the faculty of perceiving in an unhabitual way."

Carl Jung spoke of the "creative man" in his essays in the 1920s and '30s, though he remained somewhat mesmerized by the mystical theory of

genius. Nevertheless, he and other writers on psychology helped to refine the concept of creativity we have today.

That concept, as it is usually understood, is that the potential for originality exists to a greater or lesser degree in every human. It is like a sixth sense, as inherent in the organism as the other five. If it cannot exactly be taught, it can be cultivated by training, example, and habituation. And it can be brought to bear on work of any scale or nature: An office manager who comes up with a bright new scheme for handling paperwork is being as creative in her field as a novelist is in hers.

Though all this might seem clear enough, the question of what constitutes creativity remains beset by misconceptions. The most basic of these is that it is confined to the arts, an impression which artists themselves do little to correct. It is in the arts that creativity has become a rather derisive term. Critics and professional practitioners cringe at the thought of all the incomprehensible poetry, the graceless sculptures and truly primitive paintings produced in the name of letting the creative juices flow.

Learning to invent from the inventions of the past

The opportunity to be creative has been interpreted by some as an opportunity to look and behave like an artist without going to the trouble of actually being one. This leads to another misconception of creativity, which is that it is sufficient unto itself.

It is, of course, associated with freedom — the freedom to let the spirit rove in the undiscovered reaches of the imagination. But what Matthew Arnold said about opinions is equally pertinent to creative endeavours: "It is a very great thing to be able to think as you like; but, after all, an important question remains: *what* you think."

Reporting on his experiences preparing a television series on the subject a few years ago, journalist Bill Moyers wrote: "Two things are implied in the word 'creativity' as I have come to understand it: novelty and significance. What is created is new, and the new opens up paths that expand human possibilities." Without the element of significance, creative efforts amount to no more than self-

indulgence. As Ralph Waldo Emerson so nicely put it, "Talent for talent's sake is a bauble and a show."

Among the definitions of "creative" in the Oxford English Dictionary is "showing imagination as well as routine skill." The reference to skill is essential to the meaning. A man could compose music in his head like another Mozart, but without the skill to play it or to set it down in musical notation, his artistry would be lost to the world.

Sir Joshua Reynolds insisted that he would never have become known as a painter of genius if he had not acquired the requisite technique to take advantage of the artistic breakthroughs made before him. New heights, he said, are reached through a knowledge of what has already been done and a knowledge of how to build on it. "It is by being conversant with the inventions of others that we learn to invent; as by reading the thoughts of others, we learn to think."

The assumption that there is a mystical element in the creation of great works, he said, arises from an ignorance of the process. "The untaught mind finds a vast gulf between its own powers, and those of works of complicated art, which it is unutterably unable to fathom; and it supposes that such a void can only be passed by supernatural powers."

Reynolds did not deny that nature gives some people more capacity than others, but he nonetheless believed that strenuous effort is needed to make the best of whatever ability is present. "If you have great talents, industry will improve them; if you have but moderate abilities, industry will supply their deficiency."

He who shoots most often scores the most goals

Some of the most brilliant figures in history had to toil long and hard to give birth to their masterpieces. Beethoven's musical notebook bears all the scars of agonized creation. Dr. Samuel Johnson, by his own account, wrote "doggedly". The Nobel Prize-winning novelist, Sinclair Lewis, described the writing process as "painful." As a general rule, creation is "10 per cent inspiration and 90 per cent perspiration," as Thomas Edison said.

Discoveries in science and technology are thought by "untaught minds" to come in blinding flashes or as the result of dramatic accidents. Sir Alexander Fleming did not, as legend would have it, look at the mould on a piece of cheese and get the idea for penicillin there and then. He experimented with anti-bacterial substances for nine years before he made his discovery. Inventions and innovations almost always come out of laborious trial and error. Innovation is like hockey: Even the best players miss the net and have their shots blocked much more frequently than they score.

The point is that the players who score most are the ones who take the most shots on the net — and so it goes with innovation in any field of activity. The prime difference between innovators and others is one of approach. Everybody gets ideas, but innovators work consciously on theirs, and they follow them through until they prove practicable or otherwise. They never reject any thought that comes into their heads as outlandish. What ordinary people see as fanciful abstractions, professional innovators see as solid possibilities.

"Creative thinking may mean simply the realization that there's no particular virtue in doing things the way they have always been done," wrote Rudolph Flesch, the language guru. This accounts for our reaction to deceptively simple innovations like plastic garbage bags and suitcases on wheels that make life more convenient: "How come nobody thought of that before?"

Creativity does not demand absolute originality. It often takes the form of throwing an old ball with a new twist. A concert pianist may play a composition written three centuries ago note-for-note and still find unsuspected values in it. An engineer may devise a fresh application of a principle first propounded by Archimedes.

The creative approach begins with the proposition that nothing is as it appears. Innovators will not accept that there is only one way to do anything. Faced with getting from A to B, the average person will automatically set out on the best-known and apparently simplest routing. The innovator will search for alternate courses which may prove easier in the long run and are bound to be more interesting and challenging even if they lead to dead ends.

Highly creative individuals really do march to a different drummer. A study directed by J.P. Guilford, ex-president of the American Psychological Association, found that humans go about thinking in two ways. The most common way is convergent thinking, which spirals inward towards the centre looking for answers. The other is divergent thinking, which radiates out from the centre, opening up new lines of inquiry. Everybody thinks both ways from time to time, but particularly creative people are in the habit, whether natural or acquired, of thinking divergently.

Originality and the fear of looking like a fool

Small children are divergent thinkers, always liable to take off on a tangent. Any thoughtful adult watching a group of them playing "let's pretend" will be humbled by their sheer creativity. Some psychologists, in fact, try to draw out the creative strain in adults by having them play like children. The practice recognizes the truth in Carl Jung's statement that "the dynamic principle of fantasy is play, which also belongs to the child, and as such . . . appears to be inconsistent with serious work. But without this playing at fantasy, no creative work ever yet came to birth."

The poet and essayist Samuel Taylor Coleridge said that genius resides in a combination of a child's sense of magic and an adult's trained mentality. Unfortunately, most children start to suppress their wonderment and adventurousness even before they reach their teens. This happens because of pressure from their peers to conform to group standards. Originality begins to falter as soon as children conceive the fear of looking like fools.

In later life, especially within organizations, the people with the greatest mental openness and the most original slants on questions are often regarded as office clowns, whose far-out ideas are good-naturedly laughed out of meetings. Often, too, they settle into the role their colleagues have assigned to them. It is easier to play the eccentric than to fight for one's ideas.

Highly creative people *are* eccentric in the literal sense of the word. They have less respect for precedent and more willingness to take risks than others.

They are less likely to be motivated by money or career advancement than by the inner satisfaction of hatching and carrying out ideas. In conventional corporate circles, such traits can look quite eccentric indeed.

But while there is an identifiable creative personality which follows these lines, testing has shown that very few people, if any, are without the instinct to be creative. One point on which all the experts are agreed is that many people are not as creative as they could be simply because they tell themselves that they are not the creative type. To act creatively, you must first give yourself permission to try.

Creativity is our last and best natural resource

Everybody, the saying goes, is a genius once a year; the certified geniuses merely have their bright ideas closer together. It might be added that everybody is a genius while asleep. "Dreaming is an act of pure imagination, attesting in all men a creative power, which, if it were available in waking, would make every man a Dante or a Shakespeare," wrote Frederick Henry Hodge, a founder of the transcendental school of philosophy.

Though some rare types are capable of recapturing their dreams, most of us are left with only fragments or vague impressions of our unconscious wanderings. The nearest we can get to the perfectly free state of dreaming is to day-dream, which our culture tells us is not a fit thing for an adult to do.

In addition to the social misapprobation attached to day-dreaming, modern society makes it somehow anti-social to engage in silent contemplation. It is ironic that, in an age when people have more leisure time than ever before, they spend less time than ever exploring their own imaginations. We always have to be *doing* something, if only watching television. Consciously creative persons do not feel uncomfortable "doing nothing." They allow for plenty of quiet time in which to spin fantasies and toy with ideas.

Because creativity is a habit of mind, creative people deliberately cultivate the habit. They train themselves to take a playful approach, thinking up metaphors and similes, playing imaginary roles, and conjuring up scenarios.

Physical age is not a factor. "No matter how old you get, if you can keep the desire to be creative, you are keeping the man-child alive," as actor John Cassavetes said.

In fact, young-minded people have an advantage over people who are merely young: they have years of learning behind them. "The real key to being creative lies in what to do with your knowledge," says creativity consultant Roger Von Oech. "Creative thinking requires an attitude or outlook which allows you to search for ideas and manipulate your knowledge and experience."

Van Oech and others in his field see a serious need to develop the latent creativity in ordinary human beings. On the private level, an inability to express themselves causes some people emotional difficulties and even mental illness. On the public level, the exploitation of the creative resources within the population is essential to improving the lot of mankind.

At a time when we are using up our other natural resources at a perilously rapid rate, creativity is the chief renewable resource left to us in treating global problems. If we human beings are wise, we will work to remove the social and institutional barriers to exercising creativity everywhere. We should keep in mind that creation is the opposite of destruction. Creativity offers the hope of new solutions to old problems. By making creativity a way of life at work, at home and at play, we can not only fulfil ourselves personally, but contribute to the building of a better world.