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Creative Spark
Essay III/Final Draft
November 15, 2004

It's the Cake

The title above comes from a comment made by author Jerry Hirschberg. “Creative activity [isn't] the icing on the cake. Human creativity is the cake.” Getting a bite of this cake is what proves to be frustrating for some people. Simply put, there isn't one sure-fire method to achieve creative success. However, there are certainly underlying attitudes and patterns that one can perceive in creative people, (and in this most humble of papers), I will attempt to show to you through texts such as Hirschberg's *The Creative Priority* and my own forays with *Madame Creatividad* that experiencing creativity is simply a matter of opening yourself up to the world around you.

It always seems to me that any measure of creativity starts through something that I have opted to call *creative flux*, both because I am nerdy and that it happens to fit the concept extremely well. In a nutshell, all creative flux means is that you have to be willing to be open to the surrounding environment, allowing ideas from all possible angles and points to flow into you.

Hirschberg illustrates this rather well. A car designer by trade, he started his career at GM, “the supreme icon of power and success for America.” He tells us that GM eventually reached a point of stagnation, from lack of competition and from shutting the doors tight on ideas coming from the outside world. GM car design reached a monotone complacency, and it is at this point, Hirschberg says, he began feeling a little bit useless,

as his work environment had turned into, “a blinding illusion of security and imperviousness to failure.” Hirschberg then makes a transition: he switches jobs to a place of unregulated creative flux. He attributes his later success to the work environment of Nissan Motor Corp. You can almost feel the creative flux flowing from the place Hirschberg describes as “...a fully collaborative environment, where the boundaries of engineering, marketing, sales, planning, and design [were] blurred.” How fantastic it is for a man seeking creativity to finally experience it so fully through creative flux!

Of course, not all people seem to like cake all that much. Unlike Hirschberg, who was seeking to incorporate creativity and creative flux into his life, there are those who can be rather stubborn and stupid, denying themselves the experience of feasting upon that delicate sweetness that creativity brings. I was one of those people.

Many years ago, I was a child learning to play the exciting game of tennis. I was an extremely stubborn child (if you ask my mother I still am) and I was convinced that after just a few months of playing, I had achieved a level of perfection superior to that of my coaches. I refused to listen to any of them; after all, I wanted to swing the racket *my way*, I wanted to move around the court *my way* and most importantly, I wanted to win *my way*. In short, I was totally shutting off the flow of creative flux. Believe me, I was getting no cake at all. It took many bitter tears of frustration (and ample losses) for me to begin to realize that perhaps it was a good idea to listen to those around me. Sure enough, taking into consideration the help offered by my coaches and my peers improved my game exponentially. Far more importantly, I realized that emulation isn't necessarily copying: in taking the advice of those around me, I not only developed sound technique but also found a unique style of my own. This point is tremendously important: opening

yourself to creative flux does not by any stretch of the imagination mean that you are just assimilating the ideas around you. Creative flux is the gate to being able to apply the entire *human experience* to your own and at the same time allows you to add your own drop of water. I like to think of it as a stimulant-type process: ideas from my environment flow in to my thought processes, my primal instinct, and my heart. It is from this stimulation of the various parts of my psyche that my inner being naturally conduces itself towards fresh ideas I can claim as my own. After all, it took a fairly solid ‘environmental knock’ for Newton to come up with his ideas regarding the force exerted by gravity. Creative flux can be quite potent.

Of course this potency can never be experienced if the roadblocks associated with creative flux are not removed by the individual. Not all the roadblocks to creative flux are as straightforward as mere stubbornness. It is not uncommon to see people shutting off the faucet of creative flux because of an innate sense that some creativity is not utilitarian. An assertion that some creative processes are not useful is not only presumptuous, but utterly mistaken. Let me reiterate that: all creative processes are utilitarian. Not always in the way one might expect it to be, but being creative always yields purpose to someone, somewhere. It is important to note though, that the converse is not always true: things meant to be utilitarian do not always end up being very creative. But sometimes they do.

The women of Gee’s Bend will quickly reveal this to you. Isolated in a remote part of southern United States, the women of Gee’s bend took any kind of scrap of cloth to create quilts for keeping warm. Not only did they turn out to be good for thermal purposes, but the resulting quilts also demonstrated, “...brilliant, improvisational range of

approaches to composition that is more often associated with the inventiveness and power of the leading 20th-century abstract painters than it is with textile-making,” according to an article by Barbara Pollack. Clearly, creative flux is present everywhere, and in the case of Gee’s bend, yielded beauty in utility.

All arts seem to suffer from this stereotype that though creative, can never be utilitarian. I once had the opportunity to see the documentary *Dancemaker*, chronicling the turbulent life of dance choreographer Paul Taylor. The film is a direct viewing lens into the world of dance, and at times can lose the viewer for the sheer boldness (and beauty) of the dances Paul Taylor has created. You might ask, “What is the point of seeing a film like *Dancemaker*?” My simple response is that any art is by nature a greater part of enrichment of the soul, an elevation of human purpose. As psychoanalyst Rollo May says in his *The Courage to Create*, “By whatever name one calls it, genuine creativity is characterized by an intensity of awareness, a heightened consciousness.”

Creative flux and the rewards it can yield can seem confusing at first because it tends to not take a straightforward path. The means of what we do to be creative becomes intimately entwined with why we wish to be creative. At first glance, you might think that Jerry Hirschberg’s main purpose in working for Nissan is to produce newer and better cars. If this is the case, his answer might shock you: “... the principal end product of NDI [is] ideas.” Trying to lead ideas towards some creative end is nigh near impossible, allowing them to lead you however, is the most productive way of inspiring creativity in yourself. It is through ideas that we inspire our creative processes and all ideas have a component of being fresh, taking understanding of ourselves as parts of the human race to exciting new levels. THAT, is the underlying utility of thinking creatively.

We eat the creative cake because it not only satiates us but also allows us to achieve a higher understanding of the human race and apply it in our own creative endeavors. I must insist though, that cake can not be shoved down the throat inelegantly.

Hirschberg has a prime example of this in *The Creative Priority*. He talks about how his staff on one particular day was “bogging down midway through the design of the Pathfinder.” Instead of putting on even more pressure, what does the crazy man do? He takes his entire staff that very instant to go see *The Silence of the Lambs*. Hirschberg calls this process ‘stepping back from the canvas.’ And a gloriously effective technique it turns out to be, “...ideas again started flowing, knotty problem areas unraveled, and the design began to lead the designers, a sure sign that a strong concept was emerging.” Something similar to this happened to me in the process of writing this essay, as I acquired a major case of writer’s block. Thankfully, I took Hirschberg’s advice to heart: I ‘stood back from the canvas’ and succeeded in opening the floodgates of creative flux anew.

So is creative flux the path to taking a bite out of the all elusive cake of creativity? Although it is not the only way to approach creative problems, it is the phenomenal openness that creative flux provides that makes for such an exciting tool in one’s quest for achieving creative goals. So go ahead, open up and take a bite.