

What Is Creativity*

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As a psychiatrist interested in the field of creativity, I am often asked, "Well, just what is it?" Though the honorific term "creative" implies several things, it is difficult to come up with precise definition. The word "creativity" derives from the Latin *creare*: **to make** and the Greek *Krainein*: **to fulfill**. We can approach creativity from one of these two senses.

It is what creative persons do or make. We use our imaginations to "make up" something new and valuable, thus transforming what is into something better. The creator takes the old and changes it into the new. He adds his unique contribution to whatever he does. He surpasses the traditional with the innovative, the outmoded with an improvement.

It is what creative persons are. As we transcend our past in the things we do, we also become who we can be. Thus creativity is those attitudes by which we fulfill ourselves. It is more than working in a "creative" field such as art or inventing or research, for as Maslow (1968) says, "It is better to make a first rate soup than a second rate painting." Creativity is the actualizing of our potential. It is the expression of ourselves in our becoming. It is our "being becoming." It is our adventure into the unknown.

Creativity is the paradoxical integration of doing and being. Thus it is a flexible encounter with our world -- an active letting go, an aggressive receptivity, a passive responding. It is the assimilation and integration of polarities to find new directions, new solutions, a fresh viewpoint. It is the integration of our logical side with our intuitive side, our left brain with our right. It is all of these and more.

Creativity is more than mere spontaneity for it involves deliberation as well. It is more than divergent thinking for it converges on some solution: It not only generates possibilities, but also chooses among them. It is more than originality which may only express the bizarre, the uncommon -- a purposeless reshuffling of combinations. It is as much asking the right question as finding the correct answer. It is more than play, though it includes play; it is more than work, for it involves letting go as well. It can be as ordinary as unblocked growth or extraordinary as the peak achievements and experiences of humankind. It is more than conscious effort, though at times an active encounter with the world is an essential component. It is more than revealing "archetypical symbols of a collective unconscious," for creativity is an advance and change as well as an expression of continuity with the past. It is more than the result of past directions for something emerges as a consequence that was not present in the cause. The creative product is more than the creator envisions -- and the creator becomes more by creating it.

It may involve methods or techniques but should not be equated with them. It is not the same as the scientific method or any particular method such as "brainstorming" or "Synec- tics." Methods, when they become the rules for behavior, stifle creativity.

Creative behavior always goes beyond any codification of it. The rule makers are always a step behind the innovator. Thus creativity always goes beyond any definition of it.

GIFTS VS. SKILLS

But, nevertheless, a working definition can help for the purposes of this discussion. By using an agreed upon definition we can figure out how to develop one's creativity. Creativity, as I see it, involves three components: skills, newness and value. It is the skill of bringing about something new and valuable. Or as I said in my recent video, "The Creative Adventure," "It is loving something new and valuable into being." Some take the view that creativity is a gift, and that you either have it or you don't. If you do, you develop it. If you don't, you hire those who do and encourage them to use their skills. One of my students, Lin Schuler (1982), wrote a wonderful poem decrying the attitudes of the "gift." She called it "Canned Creativity" and I would like to share an excerpt from it.

If creativity were only a gift, then I would have to cease speaking and just admire or hire the results of the gifted. But I, like Lin, believe creativity not only involves certain learnable skills that can be taught, but that you must invest all of yourself in forming and delivering anything really new and valuable.

Skills are important to the creative process. New and valuable things do occasionally happen by accident, but the creative person can re-set the conditions so they happen often. Without skills the results are non-repeatable. A monkey may by accident arrive at a Shakespearean sonnet by banging away at a typewriter for centuries, but would he be able to repeat it or recognize the results? It takes skill to make or discover something new and valuable. Skills in any endeavor are determined by native talent, training and practice. A tall basketball player has an advantage over a short one, but the latter can counter some of the difference through training and practice. Mozart's sister had as much native ability as her famous brother, but because their father encouraged and fostered Wolfgang's talents, he became immortalized, and his sister a footnote in history.

NEW AND VALUABLE RESULTS

Newness and value describe the result. Some think the creative act is associating or bringing parts together in novel ways, but creativity is more than fortuitous combinations. The newness might just as well be separating out significant elements or rearranging things in a better way.

Good Mental Health

Some people do not think that having a product is important to a definition of creativity. They claim that being creative is rather an open and spontaneous attitude toward life. This approach tends to equate creativity with good mental health. In this view, the creative "product" becomes your life and your relationships with your world. The product becomes the process. The end is not some specific result but, instead, a way of relating your life to present circumstances and future possibilities. You live spontaneously rather than basing your present choices on conscious and unconscious earlier decisions. You live in the "now," rather than the "then." The "means" become the "end." How you travel becomes more important than where you go.

Maslow (1968), the psychologist, in his studies of "self-actualizing" people finds that health, genius, talent and productivity are not synonymous. He maintains that there are two kinds of creative abilities. The first, he calls, the "self-actualizing creativeness" and the second "special talent creative- ness." The former abilities, as opposed to the latter, seem to be close to good mental health and perhaps unrelated to genius, talent or productivity.

Moreover, according to him, the assessment of creativeness does not depend upon the field in which the result occurs, but rather upon the quality of the result itself. It is not correct to say that some fields are creative and others are not. Art, for example, is not ipso facto more creative than housekeeping or business. The attitudes towards the work and the processes to achieve the results become more important in this assessment. Thus from this viewpoint it is more important to determine how the result is obtained, what are the odds against its happening, and how well does it stand on its own merits? Some may think that being creative is just coming up with a new idea. According to this approach getting the idea is all that matters, you don't have to put it down or relate it to anyone.

Hunches can be the initial spark of inspiration, the breakthrough, the creative "germ." Some people in business, for example, are "idea" people. They always seem to be bursting with new ideas. They come up with the concept, but too soon get bored with it and want to look again for something new, so they give it to others to work out the implications and details.

Sometimes this approach works quite successfully, if enough information is provided so that another can work it through to completion.

Too often, however, this attitude can be a cop out. It can be a way of feeling good about yourself without ever being evaluated. You have a great idea or several, but you keep them to yourself. You don't do anything with them. This often is the problem of the would-be novelist. He talks about what he is going to write, but never puts words down on paper. He imagines his book selling and having fame and fortune, rather than visualizing his characters and plotting out their story. He wants to "have been published," not to write. Inspirations require self-discipline to bear fruit, or they just remain hunches. I, for example, thought I had a lot of good ideas about creativity. But until I began to write those thoughts down to publish them in journals, or try to put them across in workshops, did I find they were more vague than I thought. I did not really know them as well as I thought I did. I had to work to know them, to understand their implications, and to put them into a communicable form. Inspirations need to be put into some form -- if only to communicate to yourself. You might have a good hunch, but that is all it is.

Consequently most authorities judge creative people by their works. They think creative people need to arrive at a concrete result to be shared with others. Stein (1963), for example, thinks that creativity must result "in a novel work that is accepted as tenable or useful by a group at some point in time." When there is a specific result you can re-evaluate your work over time and others can provide specific feedback. Robert Frost, the poet, for example, would put his new writings in a desk drawer and look at them several months later. He could then evaluate and edit them with a more critical eye and make improvements. With submission for publication, editors also could recommend possible

changes. With feedback improvement through modification is possible. But you have to have something objective to modify.

GOALS

General goals of creative work. To be creative in any field, you need to have some idea of where you are heading. You need a goal, some general criteria by which to judge whether you are going toward or away from that objective. Seneca, the ancient philosopher, once said, "If a man does not know to what port he is steering, no wind is favorable." In creative thinking steering is particularly difficult. You head toward a goal you may not fully recognize until you get there.

Instead, you go ahead, comparing your thoughts and results with an internal set of criteria which serve as guidelines. They vary from field to field. The conventions, however, continually evolve. Shapero (1941) says:

"Neither style nor form, in their essence, are derived from convention; they always must be, and are, created anew, and establish and follow their own laws. It is undeniable that certain periods -- and the most fortunate ones--have established clearly defined patterns or standards which give the artist a basis on which to create freely. . .Where such standards exist, however, they retain their vitality only as long as they are in the process of development. After this process has stopped, they wither and die, and can be recreated only by a conscious and essentially artificial effort, since they are produced by a unique and unrecoverable impulse, and are suited only to the content which has grown with them."

Newness and value serve as important guides in the decision-making process that every creative person needs to consider. With these criteria you can tell whether you are moving towards your unseen objective.

NEW

Creative people do more than break away from the old patterns. They do more than find alternatives. They diverge from familiar patterns, but then they converge on new solutions. They break laws to remake them. They make hard decisions about what to include and what to eliminate. Creative people innovate. They aim toward newness. This can be considered in several senses:

New as Original

Originality implies being the first of its kind. It suggests something that has never been done before. Thus you must know what has gone on before -- you must know history. Otherwise you end up re-inventing the wheel.

This is why, for example, most children's art lacks greatness. Though some children's work is quite original, it is, for the most part, rarer than most proud parents would admit. The early works hung proudly on the refrigerator or in the office are hardly much different from those on other refrigerators or in other offices across the country. Often neither the child nor the parents give an appropriate assessment of the work. It is new for that child, and that is all that matters.

The work, though new to the child, is not original to larger society in which it lives. Originality depends upon context. If you don't know the context, you can't evaluate its uniqueness.

Wolff, in an article in *The Christian Science Monitor* (1981), writes:

"Originality in art is very difficult to pin down, for it sets its own rules and conditions, and they seem to vary from age to age. One of the most original of all works of art, Albrecht Durer's "The Young Hare," resulted from nothing more unusual than an artist looking very, very carefully at a young animal, and then trying his very best to draw it exactly as it appeared."

Original also implies originate. When you know what has gone before, you also can recognize when your idea is a breakthrough. Your idea thus could start a new line of investigation. It could spawn offspring. Like a mutant that proves it can survive in changing ecological circumstances, the original concept promotes imitation. The product germinates new possibilities which others may then develop and modify.

But being first is quite important. Who remembers Elisha Grey? He also invented the telephone, but Alexander Graham Bell beat him to the patent office. Gray was a few hours too late that February 14, 1876. In patent law, being the first to come up with an invention and register it confers restrictive rights for a number of years. Others have to pay to use that new idea. In science, the first person to publish results gets the grant monies, despite the fact that the concept might have been about to emerge from many labs. Being first matters.

New as Statistically Infrequent

Psychologists measuring creative potential in children or adults look for rare or unusual responses to standardized tests. Newness as novelty, as out of the ordinary, would make Durer's drawing not at all new when seen in today's context. Today many artists draw realistically.

Wolff (1981) says about Durer:

"We today, of course, would tend to see such an act as the very height of unoriginality, as nothing more than the slavish copying of nature. But, in its time and place, it was a truly revolutionary act. It is not so much what you do, but the context in which you do it. Context determines unusualness."

New as a Change from the Regular Way

Wolff (1981) writes:

"To us originality lies more in the imaginative ability to do something dramatically different (regardless of its intrinsic merit), or in the knack of inventing something out of whole cloth.... Durer's originality, however, lay in his ability to perceive and to transmit a particularly full and clear image of physical reality directly to paper by means of line and color, and without following certain rigidly prescribed rules for drawing based on centuries of tradition."

Going beyond the rules of the day is important for any innovation. You can, of course, create within a tradition as, for example, developing a poem in the sonnet form. But creators who break into new territory go beyond tradition. Their work emerges beyond old boundaries like the free verse of the early twentieth century.

New as Renovated, Rejuvenated or Regenerated

Each generation needs to find or make new meaning. But the source of that meaning need not come *ex nihilo*, that is, from nothing; the past can fuel the future. Even Isaac Newton says, "If I have been able to see farther than others, it is because I have stood on the shoulders of giants." William Shakespeare likewise draws from many sources in each one of his works. The original story of Othello, for instance, is found in the novel *Il Moro de Venzia* from the *Hecatommithi* of Girardo Cinthio, published in 1565 but also resembles the tale of *The Three Apples* in *The Thousand and One Nights* (1936). Other authors too -- Goethe remolds the Faust legend, Christ re-interprets the Old Testament, Camus rewrites the biblical story of The Fall, Giraudoux replays the cuckolding of Amphitryon by Jupiter -- each reworks the old stories creating new symbols for a new age. The creative writer, however, not only translates the message across time from the foreign language of the past, he also adds new meaning. With fresh insights, he revitalizes the stories of the past. He recreates it for the present.

Many artists revert to an older period for inspiration. Picasso takes from Ionian statues, Greek vases and African masks, transforming them into new syntheses. He incorporates the old, but rejuvenates it by altering the viewpoint. Various ages look to the past to discover new possibilities in the old which can be renovated. Neo-classicism, neo-romanticism and other "neos," for example, re-examine earlier viewpoints. Artists of each era take particular views of reality. They may, for example, use perspective to give the illusion of three dimensions as did Durer. For several centuries after him artists tried to imitate nature. Many early twentieth-century painters, on the other hand, focused on surface shapes and the act of painting. Their world was flat, the surface of the canvas was all that matters. yet even "modern" artists need to study the past. Mondrian (in Sedgwick, 1966) says, "What is wrong with the abstract painting of the younger artists today is that they feel their painting began where mine leaves off, without going through what mine has gone through to be the way it is." Now, in the late twentieth century, artists paint "photorealistically" -- Neo-Durer. They imitate the camera. That which is rejected by one group becomes accepted and used by subsequent generations.

The look backward for inspiration occurs in science as well. Albert Einstein's relative space was an idea Leibnitz proposed in contradistinction to Newton in the eighteenth century (Bronowski, 1978). Copernicus took an idea developed by Aristarcus thirteen centuries earlier. Yet both theories, when reconsidered in light of new information, were seen as revolutionary concepts.

New as Unique, Personal Expression

Striving to be different does not make you an original artist. Striving to be yourself does. It is here, that making and fulfilling are integrated. Mozart (in Holmes, 1912) writes: "But why my productions take from my hand that particular form and style that makes them Mozartish, and different from the works of other composers, is probably owing to the same cause which renders my nose so large or so aquiline, or, in short, makes it

Mozart's, and different from those of other people. For I really do not study or aim at any originality."

He aims at being true to himself. Wolff (1981) writes:

"Originality is more a matter of being than of doing, and exists in the very nature of the individual who expresses it. It is intrinsic to identity, and, on its most primitive level, is quite simply an individual's uniqueness."

But one's uniqueness is not simple. We are both the continuation of previous generations and a unique expression of that continuity. The creation of one's self and his work are both an expression of continuity and one of change. The old is part of the new.

In the history of man the illusion that man is unique and special has been battered through an increasing awareness of who we are and how we came to be. The winds of change blow on Narcissus' pool. One image is destroyed after another. Copernicus proposes that the earth revolves around the sun, overturning the Ptolemaic system and the viewpoint of the Roman Catholic Church, so man loses his position in the center of the universe. Darwin then challenges the illusion that man is a unique creation of God by postulating that he evolved from simpler organisms. Freud undoes the concept that man is the master of his thoughts and behavior by showing that despite conscious uses of will power, unconscious processes determine much of what we do. Now biologists attack the idea that we are unique selves derived from a particular germ plasm by postulating that even our body cells have organelles within them that derive from foreign bodies which have taken symbiotic residence within -- the centrioles and mitochondria. Thus in the review of our changing status in the universe, we must re-view our sense of uniqueness and specialness. In one perspective it is an illusion to fortify our narcissism; in another sense it is our greatness for we share in the process of evolution being both a continuity of it and a change from what went on before.

VALUE

But a creative product must go beyond the new: It must also be of value. You could, however, ask of what kind of value and for whom?

Some products have value only to the creator. A housewife paints a scene of a mountain with a lake in front of it. It has value to her because it reminds her of a pleasant time at the cabin last summer. To others it may have no intrinsic aesthetic value. They may pass it off as "calendar art." But to the artist it had value in fixing an experience. Both the experience recorded and the activity of painting it, give value.

A schizophrenic patient depicts his inner turmoil on canvas. Some paintings done with superior skills may be strangely moving. Another patient's work, on the other hand, may just seem odd. It lacks relatedness. Though some psychological theorists say that the schizophrenic patient is attempting to re-contact the world through his expression on paper or canvas, the patient often fails.

Some schizophrenics are so sensitive to rejection they communicate in symbols only a few can read. They are only willing to let others into their private world on their terms, so they use symbols they can control. Others, less sensitive, are put off by the strangeness.

Thus the work has value to the artist in delivering a message to those who try to understand and in denying access to others who would fail to appreciate what he had to offer. He expresses his ambivalence through his art. He relates on his own terms. Hence its value.

What might have great value to the creator may have little worth to others. On the other hand, the work may be a desirable enlargement of the human experience. It may be relevant to a small group or of value to the world as a whole. It may have no significance to contemporaries and great significance to future generations.

Its worth may be aesthetic pleasure as in art or usefulness as in commerce or predictability as in science or joy as in humor. Each person or group determines a creative product's value to him. The determination of value depends upon the context which may relate to the creator himself, in other cases to his core group, in other instances to the world at large, for this generation and perhaps to generations to come. All these groups help determine the value of a creative product. Creative products fulfill the creator in the sharing with others. One communicates to complete the creative process.

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