

The Roots of Creativity

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IT IS WRITTEN: *There is no new thing under the sun.*

The people who brought us that saying are the same people who brought us God. And I think what they meant to say was: Only God can create something truly new—that is, create something from nothing. The rest of us can only rearrange what already exists, into new patterns and new combinations.

However, the possibilities for such rearrangement are almost without limit. For example: if we just took all the people in this room, and figured out how many different arrangements and combinations of us we could create, the number would be *astronomical*.

Chemists, working with the basic elements, which as you know number less than a hundred, have in recent years been creating thousands of compounds which have probably never before occurred, in the whole history of the universe.

In the field of music, which is of particular creative interest to me, there are a very limited number of instruments, most of which can play a very limited number of notes; and these capacities have been largely fixed for several hundred years. Not just in our culture, but in other cultures as well. And during this time, millions of people have been making music. And yet, there is no end even remotely in sight, to the possibilities for new songs, and new styles.

And when it comes to language! Just consider the title of this conference: Unleashing Creativity. The juxtaposition of just two words has created a whole panoply of connotations, nuances and associations that were not part of either word by itself. First of all, the positive attitude toward creativity. As you know, whether creativity is good or bad has been debated for thousands of years. And, at the end of this century, it is still very debatable. But the person who wrote this title has made clear their own position in this debate. Then there's the idea that creativity can be blocked—“leashed”, as it were. That it can be unblocked, or “unleashed”. And the implication that this conference will explore ways of doing this. All this, and many other perhaps more personal meanings and associations, were created by putting together only two words!

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The prototype of human creativity is human reproduction. Which consists of the rearrangement and recombination of the human genetic material.

But not just one set of genetic material. Human reproduction always requires *two* sets of human genetic material, which must be rearranged and recombined to form a new person.

If this is to be the model for all human creativity, then the question arises: does all human creativity involve a *relationship*?

I propose that it does. I propose that the creative process, in humans, always stems from an *interaction between self, and other*.

And that *narcissism* and *repetition* are not merely associated with each other. They are identical with each other. Synonyms.

And that, to the extent that an individual relates only to himself, and not to others, to that extent he will only be able to repeat himself. Just as an organism that reproduces asexually can only create clones of itself.

I haven't had a chance to develop this idea. Because it only came to me about a week ago. But the manner in which it came to me I think is a good illustration of what I'm talking about.

The fact that I had this idea—that creativity always involves a relationship—just a week before this conference was certainly not a coincidence. If it had not been for the stimulus of the conference, and the necessity to think of something to say this morning, I would not have thought of it.

So, even though I was the mother who gave birth to this idea, it also had a father. All of you.

If I wanted to be a bit mischievous, I might point out that, with ideas just as with children, paternity is never certain.

I just said that you are the father of my idea. But I could be lying. Maybe I just said that because I wanted to make you feel good. Or maybe I was hoping that you would offer me child support payments, to help me develop my idea!

The important thing is: even though we may not always know who the father is—*there is always a father*.

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What are the roots of creativity? I've been digging for several months, and have uncovered four.

The first of these is simply the *material* which is available for rearrangement. In the arts, sensual experiences—light; color; sound; form. In the humanities, ideas; thoughts; memories; feelings. In science and technology, physical objects, and physical techniques.

And when it comes to creativity, the more, the merrier. The more materials there are available, whether through physical proximity, or knowledge, the more possibilities there will be for rearranging and recombining them into new patterns.

I don't think it's any coincidence that Shakespeare, who used a larger vocabulary of English words than any other author, is also generally regarded as the greatest English author. And if you believe, as many people do, that he was the greatest author in any language, surely some of the credit belongs to the fact that the English language is unparalleled in its richness and diversity.

Something which I think many Americans are not aware of. Since so many Americans don't study foreign languages.

My wife, who came to this country from Hungary as a child, recalls the astonishment of her parents—both highly educated people—when they first saw an English-language dictionary. They didn't know what to make of it! They were familiar with dictionaries from one language to another—Hungarian to English, or French to German. But why would anyone need a dictionary of their own language? There is no equivalent to a Webster's dictionary in the Hungarian language.

The second root of creativity, and I'm sure this won't surprise those of you who are familiar with my writings, is *fantasy*. In order to create new arrangements, new patterns, we must first imagine them.

This isn't to say that something new isn't ever created accidentally or unintentionally. But we don't usually refer to this as creativity. When we speak of someone as being creative, what we mean is that they are able to imagine new things, and then implement them.

Fantasy is of course of great interest to psychoanalysts, both in its content, and its process. The development of fantasy, and the ability to fantasize, are affected by individual experiences and relationships. I don't have time to talk about this more now, but if you're interested, you can read my articles on the subject.

The third root of creativity is *motivation*—the desire to create. There are a lot of questions about this to which we don't have the answers. To what extent is this desire learned? To what extent is it inborn? Is there a creative drive? Or some temperament—perhaps related to the recently discovered “novelty-seeking” temperament?

Of interest in this regard is the subject of women's creativity. As you know, in the past it was felt that women, in general, could only be creative in the home. Bearing children, of course, and also in all the varieties of "homemaking" activities—cooking, sewing, and domestic crafts.

In modern times, there has been a more or less steady increase in the creative accomplishments of women outside the home. Concomitantly with a more or less steady decrease in the birth rate.

What is the connection between these two trends? Is it just that women are increasingly free from restrictions outside the home, and burdens within it? Or is there some creative impulse which can be satisfied in one way, or another?

For those of you who are interested in little tidbits of information, I recently discovered that there is one country in the world—and only one—where the number of women entering careers in mathematics and science is equal to that of men. That country is Hungary.

I already mentioned that Hungary has a language with a relatively limited vocabulary. Another interesting fact is that Hungary has, for many decades, had one of the lowest birth rates in the world.

My wife, who is both Hungarian-born and trained for a career in mathematics and science, will point out that correlation does not prove causation. We don't know what meaningful associations there might be among these various facts. But it's certainly interesting to speculate about them.

To put some flesh on the bones of these statistical data, I happen to be personally acquainted with a young Hungarian woman who is a graduate student, and who is studying how DNA directs the formation of proteins in the human body. At the same time, she has a strong desire to use her own DNA to direct the formation of a new human body! She has a conflict.

There are two men in her life—her professor, and her husband. I think they have somewhat different views on what the priority should be. I think her professor would like to be the father of her research findings, while her husband would like to be the father of her child.

I like to think that I'm the third man in her life. Because I'm the leader of a band in which she sings. So I've put in my two cents on this matter. Which is, that you can study DNA any time, but you can't use it any time. Which is essentially the same advice that I've given my own daughter.

However, so far, she's still in the lab. In fact, knowing her, I would not be at all surprised if she's in the lab right now—Sunday morning.

But I hope not. I hope she's in bed with her hubby!

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The fourth root of creativity is what I call *conviction*.

I don't think it's enough to have just the idea and the desire to create something new. Millions of people dream of things they would like to create, and their dreams never come to fruition. Rearranging things into new patterns can be a very daunting enterprise. People who succeed at it seem to have something extra. A sense of empowerment. Entitlement, maybe. Belief in oneself (or in something bigger than oneself). Determination. Confidence.

Aggression.

Which brings me to my final topic for today, which is, the relationship between creativity and destruction, and the ambivalence which results.

If we cannot create something from nothing, but can only rearrange existing patterns into new ones, it follows that we can only create a new pattern by destroying an old one. *To create is to destroy.*

In some cases this is obvious. For example, the construction of the school building we are in right now required the destruction of trees, of metal ores, of the pre-existing landscape, and so forth.

In other cases, what is being destroyed is much less obvious. Suppose we consider human reproduction. What can possibly be destructive about bringing a baby into the world? Going beyond the obvious physical aspects—whatever processes went into the provision of the necessary food and shelter—we might look at the loss of certain potentialities and possibilities in the lives of all those involved in having a child. And then consider some of the possible effects on other people, and on the world.

As psychoanalysts, we need to recognize that even though what is being destroyed in an act of creativity may not be obvious or even conscious, it may be well be part of unconscious awareness.

I'm going to close this lecture as I opened it—with a saying. I think we have a lot to learn from sayings, about the collective unconscious.

“You can't make an omelet without breaking eggs.” We've all heard that. But what exactly does it mean? To create is to destroy, obviously. But there's even more to it than that, isn't there? To create is to disrupt the natural order of things. To create is, even, to *kill*.

No wonder people experience blocks in their attempts to be creative. If our goal is to unleash creativity, we must understand, and appreciate, *the universal and profound ambivalence* with which creativity is—and should be!—attended.