How to Think Creatively

I grew up hungry to do something creative, to set myself apart. I also believed creativity was magical and genetically encoded. As early as the age of 8, I began sampling the arts, one after another, to see if I'd inherited some gift.

Eventually, I became a journalist. For many years, I told other people's stories. I was successful, but I rarely felt truly creative.

The first hint I might have sold myself short came in the mid-1990s. In the course of writing a book called *What Really Matters, Searching for Wisdom in America*, I took a five-day seminar on how to draw, led by Betty Edwards, author of*Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain.*

When Edwards peered down at the self-portrait I had drawn on the first day, she smiled. My artistic development, she told me gently, seemed to have been arrested somewhere around the age of six. This was, she hastened to add, no evidence of lack of ability, but rather of training.

From an early age, we're taught in school to develop the logical, language-based, rational capacities of the left hemisphere of our brain, which is goal-oriented and impatient to reach conclusions.

The left hemisphere gives names to objects in order to reduce and simplify them. One nose is like another, for example, so when we're asked to draw one, we retrieve the symbol we have for "nose" from our memory, reproduce it and move on.

The right hemisphere, by contrast, is visual rather than verbal. It's capable of seeing more deeply and subtly than the left, immersing itself in what's actually there, in all its richness. Once you learn to do that, Edwards told us, drawing what you see is, relatively speaking, a breeze.

Sure enough, by the fifth and final day of the workshop, I was able to produce a self-portrait that was undeniably me, and surprisingly realistic. After several months of practice, I was able to draw myself with a significant degree of skill, and even expressiveness. I had effectively begun to learn a wholly new and non-verbal language.

But what did that have to do with creativity? Turns out, quite a bit.

Over the past hundred years, researchers have reached a surprising degree of consensus about the predictable stages of creative thinking. It was Betty Edwards who first pointed out to me that the stages move back and forth between right and left hemisphere dominance:

1. Saturation: Once the problem or creative challenge has been defined, the next stage of creativity is a left hemisphere activity that paradoxically requires absorbing one's self in what's already known. Any creative breakthrough inevitably rests on the shoulders of all that came before it. For a painter, that might mean studying the masters. For me, it involves reading widely and deeply, and then sorting, evaluating, organizing, outlining, and prioritizing.

2. Incubation: The second stage of creativity begins when we walk away from a problem, typically because our left hemisphere can't seem to solve it. Incubation involves mulling over information, often unconsciously. Intense exercise can be a great way to shift into right hemisphere in order to access new ideas and solutions. After writing for 90 minutes, for example, the best thing I can do to jog my brain, is take a run.

3. Illumination: Ah-ha moments — spontaneous, intuitive, unbidden — characterize the third stage of creativity. Where are you when you get your best ideas? I'm guessing it's not when you're sitting at your desk, or consciously trying to think creatively. Rather it's when you've given your left hemisphere a rest, and you're doing something else, whether it's exercising, taking a shower, drivingor even sleeping.

4. Verification: In the final stage of creativity, the left hemisphere reasserts its dominance. This stage is about challenging and testing the creative breakthrough you've had. Scientists do this in a laboratory. Painters do it on a canvas. Writers do it by translating a vision into words.

The first key to intentionally nurturing our creativity is to understand how it works. I've found the stages often unfold in unpredictable sequence, and wrap back on one another. Still, keeping them in mind lets me know where I am in the creative process, and how to get to where I need to go.

Ultimately, the highest creativity depends on making frequent waves — learning to engage the whole brain by moving flexibly and intentionally between the right and left hemisphere, activity and rest, effort and letting go. That's also a pretty good prescription for how to live

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