

article from

Journal of Quality and Participation

Copyright January 1997, Michael Jones

There is a story that one day a mother and father brought their young son to see the Indian teacher Mahatma Gandhi. "He eats too much sugar." they complained, "Is there any way you can tell him to stop?" Gandhi thought for a moment and then said; "Bring him back to see me in three days." Three days later they returned with their son. Gandhi looked at him and said "Don't eat any more sugar, it is not good for you." They looked at Gandhi with surprise. "Why didn't you say this to him three days ago?" they asked. "Because I needed to stop eating sugar first" Gandhi said in reply.

There is a little of asking people to stop eating sugar when it comes to offering advice on how to bring a spirit of creativity into our work and our daily lives. Before you can tell someone to be more creative or to bring creativity into their work, you need to have been creative in your own work and life.

When I faced this creativity question myself, the result was that I left my consulting and educational work for close to ten years and spent that time composing and recording at the piano in the hope that I might learn something more about the creative impulse that I could bring back and

share with others as well. I am pleased that I have been invited to share with you what I have learned during that decade long journey.

My overall learning is that a general change in attitude is required to integrate creativity into our general business processes and perhaps it can only be found in certain artistic activities.

Because the creative impulses currently exists for the most part at the margins of our busy and activity centred lives, to access its latent power and potential involves a commitment to changing certain time honoured habits of thinking and feeling that even artists often have difficulty trying to achieve.

Tools and techniques aren't the answer

The challenge here is that these changes generally involve more than simply mastering a new set of techniques. In fact, part of the dilemma is that genuine creation begins at that point when the techniques and rules no longer work. Artists, for example, soon realize that no prescribed technique will help paint the picture or compose the music for them. To accomplish their goal eventually involves leaving all that was secure behind and entering into uncharted territory and steps like these in all their various forms feels much like a blind leap into the void.

Walking your own road...

The great American artist Georgia O'Keefe speaks of this when she describes how the work that made her famous began when she dropped her training. Her teachers, even the very good and accomplished ones, could only describe to her how they painted. They proved to be of little help when it came to teaching her how to paint. To do this she had to walk a long, lonely and sometimes frustrating road to find her own way.

Practices, not techniques are needed

To live and work creatively involves not so much a conformity to rules or techniques, instead it involves the mastery of a set of practices. Practices differ from technique in that no single outcome can be predicted nor can any specific result be guaranteed.

Practices, unlike techniques, prepare us for the experience of creation

They open the doorway to not one but to infinite possibilities. Practices also remind us that the creative impulse does not belong to us, we belong to it. To receive all that is available to us from the creative impulse involves a time of preparation, of apprenticeship, a journey into the dark forest so to speak so that we can make full use of whatever has been given to us. And that which is given to us rarely appears in its finished form.

Active relaxation...

These practices help loosen our thinking by bringing about an experience of what Aldous Huxley once described as active relaxation. Musicians and visual artists know, for example, that they need to maintain a suppleness and sensitivity in their hand so that it can transmit onto the keyboard or canvas an accurate portrayal of the artist's inspiration. If the hand is too tight or cramped this becomes impossible.

Similarly in our business practices we need to introduce practices that can allow for a certain loose improvisational quality where one cannot know in advance how everything will turn out. It is through introducing this unplanned play like quality that can free us from ingrained habitual patterns of thinking and thought that limit the output of original and innovative ideas.

As I describe these practices, I will occasionally draw upon [music and the arts as a metaphor.](#) *

Practices for creating

I. Creativity: a form of improvisation

Creative thinking does not so much involve going to the world, as it does creating a space for the world to come to us. Improvisational musicians speak of this when they say "I don't know who was playing the piano tonight, but it was not me!"

When we are thinking creatively there is a sense that our thinking is thinking us. To capture this elusive spirit involves a readiness to act from what the moment calls for, to listen without resistance and to be responsive and willing in an improvisational way to follow the deeper impulses that inform our thoughts, trusting in a felt sense that cannot be easily explained or calculated in advance. The more we are able to let these insights speak to us, and interrupt them less, the more they will over time complete themselves for us.

To create therefore involves learning to trust in the authority of our own immediate and direct experience of our world.

External validation is overrated...

This, in itself is a great challenge. From the first day we walked into a school yard, we were told when to go, when to stop, where to stand, what to think and how to behave. Even more importantly, we were taught that our perceptions of the world could not be trusted and were, therefore not valid. Gradually we learned to accept the theories and

assumptions and beliefs of others in place of our own perceptions and impressions of things as a way of adapting and surviving and succeeding in the world.

Escaping your own expectations trap...

The performing artist faces this challenge each time they walk out onto a stage. How can the artist unravel this knot of expectations to just be who they are today and not yesterday. Each artist knows that what is being asked for is not the performance they've given before. Yet to free oneself from the familiar is not an easy thing. The performance that truly energize an audience are those which flow from a connection grounded in the truth of the moment. The performance then feels timeless, and we realize that we have all shared in an experience that can neither be named or repeated.

Business meetings aren't meant to be artistic events but there are parallels between the two...

How often do we hear the same old notes being played over and over again. We keep asking for thinking that is fresh and new, but become trapped time and time again in memory and conditioned knowledge from which it is difficult to break free.

When a musical performance feels this way, I need to break apart the composition and reform it in a new way. This is perhaps the most difficult thing to do.

"The more we are able to let these insights speak to us, and interrupt them less, the more they will over time complete themselves for us."

"Learning to live without questions that remain unresolved is one of the greatest challenges for a creator."

"To keep the imaginative realm fresh and alive, it needs to die and be reborn in a new way each day."

How do we break apart something that feels finished and secure, something that has been grounded in habit and repetition and make it unfinished again so that there exists the possibility of creating from it an entirely new form. One of the reasons this is so challenging is that adults, unlike children have an extremely difficult time thinking up new thoughts on their own.

Improvisation through conversation...

One of the best ways of generating creative insights therefore is through conversation. The word conversation is derived from to converse which in one of its meanings involves exchanging information. It involves a surrendering or giving of yourself to create a reciprocally held space within in which another dimension of reality can appear.

In a meaningful conversation there is always the possibility of surprise...The moment comes when we take an unexpected turn, we can no longer depend upon memory or conditioned knowledge. Instead, through allowing the words to form in our mind as we speak, we rediscover the latent generative power of language.

We could bring much more creativity into our meetings if we took the time to suspend our need for goals, outcomes, prepared reports and speeches, and used it instead to speak from what has true heart and meaning for us. In so doing we would become reacquainted with the origins of language which was to think, create and experience together through improvising with words.

2. Creativity involves living in the question

Improvising involves a living inquiry into what is. When our conditioned knowledge and theories no longer serve us, we need to inquire more deeply into things as they are. This creates a space for more subtle insights to emerge.

The process of improvisation begins to dissolve the boundary between the visible and invisible worlds. Pressing towards solutions prematurely hardens this boundary again. The way to make these boundaries even more transparent is through living in the question instead. Questions help to enliven a conversation, particularly questions for which the answers are not yet known.

Learning to live with questions that remain unresolved is one of the greatest challenges for a creator. While we often think of the tension that is caused by unresolved questions in negative terms, artists know that the questions that remain unanswered are the source of energy from which all new creations begin.

Giving voice to the silent question...

How often have we sat in a meeting knowing that there is a question in the room and waiting to see who will put words to it. Unfortunately most of us live in organizational cultures that do not seek out, honour and encourage the expression of great questions. It does not recognize how the question itself sets a process in motion that slows down our thinking and empowers us to be led in those directions where an answer may be found.

Without the question there can be no true creation...

Questions help to dismantle our habits and well worn tracks so that we can view possibilities through fresh eyes again. Questions also help to loosen our thinking and make it more fluid again.

In making public our own uncertainty and doubt, we create the possibility of accessing a group intelligence that allows others to join us in sharing their thinking so that a collective solution can be found.

Inquiry finds its roots in the curiosity we had as children...

This wasn't just an idle interest but a consuming passion, something that so absorbed us that when we were involved in it we often failed to hear the dinner call. This question lives in us still, even though many of us have forgotten that it is there.

This question is energized by the imagination. That is, through developing a relationship with our dreams and visions and fantasies and possibilities. These cannot be fixed in time. To keep the imagination realm fresh and alive, it needs to die and be reborn in a new way each day. The compositions that are most alive for me when I play them are the ones that I've known the longest. To keep them alive and interesting I need to approach them with a new perspective each time they are played.

The uniqueness of our own creative imagination is rarely reached by knowing where we are going in advance. In fact, we often don't recognize what is significant about what we have accomplished until long after we have arrived. In this respect holding to the question can help to quiet the critical and judgmental mind. If we bring it into play too soon, it will cleverly undermine these first tentative steps in a new

direction before we can even begin. Much of the joy of creating comes in the doing of the activity itself for its own sake.

When I am composing, I often like to play with a goal or specific outcome in mind. I have composed and recorded ten albums. In each, I believe that I exceeded whatever goals I may have had for them, by being open and responsive to the ever changing form of the music and integrating new ideas and possibilities into the compositions as they emerge.

It's my observation that those individuals who move forward with bold determination, their answers clutched firmly in their hand, are of much more danger to the long term welfare of the business, than the leaders, who intentionally engage others in a mutual search for the right questions, who freely admit what they don't know and who encourage problem finding rather than problem solving by deliberately insisting on a broad consideration of many different options before taking action. It takes a skilled leader to find and hold the balance between those actions which are planned in advance and who can also create a space for others to emerge as they go.

3. Creativity requires the reframing of our assumptions

We live in an inferential world. Our minds are so filled with information and opinions, that it becomes almost impossible to listen to others with what Russell Lockhart speaks of as "innocent ears".

While we often take pride in the quickness and cleverness of our thinking, and defending what we believe to be right, this often interferes with our capacity to create authentic relationships. In our efforts to prepare our response, we often discover that we have not heard anything that the other has said.

To be truly generative in our actions and words, listening and seeing, in and of themselves, may not be enough. We need to develop the capacity to sense into, to pick up the nuance, that is, the rhythm, tone, and texture of the meaning behind the words of another through developing the sensibilities of smell, tastes, sight, hearing and touch. In other words, we need to develop the sensibility to pick up possibilities in another's words by listening for context as if the content were not already known. Unless we listen with this quality of peripheral attention, we may miss the deeper possibilities that are there as well. Creative insights rarely come to us in a finished form. Filling the spaces that remain unfinished with our own assumptions and inferences may take us even further off track.

Similarly, holding to a fixed and rigid point of view, makes it almost impossible to attune ourselves to the moment and recognize what it calls for. All of us, even the most 'creative' are at risk of assuming that they have arrived and nothing more is required. This subtle shift is sufficient to bring the flow of creative insight to a stop. While it is important to build infrastructures of knowledge and understanding we need to be constantly vigilant in witnessing our own process and noticing when we stop too far back from our immediate perceptions and sense of what it is.

Therefore, to make our meetings more productive, it is important to test and display our assumptions rather than simply acting from them. When the assumptions and models we use to create meaning and take action in our world remain implicit, untested and unexamined, we spend most of our time trying to sort our misunderstandings because the words we choose to use will mean many different things.

When musicians learn to improvise they soon discover that the truth changes the world is not as solid as we like to believe it is. As soon as we think we have discovered the truth and found a conviction in the musical note, the truth itself has already moved somewhere else. The more that we are willing to suspend our assumptions about what is true the more we can allow the gaps that this creates in our knowledge and certainly for a deeper wisdom and knowing to flow through. But this also is not easy. There is vulnerability to following the truth because we have no way of knowing where it might lead.

4. Creativity flows from relationship

The jazz trumpeter Wynton Marsalis once said "Jazz is the music conversation...it is a dialogue...with integrity.

We were always designed for relationship...

It is very difficult to access creative insights on our own. Creating involves a forgetting of oneself which is almost impossible when we are alone. For example, how often in an animated conversation do we come up with a wonderful insight and then discover that we have forgotten it as soon as we got home.

Creating is grounded in the sense of the other...

Artists, even when they work in solitude have a sense of being connected to the other even if in their case, this takes the form of being in the presence of a rock that stands outside their window as they work, or of a flower, or a tree. It is this sense of otherness, the idea that we do not work alone, that provides the ongoing source of inspiration that ignites an artist's work.

The philosopher Martin Buber spoke of this as "imagining the real in the other." He believed that this capacity was of fundamental importance in developing and sustaining a creative relationship with the world.

Furthermore, he suggested that when we are engaged in authentic dialogue with the other, the insights that emerge are not attributable to any one person, but emerge as a function of the space that has been created among the two.

When I relate to the piano as an object to be manipulated and controlled this sense of otherness is not possible. It only occurs when I maintain a certain lightness of touch which allows me to be responsive to whatever the moment calls for. As soon as I try to force or control the outcome, this delicate bond is broken and the music comes to a stop.

Closing thoughts

Each of us possesses a unique quality of perception and experience which is our own truth, one that cannot be possessed by or expressed through anyone else but ourselves. Too often our meetings, by general briefings and problem solving, fall short when it comes to introducing

certain disciplines or practices that can help to surface the vast reservoir of latent creativity which is left outside the door.

Through structuring meetings so that there is time for a free and open dialogue around questions of common importance and concern and through testing assumptions, using new metaphors, listening without resistance and encouraging the building of relationships that can be improvisational in nature must, like a music ensemble, admit the possibility exists for accomplishing much more. Through improving the quality of thinking in our meetings, we can tap into the generative power of language again which is where the true and lasting strengths of the business is to be found.

..

*

The use of metaphor itself can enhance our ability to think creatively. Metaphor means to transform or cross over. Metaphors help to integrate the linear and the creative mind. An appropriately chosen metaphor like a musical ensemble for example can also help us reframe our mental models enabling us to see familiar situations and circumstances in an entirely new way.