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Your every moment Creativity

Everyone needs to be creative in today's world, and everyone can be more creative than they are. The old view was that creativity was about producing art works or scientific inventions, and was restricted to a few gifted people. We know now that it applies in every area of life, and that every human being has important creative powers inside him or her.

What is so sad and wasteful is that most of us have evidence, every now and then, of our own creative powers; but we often fail to cultivate them, and just pass by on the other side. Often this rejection is based on fear - the thoughts seem to run like this: If everyone released their creative potential the world would become an impossible place - everyone would be expressing their impulses with total lack of control - the world would go mad. And this is clearly a mental process of projection - what we are really afraid of is our own madness. 'If I let my creative powers out, they may take over and overwhelm me.'

Now many creative people quite like this idea, and foster this conception: it makes them appear more dangerous and interesting. But in fact creativity is not the same as madness: it is just the opposite. The fact is that opposites tend to be very easily confused - there is nothing easier to confuse with the left hand than the right hand - but a drive on any road soon shows that the difference is more important.

Creativity And Madness

Up until recently, however, psychology appeared to support the view that creativity and madness were the same thing. It was Kris who first put forward the widely accepted Freudian view that creativity depended on 'regression in the service of the ego'; meaning that the creative person got his new ideas by, as it were, plunging into the Id and coming back with the goodies.

It was Schachtel who pointed out the error in this. He showed that far from *losing* oneself in the boiling cauldron of the unconscious, one *finds* oneself in the object, idea or problem which is the focus of the creative endeavour. And he went on to say:

What distinguishes the creative process from regression to primary-process thought is that the freedom of the approach is due not to a drive discharge function but the openness in the encounter with the object of the creative labour.

Research with mescaline and LSD has confirmed this general picture. Here again, the early research seemed to show that the altered states of consciousness available through such drugs were akin to those found in schizophrenia; but the later research now makes it clear that they are just the opposite. Ingenious experiments by Aaronson, using hypnotised subjects, have shown that one set of instructions produce a psychedelic experience.

So we may now say fairly confidently that the creative experience may be something like a mescaline trip, but is very unlike a psychotic state. But in what way is it like a mescaline trip?

Bisociation

One important way is summed up in the word bisociation, as used by Koestler. In bisociation two habitually incompatible contexts of thought suddenly come together. The result is a kind of flash, which may be a flash of insight into a problem, may be a flash of wit, may be a flash of artistic illumination or whatever, depending on the circumstances. In a mescaline trip it is incompatible things, and also to capture an image which expresses the similarity between dissimilar things; and exactly the same thing happens in the creative process. Mednick emphasises that 'the more mutually remote the elements of the new combination, the more creative the solution.'

Bisociation as a key to creativity is allied to other keys in other fields: Maslow found that what he called 'dichotomy-transcendence' was important in the peak experiences which strike most of us at some point in our lives; the reconciliation of polarities is central to the ecstasy of the mystics and the *satori* experience of Zen Buddhism and Taoism; in intellectual terms it links with the dialectical synthesis which both Hegel and Marx found so important in their thinking; Perls found it a central element in his concept of Gestalt therapy . . . and so on.

Bisociation, then, is a key element in creativity. So how can we cultivate bisociation, since it seems not to be either crazy or dangerous? The interesting thing is that it appears to be not a question of learning to exert oneself and strain and strive for something; but rather a question of learning how to let go and allow oneself to be open. Not that this makes it easy. Learning how to let go is one of the most difficult things for most of us, because our culture tells us only how to hustle and take.

Conditions For Creativity

There is now a lot of psychological knowledge in this area, much of it stemming from Maslow's classic *Towards a psychology of being*. And it means that we now have reliable psychological techniques for helping one another to achieve greater access to these creative powers which we all have; we know how to set up the conditions which will favour the eleven experiential modes related to creativity outlined by Harman et al:

1. Low inhibition and anxiety.
2. Capacity to structure problems in a larger context.
3. High fluency and flexibility of idealisation.
4. High capacity for visual imagery and fantasy.
5. High ability to concentrate.
6. High empathy with people.
7. Accessibility of preconscious resources.
8. High empathy with external processes and objects.
9. Ability to associate seemingly dissimilar elements in meaningful ways.
10. High motivation to obtain closure; an appetite for elegance.
11. Capacity to visualise the complete solution in its entirety.

(I have amended No.7 from 'unconscious' to 'preconscious' in line with the more recent criticisms of R.M. Jones.)

When we can set up the right conditions - and this is most readily done in a group situation - these things emerge naturally, rather than having to be sought for one by one. And creative productions will then pour out in profusion. We do not try to achieve one answer to a problem, but get a cascade or overflow process going, by which multiple answers are produced. There is no shortage. And this is done completely without the use of drugs, solely by recourse to group interactions.

We now believe it is possible, indeed all too easy, to get a multitude of answers to creative problems, and that the question of how to get ideas flowing is virtually solved. This we may call the Red Phase of creativity. But there is also the Green Phase, where we sort out, criticise, amend, digest and rework the ideas or beginnings which have been produced. It may also sometimes be a case of destroying the original conceptions so as to release the new creatures one has brought into existence.

Much less attention has been paid to this phase, in the literature of creativity. Helmholtz, one of the first writers to systematise thought about creativity, did not mention it at all. Wallas added a stage which he called *Verification*, but said little about crucially important to get it right.

The Second Phase of Creativity

What typically happens is that someone has a good idea, and sticks to it. Then someone else makes a criticism of it which is clearly valid. There the trouble starts. Does one amend the idea? Reject the criticism? Go back to the drawing-board and start again? Insist on the criticism being reworded so as to be constructive or helpful? Feel threatened or frustrated in any case? All this needs to be dealt with.

It is at this point most of all that the person who has created something is most likely to get bored, switch off and stop reading this article. 'This is not about creativity, 'he will say, ' this is about destruction, or nitpicking.'

But this is partly because we have not fully accepted the idea of creativity as overflow. If I have produced six solutions instead of one, I am not so bothered about any one of them - my fear of failure is not aroused, and so I am not so defensive or touchy.

Only partly is this the answer, however; also it is a question of social relations. How do I feel about the person who presents the criticism? Do I trust or mistrust him? Do I respect him or not? And what is the social structure in which we both function - does he have more power or weight than I do? What is the ownership situation? And so on.

And what are my unspoken assumptions? Do I assume that either he wins or I win, or we compromise? Follett in *Creative Experience* suggests that there is always a third way, which is neither domination nor compromise, but in which a kind of bisociation takes place.

These are all things which we can explore and find our own answers to in the group situation. We can actually feel what it is like to get criticism from someone we trust and who trusts us, without a damaging social structure and without damaging assumptions, and this can open out a whole new vista of possibilities for our future lives.

It appears, then, that the group experience is just as relevant to the Green phase as it is to the Red. It can establish the two conditions, of psychological safety and psychological freedom, which Carl Rogers has urged as central to the fostering of constructive creativity.

The Need For Creativity

And this brings us back to the point we started with. In our culture today we tend to turn out conformists and people with narrowed vision. Our education makes us look for the accepted answer, rather than the infinite variety of what is possible. Our leisure activities are all-round packaged units which we buy and consume like cornflakes. In the sciences, there is an ample supply of technicians, but few who can come up with genuinely new ideas. In industry, we pay lip-service to creativity, but systematically discourage it except in a few specialists - and we keep even them on a pretty tight rein. In individual and family life the same picture holds true; it seems dangerous to be different. In a world which is changing as fast as this one is, we desperately need more and better cultivation of our creative powers - every one of us; not just to do science or produce art, but to deal with our work problems, our sexual problems, our life problems - and to go beyond problems to opportunities. We need to be more creative just to survive at all.

And even if we didn't need it, creativity is fun and exciting. It gives us a worthwhile challenge to be all that we have it in us to be - to be that self which we truly are.

If this sounds embarrassingly high-flown and unrealistic, perhaps it is partly because we have learned all too well how to switch off our emotional responses. Maybe it is about time we learned how to switch them on again.