

# Cultural Blocks and Creative Possibilities

This article analyzes three cultural blocks to our acceptance of ourselves as creative beings. It also proposes a conceptual model of creativity which offers constructive and exciting possibilities for the future.

THERE ARE cultural conditions which make it difficult for us to accept ourselves as creative beings. These conditions are strong and perhaps now growing stronger. At the same time, there has been progress in man's thinking about himself during the two decades since we last tried to make "creative education" stick as a guiding ideal in education. We now understand better how ideals work in the building of reality and we are better prepared than we were in the Thirties to give creativity a substantial intellectual base for use in the evaluation and structuring of education.

What I want to do here is to sketch three cultural blocks which interfere with our acceptance of ourselves as creative beings and then to offer you a conceptual model of creativity from which I hope you are able to gain some constructive possibilities for the future. The model has grown out of research on the writings of creative people and on the essentials for existence of the simplest organisms.

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a lecture given at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in its Summer Seminar on Creative Engineering, 1955, under the title, "Cultural Blocks to Creativity."

## Three Cultural Blocks

### *Increasing interdependencies:*

Individuals within a society are able to make a workable scheme of life by setting up a network of expectancies for one another. Meeting our need for food, we expect a grocer to be on hand to store it, a butcher to cut it, a trucker to haul it, a farmer to raise it, etc. In return for these fulfilled expectancies by others, each of us in turn is required to fill his particular niche in the expectancy field. A society can become quite strong in its insistence on reliable and regularized service to itself on the part of individuals in it. A society is inclined to become more insistent as the complexity of interdependencies increases.

The complexity of our interdependencies is increasing for us. During the settlement of our country, each settler was relatively self-sufficient, producing his own food, building his own shelter, making his own clothes, etc. He carried, within himself, the capacity to be producer of his own consumer needs. Through the succeeding years, the producer-consumer roles have become increasingly split from one another so that we now largely produce what other

people use and consume what other people make. The network of our mutual dependency is increasing.

The more we feel dependent on others, the greater our fright can be at what others may be doing. The greater the fright, the greater the lunge for conformity, the more difficult the position of the innovator, the greater the proportion of energy spent by people in adjusting to one another in the system, and the less energy available for realizing the unique integrations that are requisite for creative beings. Absorption in interdependencies thus dulls our capacity to see and feel ourselves as creative beings.

#### ***Outside enemies:***

With the shift from a frontier and agrarian society to an urban and industrialized society came a deep psychological shift. Among settlers and farmers, the dominant surroundings are felt to be the things of nature; among us now, the dominant surroundings are felt to be human. Whereas nature once held primary control over our destiny, people now hold primary control. We have emotionally sensed this shift in control and have felt our own lack of experience in dealing with the power of men over men in the collective mass. Largely unconscious of what's happened at our deeper cultural and psychic levels, we have hatched a brooding anxiety about ourselves and our world. We need an explanation for how we feel and an outlet for our otherwise frustrated

energy. One of the quickest solutions and the easiest impulse is to seek an outside enemy.

Our need for an enemy is met by Russia who draws down a heavy curtain on the other side of the world, veils herself in mystery, and puts spies in our midst. She fills our need perfectly, both as target for projection and as an actual and natural complement of her own need to have an enemy too, for she, in more marked degree than we, has recently been going through a shift from an agrarian society to an industrial society. The two nations lock each other's projections in place to support the purges, the presumptions of war when war is the most irrational possible "out," and the shift to a cold war when a hot one is too hot. This ties up a great portion of the energy of the two nations in dealing with their respective outside enemies while the motivating enemy, common to both, lies inside the intimate experience of its peoples where there has not been opportunity, as yet, for full absorption of what it means to man to have to face himself as his primary controlling agent. Accepting oneself as the primary agent of one's control is requisite to the acceptance of oneself as a creative being. Outside enemies block the acceptance of the creative ideal.

#### ***Inward inexperience:***

Not only do we tie up energy on outside enemies but we lack experience in the use of energy turned inside. Since our frontier days, we have been busy in a constant and varied expansion of our physical environment, first with the conquest of the wilderness, then with the creation of heavy industry, and now

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with technological manufacturing. We have turned our attention consistently outward to give greater order and significance to physical forms. Free of foreign threats for the most part of our history, we have been able to accept the values of our national founders and to put our energy on the immediate and concrete jobs at hand. Our usual picture of the ideal man is that of an overtly active, concrete-minded person who can do things with things out there in the "real" world. The man who searches deeply for what he believes and knows is a little embarrassing to us. People who deal in abstractions are tolerated, to a degree, in universities, but they are suspect whenever there is a "real job to do." Persons who care about others are often considered soft and naive. There is no ready honor for the man whose temperament leads him into the inward journey.

But now we have come to a great threat, both on the outside and on the inside, and we are required to discover our old values anew and to develop new ones. We need more than a capacity to deal with concretions, for abstractions are what now hold our technological economic system together and influence so greatly our political and social affairs. The center of struggle is not within physical relations but within human relations, ideas and ideals.

So our cultural frontier is now inward and will remain so until we can come out again some day, knowing what we value, how we think and feel, and what we want to do. Accepting ourselves as creative beings now depends on seeing ourselves as creative beings on the crucial inward journey.

These three "blocks" make the acceptance of ourselves as creative beings difficult, but, once we are aware of them, they also face us with a bold and clear challenge: either to find ways to make increasing interdependencies yield growth and freedom to individuals or expect increasing suffocation in the collective mass; either to find ways of facing the enemies in our private psyches or suffer destruction at the hand of our "outside" enemies; either to find ways of taking the inward journey or meet collapse in outward journeys as well.

This challenge, shaped in this way, helps to explain why I feel it is so important that educators and researchers pay attention to the necessary inward journey. It explains, too, why I pursue research on creative behavior for I feel that the model of the creative being is likely to be man's most constructive conception for guiding him on his inward journey. I feel it offers our best hope for developing ways of growing strong individuals, self-realized in depth, balanced in the inward-outward journeying, and fit to deal with the increasing human pressures of the times. An age of human control requires self-control and there is no avoiding it.

### A Conceptual Model of Creativity

When studying what acknowledged creative persons have said of their creative experiences, I had in mind the question, What conceptual model fits best to describe what happens when people create ideas? As I read, I selected passages which seemed to me to be particularly revealing. From these I made up brief statements in

which I tried to catch up the meanings; then I classified the statements. It is the classification into four dimensions which yields the model:<sup>2</sup>

"The important thing is how the creative person handles himself in relation to (1) the extension of his experiencing, (2) the focusing of his experiencing, (3) the management of his actions during his experiencing, and (4) the derivation of significance from his experiencing."

These four dimensions are expanded in the following four paragraphs:

"The creative person seeks to *extend his experiencing* through holding himself open for increasing inclusions. This is evidenced by an inclination to take life as an adventure and a becoming, a curiosity and willingness to understand what is going on in oneself and in related aspects of the environment, a desire to get out to the edges of conscious realization and to feel a way into the unknown, an interest in new ideas and fresh perspectives, a spirit of play and experimentation.

"The creative person seeks to *focus his experiencing* through self-differentiation and self-realization. This is evidenced by a willingness to be different in things that make a difference, an honoring of his own fulfillment even when it runs counter to common expectations of others, a persistent inquiry into the meaning of his own life, a feeling that his individual life has independent roots, an insistence on expression for self-clarification, a feeling that the world is, in important part, his own creation.

"The creative person seeks to *manage his actions* during his experiencing through disciplining himself to serve the extension and focusing of his experience. This is evidenced by an insistence on mastering his materials and tools of work so well that these become a part of his own way of living, an insistence on the privilege of controlling his own work schedule, a willingness to stick with baffling problems over an extended period of time, a

<sup>2</sup>Ross L. Mooney, "Groundwork for Creative Research." *The American Psychologist*, Journal of the American Psychological Association. Vol. 9, September 1954, p. 545-46.

capacity to be consumed by his work, a seriousness in selecting work to do which is personally and deeply valuable to him.

"The creative person seeks to *derive significance* from his experiencing through dependence upon esthetic formings. This is evidenced by an insistence on harmony of form and function, a trusting of feeling to guide his way through an experience, a searching for the simplest structural forms to catch up a whole field of relations at once, an ability to think in terms of patterns of form, a sensing of a profound order in nature and a searching for that order in himself and in the universe, a testing of a solution by the way in which it seems to fall into place without forcing, a deliberate nourishing of aid from unconscious sources, a sensitive awareness to positive and declarative modes of thought."

Using catch-words, these four dimensions might be referred to as "openness," "self-realization," "control," and "esthetic evaluation." The general pattern of these dimensions was confirmed, for me, in later work done on the simplest organisms.

When studying the simplest organisms, I held in mind the same general question I had been using when looking at the writings of creative people, only cast at the most elementary biological level rather than at the most advanced psychological level, i.e., What conceptual model fits best to describe what happens when the simplest organism lives? I considered the simple-celled organisms which live in the sea and which are presumably prototypes for the organisms out of which increasingly complex forms evolved, culminating in man. The following quotations from my working papers show the emerging model:

"1. The sea in which the organism is placed is an undulating, moving mass of events, a million-billion forms and formings,

interfused and going into the far reaches of the earth, hooked into things molecular and dynamic, extending through the universe—a seething mass of synchronous events. The organism is a tiny thing in all of this. It is obvious, in the vastness of eventful space and time that surrounds it, that it must be in synchronous harmony with all the rest. The organism is 'a part of' and not 'apart from' its universe; it must be in constant transaction with it; it must be an open system for relevancies to reach it from beyond and for relevancies to extend from it into the beyond. It must have openness; this is the first named essential—

*openness* of the organism for transactions between itself and its environment.

"2. Being open to all does not mean the organism is all. Quite to the contrary, its togetherness within its membrane is quite particular, very concrete. It is its own unique inhabitator of its place in space and time and events. It is its own being and no other. Though like other beings in its own species, it is no other being in its species or in any other species—it is itself. Its goings-on are not all goings-on, but very specific and special goings-on. Its life depends upon keeping those specific goings-on going on. This necessity establishes a core for the construing of its actions, making it the inescapable center of its universe, shaping its relations with the universe in reference to what it takes to keep its specific formings forming. It must have this centering, *be* this centering; this is the second named essential—

*centering* of action within the organism for the fulfillment of the goings-on that make it up.

"3. If there is to be continuity in the goings-on of the organism, there must be an order to the way things happen within the organism, a sequentiality which allows the various parts of the organism to come in on the act at suitable places. When the organism receives an energy-form from outside which is possible of being used, the organism needs (1) to grasp it for holding within the organism, (2) to distribute it to points of usage, (3) to transform it for use, (4) to use it, and (5) to eliminate the residual energy-forms not usable or used. With this sequen-

tiality, the goings-on of the organism can be maintained; this process enables it to hold to its togetherness; this means to live. Ordering is necessary; this is the third named essential—

*sequential ordering* of action for responsible control.

"4. Not all energy-forms from outside are useful to the organism. Some are nutriment, but others, if once inside the organism, would kill it. Still others are neither nourishing nor killing. There are grades in between. The organism does well to select for inclusions, for exclusions, and for toleration. If an organism could include everything in its environment, selecting would not be necessary. But to include everything would mean to become the universe itself and that is too much! So the organism has to be able to select and, in selecting, to pick the particulars which are most fitting to its particular goings-on. The answer to the question, 'to be or not to be,' can ride on the selective sensitivity of the organism to 'the fitting.' Survival goes to the 'fittest.' Selecting is necessary; this is the fourth and the last named essential—

*selectivity*, to provide the fitting.

The catch-words for these four dimensions are "openness," "centering," "sequential ordering," and "selective fitting." These are more universalized expressions of what was said a little differently when summarizing the analysis of the writings of creative people. When I first saw the parallel between the model for psychological creativity and the model for biological creativity, I was hit between the eyes with the question, Could it be that what the human honors in a creative experience is the same as what life honors at any level? Could it be that what has happened has been that psychological creativity is but a further projection of life trying to realize itself?

If this were so, then it should work out that the dimensions for existence of simple organisms would turn out to

be dimensions for life growth as represented in the evolution of biological forms and the development of psychological forms. All that would be necessary would be to put the word, "increasing," in front of "openness," "centering," "sequential ordering," and "selective fitting" to describe the path of progression in species evolution and human maturation.

I have had little opportunity, as yet, to test the prediction in biological evolution, but, as far as I have gone, it appears to work. For example, in the matter of "openness," as one goes up the scale of life forms, there is an ever increasing reach for differentiated inclusions, an increasing openness. In man we see it in our forever reaching to include more and more; we no sooner circle the globe than we want to move into outer space; we no sooner trap the molecule than we want the atom and beyond—ever beyond.

The best opportunity I have had to check the prediction in psychological maturation has been through work on perception. Using a laboratory of Ames demonstrations and the "transactional" approach, I have found the best explanations of progressive maturation in perception to be those framed in the context of increasing openness, increasing centeredness, increasing sequential ordering, and increasing selective fitting. Each makes sense only through relevance to the others in the system.

Should it turn out that further studies at several levels of life show these dimensions to fit well to each level in turn, we would then have a central discipline by which to structure, in one harmonious system, such diverse educational endeavors as are represented by the natural sciences, the arts and humanities, and the social sciences. Education might then come closer to a central discipline; so might the culture, so might you and I.

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