

Creative Thinking and the Common Man

Three leading American scholars discussed, at the first general session of the 1956 ASCD Conference, creative thinking and its relation to the common man. The idea of creativity, the process of creative thinking, and the effects of organization life upon creativeness are treated in the following statements.

1. The Idea of Creativity

by HAROLD TAYLOR

CREATIVITY is something which everyone wants and no one is quite sure how to find and how to produce. Educational institutions want creative teachers for children they hope will be creative. Business organizations want creative people to work for them, advertising agencies want creative staff members to think up creative ideas. The public wants creative artists, creative writers, creative television, creative everything, and it is only in occasional places, such as certain security-conscious posts in government, that people with creative ideas are suspect and not wanted. It is only the huge organizations of the state, business, the military, and the government which insist on conformity, moderation, or that hybrid, dynamic conservatism, which is another way of saying, "Let's not change anything."

We need today to rescue the idea of creativity from its misinterpretations; we need to restore it to its true meaning.

The word *creative* has become so worn with use that it is now used to identify almost anything or anybody of which we approve. We hear about a creative approach when what is meant is that the approach seems sensible and that we agree with it. We hear about creative living and creative thinking when all that is meant is that it takes account of how to do things better. We hear about creative writing when it means simply fiction or poetry, which may or may not be creative. We speak of creative minds when often we mean only that the mind is one which thinks. The truly creative and original mind is one which is able to invent, to discover new relationships, to introduce novelty, to find new ideas. But the creative potential is not confined merely to those particular geniuses who introduce whole new phases of human thought. What they do is to show in large and spacious form

what in the work of other people may be confined to smaller dimensions.

Why should there be this amount of concern for creativity, so many people who want it so much and prize it so dearly? Perhaps because it is so rare, and because we know that without it no society or civilization is worth having or is even able to sustain itself. We prize it because it makes whatever it touches new, fresh, and interesting.

The idea of creative evolution is one which belongs to the fairly recent past—within the past hundred years. In the eighteenth century in the Western World, the quality most prized in the individual was the reason and the rationality of mankind. The rational, balanced, and logical man was the ideal type. By the middle of the nineteenth century, this ideal began to fade and in its place came the romantic, the revolutionary, the one who thrust his personal views upon the world. There were revolutions in the Western World, caused by the assertion of individual opinions and convictions, and by the force of economic and social conditions which made unbearable the lot of the thinking individual. The idea of creativity is part of the romantic movement, the protestant movement, the liberal revolt against authority and a static society. The philosophy which supports it is that of the latter half of the nineteenth century, when Henri Bergson and others derived the idea of creative evolution, of a profusion of unfolding possibilities coming from the growth of the universe and everything in it. If the world is a huge organism, alive, changing, moving toward an expanding goal, then everything in it is also in a state of change. Everything is in the process of becoming something else. The new species suddenly

begun by accident, the teeming birth of cells, the constant unfolding of new forms of life, are all demonstrations of creative energy in nature.

William James and John Dewey accepted this philosophy of creative evolution, and accepted the idea of creativity as the central point in their systems of thought. The human mind, for William James, was continually creating its own knowledge out of the stuff of human experience. For Dewey, the child who learned about his world and himself by his own experience was acting creatively, and the task of education for Dewey was to encourage the creative act in the individual child. Liberation, freedom, growth, expansion, development, creativity—all these ringing positive words were at the heart of the progressive movement and gave it its early inspiration and momentum.

Creativity is therefore a positive term. The creative person is one who meets each new situation with an open and positive attitude. When a problem is met, to be creative about it is to accept it as something to be solved, not merely a set of conditions to be deplored.

The essence of the modern movement in education is the idea of creative experience and its liberating effects on the individual. The modern movement is in fact a fundamental shift in attitude toward life itself. It refuses to accept the conventional forms in which life is presented to us and looks for fresh ways of interpreting facts, for new forms of art, of architecture, of scientific discov-

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ery, of literature, of society. It refuses to accept the fatalism of the classical philosophy, with its note of reconciliation to things as they exist, its warning to mankind that everything which is done has already been done before and that everything will pass away. It believes in the reality of novelty and discovery, it believes in progress toward goals which we remake as we go along.

The opposite state of mind is described by T. S. Eliot in *The Cocktail Party*. One of the characters, in talking about the average modern man, says,

“They may remember

The vision they have had, but they
cease to regret it.

Maintain themselves by the common
routine,

Learn to avoid expectation,

Become tolerant of themselves and
others.

Giving and taking, in the usual ac-
tions,

What there is to give and take.”¹

In an opposite way, the characteristic of the creative mind is its spontaneity, its independence, and its freedom to explore and to find. The person who is afraid to speak, afraid to express his true thoughts, or is lacking in self-confidence enough to let himself go where his thoughts lead him, has an inhibiting effect on others, since he usually seeks the security of the group, and wants to protect himself by the agreement of others.

I have noticed lately that more and more blocks seem to be put before people who want to act on their own or to think for themselves. If a suggestion is made to do something, everyone sets

to work to see why it shouldn't be done. Or everyone waits for someone else to move in order to decide whether or not to move, too. If an action is proposed, instead of everyone saying, “Let's try it,” everyone says, “Let's refer it to a committee.” Or even worse, everyone says, “Let's send out a questionnaire to see if everyone will approve it.” Or, what is still worse, people say, “Don't act, you will only cause trouble and attract attention to yourself.”

Creativity is the enemy of caution and the antithesis of doubt. It is a personal affair. It expresses itself in individuals or it does not express itself at all. There are creative efforts made by groups of individuals, but if the effort is truly creative, it is the total contribution of a number of individuals working together sympathetically as individuals, each encouraging the other to think and act for himself.

For example, in a particularly disheartening statement not long ago, the president of one of the largest educational associations in the country advised all educators not to “rock the boat” by engaging in controversial matters. “Educational leaders who identify themselves too ardently with causes will do a great disservice to the cause of education. Federal aid to education, integration of the public schools, and the role of religion in public education are issues that are of current critical concern. These great issues will be solved only through the exercise of reason and intelligence.”

What the speaker is in danger of saying is, “Be quiet and let the social forces run over you. Don't say or do anything which might arouse comment. Don't help the cause of the Negro, don't speak out for free thinking in religion, don't ask for federal aid to education.” I believe that unless the individual can identify himself

¹ T. S. Eliot. *The Cocktail Party*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company.

with a cause in which he believes, he is less than a man, and little likely to add much to the sum total of human good.

For it is true that every society is in a state of equilibrium brought about by the balance of opinion, both private and public, and by what we call political, economic and social forces. But what we mean when we use these words is that people live together as they do, with certain laws, habits, customs and privileges, because there are opinions held by all the members of the society about what should be done and what shouldn't. Educational institutions transmit the habits of mind and the social customs of a given society from one generation to the next. They are essentially stabilizing forces where children are taught the point of view and the values of the older generation.

But I do not believe that schools and colleges should be merely the agencies for transmitting American middle class values. This is in fact what they usually are, when they should be agencies for transforming and recreating the values of each generation.

Here is the point at which newer theories of education in this century have broken with conservative doctrine. Each generation of children has its own truth, each child has a fresh start, and the institutions of education should be agencies of creative effort by children and teachers together for adding new insight and new ideas to the present fund of knowledge and custom. This demands a positive, not necessarily permissive, attitude by the teacher toward the student, one which looks toward him expectantly for a fresh outlook and a new truth.

The creative element in a society consists in the people in it who do not accept everything as it is, but who ques-

tion and probe to find new ways of improving whatever exists. The creative element is a thrust against convention and standardized opinion. It starts with a critical awareness of the faults of a society and moves on to a series of positive suggestions about how to cure the faults.

For example, creativity in social change would demand that the segregation of the Negro not simply be allowed to exist as if it were unavoidable. Each generation in the segregated southern schools transmits the social customs, habits and prejudices to each successive generation. Creative social change begins when people find ways of bringing unsegregated education to the Negro, when people become interested in and involved with the practical problems of equality.

It is always a tragedy in institutions, when an opportunity presents itself for creative effort in social change, if educators lack the skill, the imagination and the will to bring it about. Every society changes through the efforts of individuals to make changes.

Creative thinking and imagination in politics and social issues, coupled with a will to act on ideas in which one believes, will change societies and whole civilizations. The radicals and the heretics are those to whom we owe the greatest social debt. Without them the social order becomes either rigid or flabby.

It is one of the characteristics of our age that we have no radicals and heretics. In a democratic society in which authority and status are not centered in any one social group, the authority of the common will replaces the authority of a particular point of view held by a few. When the common will is reinforced by a common prosperity,

the tensions within a society do not develop creative thinking with a cutting edge, but rather generate a number of accommodations of one social group with another. The trouble with our contemporary political situation is that there are no issues which divide sharply the philosophies of the political parties, not even the race issue. There are only accommodations which individuals and groups within each party make, in order to secure political success.

I would therefore conclude that, in societies as in the individual, creativity

needs at its base a drive, a moral, aesthetic and intellectual energy which will not rest content with the forms of life, art or social order which presently exist. I would also conclude that in education, as in society and the individual, the way to evoke that energy is to give freedom, encouragement and help to the individual, to create in him a sense of self confidence, to trust him, to cherish him, and to give him that sense of expectancy for the excitement of the unforeseen which is the necessary condition of the creative act.

2. The Process of Creative Thinking

by GARDNER MURPHY

RESearch on the process of creative thinking gives a few clear principles. From the exquisite study of Coleridge's dream of Kubla Khan to Rossman's patient analysis of the files of the patent office, there is general agreement that acts of creativeness, great or small, arise in a context typically involving four phases.

First, there is the long immersion of the sensitive mind in some specific medium which gives delight and fulfillment, whether it be the world of color, tone, movement, space, time, the world of force and organization, the world of words, of images, of social relationships, or the world of contemplation or of mastery. Through the tentative gropings of the mind in its early formative stages, steeping itself in the sensory or the intellectual riches of this world, one falls in love, as did Newton, with space or with

force; or as did Blake, with line or color; or as did Mozart, with tone and rhythm. Minds, both great and small, are first marked out for the pathway of creativeness through the fact that they are sensitive to something in this challenging and fascinating world.

The first great problem therefore that confronts parent and teacher is to allow this first generous outpouring of mind and heart to have its way. We know relatively little about how to encourage, but all too much about how to impede. We find a thousand devices for regularizing, stabilizing, restraining, or even for poking fun at the earliest exploratory efforts of children who are overpowered with the charm or the challenge of this world. Whatever stray creativeness gets through the mesh of our adult system of approvals and disapprovals of children's behavior is likely to be knocked

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