

# CREATIVITY

DEVELOPED by Maribeth Dennis for Unitarian Church of Lubbock,

2 May 2010 - Based on a sermon by James Park and the book:

Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery & Invention

By Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, 1996.

Opening Words:

After I sound the gong, breathe deeply and think about your favorite creative works.... And then think about your own creativity....

**“Creativity is when something changes within a person that brings a new idea, a new process, or a new object into being. There is no way to force creativity, but there are ways to prepare for creative flashes of insight. The well prepared mind is able to capture creative flashes when they occur. “ (Park)**

**I have based this service on ideas from James Park, and from the book: Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery & Invention**

By Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi.

**Mihaly says that creativity is a process that unfolds over a lifetime. For his book, the group interviewed 91 individuals who were creative in many areas, including science. This group included historians, performers, philosophers, media, architects, writers, biologists, physicians, chemists, economists, astronomers, psychologists, activists, politicians, business people, and inventors.**

**To set the stage, he says**

**First: most of the things that are interesting, important, and human are the results of creativity.**

**The second reason creativity is so fascinating is that when we are involved in it, we feel that we are living more fully than during the rest of life.(p 2)**

**As the poet Mary Oliver says, “in the beginning I was so young and such a stranger to myself I hardly existed. I had to go out into the world and see it and hear it and react to it, before I knew at all who I was, what I was, what I wanted to be.” She also writes: “What a life is ours! Doesn’t anybody in the world anymore want to get up in the**

**middle of the night and**

**sing?” from her book - Blue Iris**

**Let’s stop here and share briefly what came to mind when we stopped to think about creativity....**

**I remember one of my early memories of a creative experience was reading e e cummings:**

**“anyone lived in a pretty how town**

**(with up so floating many bells down)**

**spring, summer, autumn, winter,**

**he sang his didn’t he danced his did.”**

**I had learned that you were supposed to capitalize, and to use punctuation, and not to have runon sentences. And yet here was e e cummings writing this poem!**

**This is one of the keynotes of creativity – it helps us see the world in a new way.**

**Let’s examine THE CREATIVE PROCESS**

**An act of human creation takes place when someone transcends an old way of feeling, perceiving, or thinking, - and brings into being something that has never existed before. (Park)**

**Human beings lived for centuries before someone figured out how to use rocks and sticks for tools. But once tool-making began, everyone could see the advantages.**

All of us have modified something at least in small ways. But highly creative people experience leaps of imagination that bring about entirely new ways of doing or seeing things.

Creativity is often associated with the arts, but science and technology have also seen creative leaps of imagination: language, cooking, basket-weaving, psychology, auto mechanics, computers, medicine, for example. Human creativity seems likely to continue as long as civilization exists. We can always think of something new. (Park)

How does the creative moment happen? Normally we travel along in well-worn paths of thought and behavior. Societies have been known to repeat themselves for generations. And the lives of many individuals seem devoid of innovation.

But occasionally there comes a ray of light that helps someone to see a problem or a situation in a new way. The person asks why things should continue in the old patterns. A new way of approaching a problem pops into someone's head. Of course, that head must have the prior capacity to understand the problem – and the solution. Without a framework of understanding, imaginative flashes will be lost.

James Park writes: "I see the process of writing as a series of creative moments, which, if not recorded in words, will disappear forever. To write this, I consulted a card on which I had earlier written an insight, 'writing is the process of capturing on paper sparkling moments of insight. Uncaptured, those moments are gone forever.'" He goes on to say, "one idea leads to another, but the second will not emerge unless the first is written down. I think this is the experience of creative people in every field. Creative flashes come to those who are ready for them and who know how to preserve and apply such insights."

In creative leaps, the human spirit transcends itself. If there were no possibility of going beyond what we had before, there would be nothing fundamentally new. Like computers, our minds would merely repeat and recombine the familiar contents of thought.

Park says, "Archimedes has just appeared in my mind, running naked thru the street after having a creative flash in the public baths. He runs home shouting, Eureka, I have found it!"

Such creative leaps of the human spirit seem obvious in retrospect, but somebody had to dream them first. Benjamin Franklin invented municipal street lights for Philadelphia. Why hadn't someone thought of public lighting before? (Park)

**Creativity – of whatever sort – seems to be its own reward. When it happens to us, we appreciate the creative moment, we enjoy exercising our spirits – the wonderful life within.**

**Creativity often surprises the creators themselves. After the creative leap, we do not fully understand how it happened. The moment of imagination seems to come as a gift. Some periods of our lives are much more creative than others. What accounts for that? Perhaps we can only glimpse the act of creation as it flies past. Then we might have to wait for a new inspiration. How can we nurture creativity in ourselves and others? (Park) We'll discuss this in a later section.**

**Mihaly Csik... points out that there often needs to be a period of incubation – of just fooling around. Frank Offner says that the solution to a problem will often hit him in the middle of the night, while driving the car, or taking a shower. (p 99)**

**And then there is the AHA experience – Mihaly said that most people could recall with great intensity and precision a particular moment when some major problem crystallized in their mind. The solution then became all but inevitable, requiring only a matter of time and hard work. And then comes 99 percent of creativity – perspiration and hard work! They must pay attention to the work, develop it, get perspective on it, discuss it with others, and make it public.**

**Mihaly says that the most important message creative individuals are sending is: “YOU TOO CAN SPEND YOUR LIFE DOING WHAT YOU LOVE TO DO. (p 106)**

### **The Flow of Creativity:**

**Creative people differ in many ways, but in one respect they are unanimous. They all love what they do! It's not achieving fame or making money that drives them, rather it is the opportunity to do the work they enjoy doing.**

**For them enjoyment is being in the flow of their work. It is a challenge, problems must be solved, the sense of time becomes distorted, and the work becomes an end in itself.**

**The physicist Viktor Weiskopf describes this as, “Aha, now I understand natural processes that I did not understand before. In music, it is the insight into what the piece means. What it tells you, what the composer wanted to tell you, the beauty or expression, things like that.”**

**Freeman Dyson says, “I have to always force myself to write. You have to put blood, sweat, and tears into it to start. And it's awfully hard to get started. You may work very hard for a week producing the first page. And you have to go through that process before it really starts to flow... You don't know whether you**

are getting anywhere or not. In that phase it just seems to be unadulterated torture.” (p 117)

Another aspect of creativity is forgetting self, time, and surroundings:

The poet Mark Strand says, “when you’re right in the work, you lose your sense of time, you’re completely enraptured, you’re completely caught up in what you’re doing, and you’re sort of swayed by the possibilities. If that becomes too powerful, then you get up, because the excitement is too great.

The idea is to be so saturated with the work that there is no future or past, it’s just an extended present in which you’re making meaning.” (p121)

Madeleine L’Engle said, “a lot of ideas come subconsciously. One of the things we have learned is that nothing happens in isolation, that everything in the universe is interrelated. Physicists have a name for it, the butterfly effect.” (Mihaly p 256).

Another aspect of creativity is that it can be used to transform the negative in the world. The writer, Stern, says “the great thing about this kind of work is that every feeling that you have, every negative feeling, is in a way precious....It allows us to recognize our feelings and label them in terms of enduring, shared qualities.” (p 262)

Another aspect of creativity is making visible the invisible. Jonas Salk was committed to this aspect – he wanted to bring to light the viral processes that causes polio, and he did that.

Mihaly said that there are few traits that distinguish creative people from others. However, he said that there seems to be one distinction that makes their personalities different from others. That would be Complexity. They show tendencies of thought and action that to most people are segregated. They contain contradictory extremes. Instead of being an individual – each of them is a “multitude.” (p 57) Complexity involves the ability to move from one extreme to the other as the occasion requires. He lists ten pairs of apparently antithetical traits that are often present in such individuals and integrated with each other in a dialectical tension..

1. Creative individuals have a great deal of physical energy, but they are also often quiet and at rest. They often have a high degree of sexuality, which they balance with celibacy. Some like to take a nap or meditate.
2. Creative individuals tend to be smart, yet also naïve at the same time. They may exhibit contrasting poles of wisdom and childishness. George Stigles

stresses the importance of fluidity, that is, divergent thinking on the one hand, and good judgment in recognizing a viable problem on the other. (p 61)

3. A third paradoxical trait refers to the related combination of playfulness and discipline, or responsibility and irresponsibility. Despite the carefree air that many creative individuals affect, most of them work late into the night and persist when less driven individuals would not.
4. Creative individuals alternate between imagination and fantasy at one end, and a rooted sense of reality at the other. Both are needed to break away from the present without losing touch with the past. The artist may be as much a realist as the physicist, and the physicist as imaginative as the artist.  
John Reed is a banker, and he says, "I don't think there is such a thing as reality. There are widely varying descriptions on reality, and you've got to be alert to when they change and what's really going on." (p 64).
5. Creative people seem to harbor opposite tendencies on the continuum between introversion and extroversion. There is a myth of the solitary genius. The physicist John Wheeler expresses this, "If you don't kick things around with people, you are out of it. Nobody can be anybody without somebody being around." (p 66)
6. Creative individuals are also remarkably humble and proud at the same time. Another way to express this duality is to see it as a contrast between ambition and selflessness, or competition and cooperation.
7. In all cultures, men are brought up to be "masculine" and to suppress qualities that culture defines as "feminine." Creative individuals to a certain extent escape this rigid gender role stereotyping.
8. For a person to be creative, the individual must be both tradition and conservative, and rebellious and iconoclastic. There needs to be a willingness to take risks, and to break with the safety of tradition.
9. Most creative persons are very passionate about their work, yet they can be extremely objective about it as well.

Finally, the openness and sensitivity of creative individuals often exposes them to suffering and pain, yet also a great deal of enjoyment

\_ Mihaly was curious about what shaped the lives of these creative people. He found what was astonishing was the great variety of paths that led to eminence. Some of them came from families in which one parent had died, or was abusive. Others had happy childhoods. Some of them escaped from Nazi Germany, and others had easy, comfortable lives. He said that this lack of a pattern suggests that creative people aren't shaped by their genes, or by their early life. He said that as they moved through life they shaped events to suit their purposes. (p 181)

**Now the question is - How can you shape your life to**

**Enhance your Personal Creativity:**

**-Try to be surprised by something every day! What is its essence? Be open to what the world is telling you. Life is nothing more than a stream of experiences – the more widely and deeply you swim in it, the richer your life will be.**

**- Try to surprise at least one person every day. Instead of being your predictable self, say something unexpected, express an opinion that you have not dared to reveal, ask a question you wouldn't ordinarily ask.**

**- Write down each day what surprised you, and how you surprised others.**

**- When something sparks an interest, follow it...**

**- Find a way to express what moves you.**

**- Produce as many ideas as possible, and try to produce unlikely ideas**

**Remember: You too can spend your life doing what you love to do!**