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## **POWERFUL DEPTHS OF THE UNKNOWN**

*“...for all the freedom of his life and the clarity of his thought, he is everywhere hemmed, round and prevailed upon by the Unconscious, the mysterious god within him; so that ideas flow to him...”*

-K.G. Carus

Have you ever experienced a time when you were wracking your brain trying to come up with a thesis statement for a paper, an answer to a math problem, or the title of your new poem? You spend countless hours only to end up where you began – at ground zero. You find that your brain is starting to ache from the excessive thinking and you decide to get your mind off of the problem. You focus your attention on something else, perhaps on getting some R&R and all of a sudden...AHA! The solution to your problem just pops into your head out of nowhere, almost as if it sneaked its way into your thoughts! You then find yourself wondering how this happened and what was responsible for such a reaction. The culprit of such “sneaky” reactions is a force known as the “unconscious.” Rollo May, author of *Courage to Create*, defines the unconscious as “the potentialities for awareness or action which the individual cannot or will not actualize.” What role do you think the “unconscious” plays in your life or is it really a

major contributor to the birth of creative thought? Thinkers in fields ranging from psychoanalysis to business management all seem to agree that the mystical force of the unconscious plays a central role in the creative process and the emergence of new ideas.

## **WHAT IS UNCONSCIOUS THOUGHT?**

Saying thank you in response to a good deed, looking both ways before crossing the street, smiling back at someone when they smile at you--actions such as these are said to be done subconsciously, meaning that they are performed without the realization that they are being done. The same idea applies when referring to unconscious thought. Unconscious thought is that in which we are not aware of what we are thinking. It's sort of like not being fully here on Earth, almost as if a part of you is somewhere else. While unknowingly immersed in unconscious thought, some of our most creative ideas are formed.

While one is under the influence of the unconscious, new ideas are born, but it is the phase between conscious and unconscious thought in which the idea is realized. At this point of realization, as referred to by May, an idea comes to you as insight. One may say that the idea just pops into your head "out of the blue." For some, this moment of realization may come at the most unfortunate of times...perhaps after a huge exam. As a struggling college student, I can recall many instances when during the middle of an exam I couldn't seem to remember certain concepts that I desperately needed to recall. It may have been after a couple hours or days, but the ideas just "popped into my mind" as if from nowhere in particular. In my life, these realizations always manage to come at the wrong time, leaving me displeased with the "time table" of unconscious awakenings.

Jerry Hirschberg, one of the leading automotive and industrial designers in the world and author of the *Creative Priority*, refers to this exact moment of heightened awareness as the “eureka” moment: the emergence of an idea as a split second resulting in pure, limpid clarity and a sense of lift accompanied by a surge of energy. Renowned psychoanalyst Carl Jung describes the creative process as having a feminine quality, as the creative work arises, almost as if birthed, from unconscious depths. Characteristics of the experience as summarized by world renowned mathematician, Jules Henri Poincaré include the following: suddenness of illumination, insight occurs against what one has clung to consciously in one’s theories, the vividness of the incident and the whole scene that surrounds it, the brevity and conciseness, along with the experience of immediate certainty. These attributes of the unconscious as described by Poincaré are the attributes widely agreed upon by other famous thinkers and professionals.

## **AWAKING THE UNCONSCIOUS**

While hard work is required for any type of success, too much of it can lead to stress and impede creative thought. In fact, it is not during these bouts of excessive work that one has creative revelations, but during time spent away from them. In *Courage to Create*, May expresses the notion that the breakthrough that is spurred by the unconscious thought does not just happen; rather, it comes at a moment between work and relaxation. He elaborates that insight cannot be born until tension is relaxed, at a break in periods of voluntary effort. Hirschberg realized this and stressed in *The Creative Priority*, the need to “step back” from your work during the creative process. It is during this period of “stepping back,” the period between work and relaxation, when the

unconscious state evolves to a state of heightened awareness in which memory is intensified along with the capacity to think. In the words of May: “If we are too rigid, dogmatic, or bound to previous conclusions, we will, of course, never let this new element come into our consciousness.” While all work and no play may make Jack a dull boy, it can also be said that all work and no play impedes the emergence of Jack’s creative ideas. Jung refers to the nature of this experience as “a plunge into the healing and redeeming depths of the collective psyche, where man is not lost in the isolation of consciousness and its errors and sufferings, but where men are caught in a common rhythm which allows the individual to communicate his feelings and strivings to mankind as a whole.” We must not burden ourselves with nonstop work or closed mindedness; we must allow ourselves the freedom to relax from work and the freedom to embrace new ways of thinking, which will ultimately serve mankind.

A release of tension isn’t the only condition that need be met to ignite unconscious thought. Both Hirschberg and May express the need of utter solitude, as a necessity in attempting to awake the unconscious. While Hirschberg observes that some people’s imaginations are ignited amid a bustling and crowded atmosphere, he notes that utter solitude is not only preferred by creative minds but is also an underrated and important component of imaginative thinking. It is not my intention to imply that Hirschberg says that one must be alone all of the time. He simply means that people must allow themselves periods of solitude in which they may allow the unconscious to “kick into gear.” As noted by May, we need to be able to give ourselves to solitude if we are to experience insights from our unconscious. Tapping into an unknown depth such as the unconscious requires freedom from all distractions. Conditions such as these allow

thoughts to permeate our mind so that they may coalesce in the unconscious and give rise to creative ideas.

## **THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CONSCIOUS THOUGHT**

While unconscious thought plays the leading role as the contributor to the birth of new ideas, conscious thought is not a negligible factor in the creative process. During unconscious thought the idea is formed in our minds. It is not until the transition from the unconscious to consciousness that these ideas are made aware to us and we experience that “moment of clarity.”

May and Hirschberg’s definitions of creativity both involve aspects of the conscious as well as the unconscious. Hirschberg defines creativity as the mastery of information and skills in the service of dreams. His understanding of the implementation of the conscious in the role of creativity is suggested by the “mastery of information and skills,” while the unconscious is suggested by “the service of dreams.” I consider this a sort of marriage between factual information and ideas that may seem a bit whimsical or far from the norm. May defines creativity as the encounter of the intensely conscious human being with his or her world. This definition speaks of the “intensely conscious human being,” in reference to a human being after having had that insight initiated by the unconscious, while “his or her world” refers to the role of conscious factors in one’s creative thought process.

Everyone has experienced the evolution of unconscious thoughts into consciousness. I’m sure you can recall a time when “the light bulb flickered on in your mind,” your ideas just seemed to “click,” or you had an epiphany. Had it not been for the

unconscious being hard at work, Sir Isaac Newton may have never formulated his laws of physics, there would be no such thing as Calculus, or even math for that matter. The Unconscious brings about the emergence of creative thought. It can not only be thought of as a major contributor to new ideas but also to a greater cause—mankind. The role of the “unconscious” is essential to our being as it allows us to expand upon things with which we are already familiar, leading to innovative ideas. The “unconscious” is one of the most significant aspects of our daily lives.