

# Radical Beauty

- creative tensions, harmonious diversity

## INTRODUCTION - CREATIVE TENSIONS

### What is creativity?

In preparation for this weekend, I had a look at some blogs on creativity. Here are some of the comments I found:

- “Creativity is the superlative of problem solving.”
- “The word 'create' means bringing into being something new. But there are too many people just adding junk. Too many cute little Goths writing poetry that's been written before, too many aspiring painters who think it's creative to copy someone else's painting. That's not creative; it's actually the complete opposite. It's just that 'poetry' and 'painting' are known as 'creative fields'. But simply because you dabble in them does not make you creative. It's not creative if it's been done.”
- “I like to change my website occasionally to keep it fresh. I sit there and try to think of what I can do that will be unique, new, creative. I get nothing. Then I start to look at my site to see what I can do to change it and improve it. Sometimes I will follow that method. That's not creative; it's modifying. ... I guess at the heart of the matter, we cannot achieve true creativity. This is the sole domain of God. We mere mortals only take what is created already by God and form new patterns to them.”
- “Creativity is not 'a thing' creativity is a process. I've never been walking down the street when suddenly I tripped over 'a creativity' somebody left lying around.”
- “Creativity and loneliness go together ... Creative people have a particular detachment from the general world around them; they aren't necessarily loners, but they definitely are not conformists. This detachment allows them to view things uniquely, from a perspective that cannot be learned or expounded upon.”
- “Doing Artsy Stuff Isn't 'Creativity' ... part of creativity is being recognized as useful... If you invent a new type of hot water heater, that is being creative. If your chess technique allows you to rise in international chess competitions, that's creativity. If you cure cancer but don't tell anyone, that's just wasting your time. Certainly artsy-stuff can be a form of practice, therapy, or good old recreation. Perhaps it can lead to creativity one day when you share it with others. But if you sit on it, you're enjoying yourself, not being creative.”

Creativity can be a controversial issue. The artist who expresses their innermost thoughts on public display puts themselves in a vulnerable position; the worker who sees an art gallery on TV full of rubbish, wonders why he has to work, while others can earn so much for what appears to be a waste of time and space; the writer who has to feed their family, but is criticised in the press as churning out the same book again and again, the ageing political rock band who complain that younger bands don't talk about anything of substance. The topic of creativity is something that



seems to draw out an opinion in all of us. In terms of art, we all like to say what we enjoy, and what we think is a pile of trash! When I've been to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival to perform, one of the things I've been aware of is our tendency to criticise others, the culture of reviews promotes such thinking. The way in which we use artistic expression, our likes and dislikes, to construct our own identities, means that we can be prone to make sweeping statements in order to protect or enforce ourselves or our groups identity. This doesn't mean that we can't critique work or actions - this is a vital part of creative engagement - but I believe it should take place from a position of generosity rather than defensiveness or aggressiveness. Like the Biblical picture we are given of the body of Christ, there are many parts, but one body - there are tensions between different types of creative expression, but they are all an extension of, and a participation in, Gods act of creation.

'Radical Beauty' expresses a tension - beauty being something that is hard to define, capture, or pin down, and radical expressing the idea of something that is rooted in the earth. In this session we are going to outline a few of these tensions in order to demonstrate the possible breadth that creative engagement can take. It may be that you will end up at one end of a particular spectrum, but the session's aim is to highlight the fact that that creativity can take many forms. This diversity provides a rich space in which anyone can participate in the act of creation in their own unique way.

As we think through these tensions, I would like to suggest that they is actually a necessary ingredient in any community, business or church for there to be real creativity. In creative teams, you need difference - those who see the big picture and those who focus on detail, those who push change forward and those who are cautious and identify possible problems, those who rock the boat and those who provide stability and healing. Perhaps this is why in Hinduism there are three main gods - Brahma, the God of Creation, Shiva, the God of Destruction and Vishnu, the God of Sustenance, or why Hegel, in his theory of dialectic, identified that three similar elements, Thesis, Antithesis and Synthesis, that were all needed to push forward change. When we run away from such tensions, protecting a more comfortable lifestyle by surrounding ourselves with those who are like us, we limit the possibility of creativity. Perhaps our churches suffer from this? We know that if we go to a Baptist church, a black majority church, an Anglican church or an emerging church, we may find similar types of people orbiting around each particular expression - the congregations may even display subtle, or sometimes not so subtle, similarities in the way they look, dress and speak. We like to surround ourselves with those who think like us, act like us and sometimes look like us, but in that process of division, we lose some that's necessary for our progress and possibly even survival - we lose creative tension.

## **INNER JOURNEY**

The tortured artist, collapsed on a sparse wooden chair, emotion, energy and passion poured out, visible in the raw intense colours dabbed and scratched and flung onto the canvasses surrounding the room. Alone he sits, facing his demons, empty wine bottles strewn across the floor, melted candle wax congealed on the glass. A place of light and darkness, of excavation, where the normal boundaries of existence are crossed. A more dangerous journey into the soul than most are



prepared to undertake.

The writer, alone in her study with a blank sheet of paper fed into the typewriter, waiting for inspiration to flow. Rings of coffee mark the desk. Crumpled sheets of paper fill the bin, never to be read. Moments later she is pounding, pounding the words upon the keyboard, the sound of the letters click and crack as the black ink is punched into the page, a weightless gateway to the world of her imagination. Her memories opened up. Her hurt and her joy.

The wandering prophet, wide-eyed, travelling along the road, staff in hand, embracing the desert places, praying through the blackness of the night, or alone in a coracle tossed by the sea. A poet, a musician, a speaker of riddles. Objects becoming crazy messages. Sticks thrown, cloaks torn. Unpredictable, misunderstood and often embarrassing, a thorn in the side of the social order.

All of these are familiar pictures of the artist or creative person undertaking a journey of discovery into the inner recesses of the self, of nature and of existence itself. It's a spiritual journey. A quest. Their own lives becoming an experiment, a voyage of discovery, a challenge to mere existence. Creativity emerging from such engagement is costly, by necessity it avoids glibness and propaganda - the creative expression is not used to control others or merely to communicate a message without learning ones self. The act of learning is the creative engagement. If no audience sees the performance, or no reader reads the findings, the work is no less important. In this sense such work is authentic, deeply human and avoids the temptation to use ones skill to impress or influence alone. It is art for life's sake, not a choice, but a vocation, a calling.

*Better to write for yourself and have no public, than to write for the public and have no self.*

*Cyril Connolly*

## **OUTWARD EXPRESSION**

However, when one starts to practice any creative act, whether it's writing stories, painting pictures, developing the most intricate curries known to man, or planting a garden full of flowers, one quickly finds that one wants an audience. I discovered this myself when I started to write seriously. True, my first drafts were intensely private, crazy, random pieces of work – and it was only by setting a strict 'nobody reads the first draft' rule that I could free myself to put pen to paper. When we take our first steps in any creative endeavour we often need to be alone, in case the first harsh breeze of criticism withers our tender efforts at the first shoot. But after a while, after we have practiced, and polished, and edited, and refined, our work cries out for an audience. I write stories fundamentally to share them, to communicate with someone outside myself. We cook those curries not just to feed ourselves but to nourish others. We love to invite visitors into our gardens to sense the atmosphere we have laboured to create. So while it's true that commercialism can be the enemy of creativity, and ill-founded criticism can be a curse to fragile artists, there is something fundamental about creative acts – they long to be observed.



I would venture that much great art is more than just seeking an audience. Creativity is about communication – about truth communicated in profound, mysterious or visceral ways. Some of the most famous and loved works of art come from a moment when the creator was impelled to communicate. So for example, think of the painting Guernica, which depicts the Nazi German bombing of Guernica, Spain, during the Spanish Civil War. The attack killed between hundreds of people. Picasso started painting it within 15 days of the attack and it has become a profound anti-war symbol and a much-loved work. Think of the long tradition of protest singing, of songs like ‘Strange Fruit’, the darkly beautiful and shocking song, sung by Billie Holliday. You are listening to that husky, lyrical voice – and you realise she is singing about lynchings in southern America. The song was written by Jewish school teacher Abel Meeropol, under the pen name Lewis Allen.

We instinctively know when creative endeavour has turned inwards and become self-obsessed. It can be fascinating, awful. We’ve also felt the hollowness of films, books, music and architecture, which seems to have nothing to say. Or worse still, has lots to say but none of it worth listening to.

I know that very few of us will ever gain a widespread audience for our creativity. (although in the era of the Internet we are seeing an unprecedented renaissance, with everyone able to seek an audience) Even fewer will reach the status of the greats, the Mozarts, the da Vincis, the Scorseses and the Christopher Wrens. But we can all seek to be heard, to move, to woo – even if it is just one person.

*To send light into the darkness of men's hearts - such is the duty of the artist.*

*Schumann*

## **PROCESS**

“An awful production. The actors forgot their lines, giggled randomly and were so quiet they could barely be heard. The group playing the outlaws forgot their entrance entirely leaving the audience hanging on a stagnant pause which seemed to last for an eternity. Some notable performances were as wooden as my bedside table, lacking any emotional, or indeed often physical connection to the characters. There was noise in the background, lacklustre dance and a script that sometimes made me laugh out loud - unfortunately in all the wrong places. This is a performance I would not recommend to anybody. Avoid at all costs.”

This is a fictional review for a production I am currently directing and will be performed at the end of this month.

In May of this year a process began in which I started to work with a group of twenty children and ten adults from local estates. These estates have been designated by the government as economically and socially disadvantaged areas, and by the Church as totally unchurched areas.

The process launched with two workshops, which children and adults from the estates, as well as from local churches, attended. They had a go at some drama,



met each other, and found out how they could get involved in the forthcoming production, based on Shakespeare's Two Gentlemen of Verona.

In the second phase of work, after the play had been cast and a rehearsal schedule put in place, we began the process of scripting. The idea was that the children would update the Shakespeare themselves. These are children aged 8 - 14, many of whom had never had any experience of Shakespeare, never been to the theatre, and most of whom come from struggling or problematic families. The idea to do a production during the summer was that of a local community police officer, who identified that most of the children involved would not be able to go on holiday, and so wanted to provide an activity that they could get involved in. When he heard that the plan was to help the children update Shakespeare into a modern setting, he gawped - so did many others.

In the rehearsals we read through a part of the original script, and talked about what it meant. Then the children improvised it. The improvisation was filmed, and the script written from the improvised versions. I, along with others, was surprised by both the children's ability and enthusiasm to engage with this 400 year old document. By the end of August we had a complete script. Thirty one pages long, five acts and nineteen scenes - this is the story of a boy band that breaks up when one of its members decides to enter a TV talent show.

The third phase was more in-depth rehearsal, in which we have choreographed the moves, and worked on characters. A team of young people and adults have also worked on costumes, set, lighting and sound, and will be part of the team transforming a church hall into a full theatre with raked seating, black curtains creating a studio space, and a full lighting and sound rig.

Relationships have been built, confidence has improved, fun has been had, and the end result will be quite an achievement for everyone. At the end, the children will receive a portfolio of their work with the script, photographs, and markers by which they can remember the process.

In this venture it is the process that has been primary. Of course, I will be doing my best to ensure that lines are learnt, giggling avoided, entrances remembered, voices are loud enough, and performances full of emotion connection and clear storytelling, but if they are not, and the final product is shambolic, it won't make the venture any less creative. The process, not the product, is what this creative engagement is about.

## **PRODUCT**

Well, how can we argue with that? It's obvious that what Dan is doing with the community where he works is a profound piece of art. Is there any room for an alternative perspective on the tension between the process of doing something creative, and the product at the end?

If you are like me, you are much better at starting than finishing. In the top drawer of my desk lies an unfinished novel, 50,000 words of which were completed in 'National



novel writing month<sup>1</sup> – an international, web based frenzy where 100,000 people spent the month of November 2007 trying to write a 50,000 word story in 30 days. It was a wonderful process. I learned so much and I had as much fun as it is possible to have with a word processor. But since then I have not been back and finished the novel. Well, it's finished, the first sentence is there, and the last, and the hero did finally get together with the heroine, and the space war was averted. But for all the fun of the process, it's the end product that I'm increasingly more interested in. I want a novel that at least has the characters starting and ending with the same names, that doesn't contain embarrassing plot holes and that I can read from cover to cover without forgetting who is on the side of the rebels and who is on the side of Earth. Process is great, in fact without process there is no creativity, but we value process even more if we value the product at the end.

Paul Valery, a French poet, said 'A *poem* is never *finished*, only *abandoned*.' We can easily spend our whole lives refining and polishing our work. We can labour endlessly and gain endless pleasure in the work. But eventually, we want to lay down our pen or our drumsticks or our computer mouse and say. 'That's it. I've done all I can. It's time to call it finished.'

There are process fans in every area of creative life. There are even process knitters, who are gazed upon in wonder by the rest of the knitting community; these are people who love to knit and don't really care if they never knit anything. They simply knit a jumper, then they unravel it and start again. While I understand the pleasure they get from the physical act, surely they miss out the equal pleasure of wearing the jumper at the end?

## USING CONVENTIONS

Creativity is a lot about repetition. Think about any song - the same phrases, verses and choruses are repeated a number of times. One thing that often defines a popular song, or indeed any piece of music, is whether you wake up and find yourself whistling it - it has a catch, a hook, it gets under your skin. It's the same with meditation and liturgy. We can experience creative transformation as the words, or the silence, become ingrained - part of our daily habit, our routines, the clothes we wear. We become so familiar with the sounds and words that we can move away from their surface meaning, to a higher plane of experience, a trance like state that can open our minds to creative possibility and potential.

In "The Seven Basic Plots: Why we tell stories", Christopher Booker argues that the basic structure of stories is written into our psychology. They provide a moral and spiritual template that we all identify with, and which give us the tools to understand how we can travel from a state of ego centredness, to a place in which we are at one with ourselves, our communities and all of creation. He argues that there are seven basic plots found across the world and throughout time - overcoming the monster, rags to riches, the quest, voyage and return, comedy, tragedy and rebirth. Each of these, he argues, displays the qualities of one archetypal basic five stage plot. He outlines it as this:

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<sup>1</sup> National Novel Writing Month. For further information see [www.nanowrimo.org](http://www.nanowrimo.org)



- **Stage 1:** In the initial phase we are shown the hero or heroine feeling somehow constricted, this sets up the tensions requiring resolution which leads into the action of the story
- **Stage 2:** This is followed by a phase of opening out, as the hero or heroine sense that they are on the road to some new state, or some far-off point of resolution.
- **Stage 3:** Eventually this leads to a more severe phase of restriction, where the strength of the dark power, and the hero or heroines limitations in the face of it, both become more obvious.
- **Stage 4:** We then see a phase where, although the dark power is more dominant, the light elements in the story are preparing for the final confrontation. This eventually works up to the nightmare climax, when opposition between light and darkness is at its most extreme and the pressure on everyone involved is at its greatest.
- **Stage 5:** This culminates in the moment of reversal and liberation, when the grip of the darkness is finally broken. The story thus ends on a sense of a final opening out into life, with everything at last resolved.

Booker defines this final state of resolution as all things being in balance - or shalom - it is a state in which the qualities of strength, order, feeling and intuition are in perfectly aligned. There is no stronger symbol for this than the coming together of the hero and heroine in union together. The use of such a symbol is often coupled with the community or even creation itself coming into a place of freedom and unity. The opposite to this, darkness, Booker describes as the state of ego centredness in which these four qualities are out of balance - for example, a tyrant king, may display the qualities of strength and order, but lack heart or intuition.

Booker argues that this basic template reveals to us the psychological truths of how we must all make the journey from immaturity to adulthood. We must learn to move from our own state of ego consciousness, face our own darkness, and emerge into a place of psychological balance and maturity. This is why we feel the sense of relief, happiness and joy when a story reaches its conclusion. He argues that the archetype is written into our hearts, that darkness has to be overcome for us to feel that sense of resolution. In a tragedy, the only difference is that we follow the dark, or incomplete character, rather than the hero - and we see that the price for being unable to make the transition between ego centredness and balanced life, is death.

So conventions and patterns are important. Creativity is often about playing a game within these rules - finding new ways to make them come alive to us again. They are important, they reveal to us deep truths about our humanity. Booker argues that in stories that try to break with these archetypes, for instance by imagining the dark characters triumphant and glorified rather than overcome, authors have to rely on pseudo-endings. He identifies three of these: either ending with a shocking act of violence which brings home the emptiness of the characters, employing a circular story, such as in brief encounter, where we end at the story's start point - nobody is changed, no real resolution reached; or thirdly making a deliberate virtue of the fact that nothing has happened, changed, or moved on. In each of these he identifies a fantasy cycle in which, due to the fact that a real resolution cannot be reached, the shocking violence or crushing emptiness must become more and more acute with each new story - every new film or book claiming to have pushed the frontiers or broken the mould. Here, breaking convention is held up as a virtue, but Booker argues that genuine creativity is found within the boundaries of the archetypes.



## **BREAKING CONVENTIONS**

At the heart of creativity is newness, doing new things. Sometimes, it is seeing things in a new way, or combining old things in a new pattern. We see this all the time in art, in literature, in music. Each year, the novel and the unusual is the cutting edge. The impressionists, such as Monet, with their now familiar and almost comforting misty images, were radical and shocking in their day – the French art establishment reviled them. In 1913, Stravinsky's ballet 'the Rite of Spring' premiered in Paris. Stravinsky's music, Diaghalev's costumes and Nijinsky's choreography, along with the shocking subject matter – a pagan ritual in which a maiden is sacrificed – led to a riot in the theatre, with the audience shouting and hissing so loudly that the artists could not hear the music from the orchestra. All through the history of all our artforms, the shock of the new is one of the defining features of creativity. There is something fundamental about rule breaking in the life of the artist. All through the history of art forms, there are people who have been reviled and criticised for doing something new. Often, they are criticised for speaking the unspeakable, for pushing the boundaries of what is considered tasteful, decent or appropriate.

Edward de Bono argues that for a creative person to routinely produce the same sort of 'stuff' is not true creativity. When you are producing picture after picture in the same style, or when a writer is producing novel after novel following the same formula, this is not the heart of creativity. Once art simply repeats the same thing again and again, it may be pleasant, enjoyable, it may be exciting and even arresting and alarming, but can it be considered to be truly creative?

## **EVERYONE'S AN ARTIST**

Many people argue that being an artist is something within us all. The child, when unfettered by the expectations or criticism of others, will create things that are beautiful, and truthful. However, as we grow up, the conformity imposed on us by the education system, and the self-consciousness of adulthood take away the freshness and the skills that allow us to enjoy creating.

So our task in unlocking our creativity could be described as returning to a childlike state. Following this argument, artistic endeavour is not confined to a few, professional people, it could be part of everyone's life.

But just as early civilisations only moved into producing paintings, beautiful architecture and other creative endeavours once they moved on from simple subsistence, in today's society most of us cannot afford to devote all our time to art.

So it's society that makes 'the artist' a minority pursuit. If we can find time and space in our lives, everyone should explore their artistic side, whether musically, through dance, writing, gardening or interior design. According to the current TV series 'Last Choir Standing', Britain has more choirs than pubs. Many local writing and poetry groups encourage everyone to put pen to paper, or stand up and share their poems.

Admittedly, it does not mean that everyone is going to be a great artist. Even if we say that everyone can write a poem or draw a picture, it's still essential to say that



some poems, for example, are better than others. However, evaluating creative activity is problematic in itself. The whole philosophical field of aesthetics is devoted to this and you only have to consider the Turner prize to realise that it is no simple thing. But if we start the consideration of 'what is good art' with the premise that everyone can be an artist, at least we are moving away from a definition of art that says 'good art is produced only by famous or professional artists.'

## THE PROFESSIONAL ARTIST

Is everyone a doctor? Is everyone a lawyer? If you're heading to the hospital to go under the knife, would you trust your life to an amateur with no professional qualifications? If you were having to defend yourself in court, would you ask someone who has no other training than the prolific watching of crime dramas to defend you? I don't think so. It's true that we're all called to be healers in some way, to listen to friends when they are hurting, to undertake the odd bit of first aid if there is nobody more qualified about. But does that make us doctors? We're all called to be concerned with issues of justice, to speak up for those who have no voice and to challenge the abuse of authority, but does that make us all lawyers? Surely there's something about being a professional which means that you have a particular authority in a subject, earned by a life dedicated to learning about, and practising in that particular area of life.

Some may argue that we need to expand the definitions of artist, doctor or lawyer - liberating those words from the straight jacket of specialisation. They may argue that such specialisation's set some above others, marking out social boundaries which can discourage the majority from recognising our God given capacity to act as healers, work for justice, or practice creativity, and growing into the responsibilities that each of these aspects of humanity demands. I have some sympathy with this argument. We do need to encourage and give permission for each individual to encounter the richness of what it means to be human, but if make the terms doctor, lawyer or artist meaningless by expanding them to the entire population, surely we risk devaluing those who have spent time and effort growing in understanding and honing skills in order to take their place in the body of humanity by playing their own unique role for the benefit of the whole. It may be the case that all have the capacity to be professional artists, but only a few choose to pursue a life which realises that capacity at the expense of the other possibilities that exist.

"If people knew how hard I worked to get my mastery, it wouldn't seem so wonderful at all." *Michelangelo*

"No one can arrive from being talented alone; God gives talent, work transforms talent into genius". *Anna Pavlova*

"The habit of discipline to finish each story is the difference between a hobby and a profession." *Unknown*

## Conclusion

When we look at these tensions it is tempting to conclude that they are inherently a bad thing. But tension is also good, in fact many very creative things have their life



only because they are held together by internal tensions – witness the Bristol suspension bridge! Wherever we stand on these issues, it helps us to listen to those who disagree radically with us and to realise the process of creativity is more complex than it may seem at first.

## Reading and Resources

- R Alter '***The Art of Biblical Narrative***' Basic Books 1983  
E de Bono '***Serious Creativity***' HarperCollins 1995  
C Booker '***The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories***' Continuum 2004  
J Cameron '***The Artist's Way***' Pan Books 1995  
J Cameron '***The Vein of Gold***' Pan Books 1997  
M Csikszentmihalyi '***Creativity***' Harper Perennial 1997  
JE Davies (Ed) '***Stories of Change: narrative and social movements***' State University of New York 2002  
NM Jackson (Ed) '***Right to Dance***' Banff Centre Press 2004  
A Koestler '***The Act of Creation***' Picador 1975  
C Seerveld '***Rainbows for the Fallen World***' Stride Publications 1988



# Grasping the Enigma

- Definitions and open questions

## WINDOWS ON CREATIVITY

There can be different worldviews or approaches to Creativity, which can be thought of as different windows on the same topic. Although each approach may be concerned with answering different questions or achieving certain goals, these views are not mutually exclusive and their interests overlap with other approaches. Just as looking into a room through different windows shows us different views on the same space, so looking at creativity through different windows lights up creativity in different ways.

Different approaches have different priorities and ask different questions.

### **Theological** – creativity as spiritual imperative

This worldview is rooted in the idea of God as Creator and specifically beginning with the act of Creation<sup>2</sup>. Any human act of creativity is therefore a natural extension and response to this supremely creative force. Human beings, created in the image of God, reflect God's creativity.

Questions that might be asked about creativity from a theological perspective include:

- How does creativity relate to our spirituality?
- How is our personal creativity affected or inspired by creation/the natural world?
- How should creativity impact on worship?
- What is our role as creative beings? How should we use our creative aspect?

### **Practical** – creativity as tool

This approach is interested in the process of creativity. Starting from a conviction that creativity can be learnt, it looks for tools and techniques that can be used to unlock creativity, and apply creative approaches to problems and situations in a wide range of settings.

Questions that might be asked about creativity from a practical perspective include:

- How does one apply creativity as a tool for problem solving?
- What are the benefits of different types of thinking such as logical and lateral thinking?
- Is creativity a process that can be learnt?
- How can I employ the practices or value of creativity to a particular task?
- What are the specific tools, techniques and methods used in the creative process?

### **Philosophical** – creativity as fundamental question of life

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 1:1-31



The philosophical perspective is concerned with the trying to define and explore the essence and ethics of creativity. It searches for what lies at the heart of a creative act, or person.

Questions that might be asked about creativity from a philosophical perspective include:

- Why is creativity important to human existence?
- What compels or stifens creativity?
- Why are some drawn towards creative actions, while others compelled towards destructive behaviour?
- Where is the boundary between sanity and insanity?
- Normal and the abnormal?
- Is it important to push these boundaries?
- Why are tensions important in the creative process?

A note of interest: A 'Foundation for Philosophy of Creativity' has been setup at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, to "...promote and further any research having generally to do with the notion of creativity."

For more information, go to: <http://www.siu.edu/~fpc/>

### **Political/Sociological** – creativity as human activity

The political and sociological approach starts with people: it sees creativity in the context of human interactions. It is concerned with the use of creativity to communicate, manipulate and persuade. It is also very aware of how creativity is defined and shaped by culture.

Questions that might be asked about creativity from a political/sociological perspective include:

- How can art be used to communicate a message?
- How does creativity relate to social movements?
- Why is shared story important in society and culture?
- How can creativity be applied to influence opinions or decisions?

### **Scientific** – creativity as biology

This approach focuses on the mind and the brain when trying to understand creativity. It begins with the evolution of the human brain and mind, and how creativity has helped humans survive and evolve. It also looks for psychological and neuroscientific explanations of the processes of creativity and the different ways it manifests itself.

Questions that might be asked about creativity from a scientific perspective include:

- In what ways is human creativity unique among animals?
- What processes in the brain are associated with the generation of new ideas?



- Can creative acts be classified?
- Is the ability to be creative the product of nature or nurture?

Each of these windows shows only part of the whole, multi-faceted nature and scope of the topic of creativity. And understanding the variety of different approaches to creativity explains why it is so very difficult to reach a universally satisfying definition of creativity. However it is not necessary for us to commit to only one approach; the approaches inform each other and are useful at different times.

### Reading and Resources

- R Alter '*The Art of Biblical Narrative*' Basic Books 1983  
 E de Bono '*Serious Creativity*' HarperCollins 1995  
 C Booker '*The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories*' Continuum 2004  
 J Cameron '*The Artist's Way*' Pan Books 1995  
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# Vibrant Expressions

- *Discovering imaginative living*

## SETTING THE SCENE

### Question

“How can creativity bring significant changes to personal and community life?” – many individuals and communities react to challenges through fear, ignorance and self-interest, they act predictably rather than creatively

### Aims of the session

- To discover how creativity starts with the individual and then outworks into the community
- To demonstrate creativity requires values based, rather than rules based, living
- To show community as a potential for radical change
- To explore communities as open, dynamic, outward-looking and attractive
- To discuss how to gain and maintain personal and community dynamism
- To address community culture as stable yet without stagnation or indignation

### Knowledge and Understanding

- Of what it really means to be human, spontaneous and creative
- Of the centrality of values in living creatively (personal and communal)
- Of living without legalism
- Of how individual / personal creativity serves communal expression
- Of structure that serves both creativity and community without stifling it

### Skills and Abilities

- To think and live more creatively
- To bring creativity into life choices and ethics
- To inspire communities to live differently, using examples from real-life stories
- To develop techniques to help people become more creative and effective
- To develop cultures of creativity



## EXPRESSING CREATIVITY

### Outside the box

'Creativity' is one of those enticing ideas that draws almost everyone towards it, it promises so much yet for many it seems to be truly realised by so few. We have seen that it is part of the core of our being; yet how often it becomes frustrated and forced. In reality there are infinite numbers of creative possibilities lying in wait to be discovered and expressed within the cut and thrust of everyday life.

We have seen creativity as the ability to make connections between things that most people wouldn't consider in that way, to look at circumstances within life from an unexpected perspective, to develop the skills and dexterity to bring it into reality.

Creative and imaginative living takes us out of the world of restrictive and legalistic decision-making into a way of thinking and acting that is energised and shaped by values. Here the subtle textures and contours of ideas such as peace, love, justice, truth, wisdom, joy – and so very many more – create the possibility for untold permutations within life-giving choices; provided there is the imagination to see them and the courage to make them a reality.

Where creativity is explored it is usually on an individual level; even singing in a choir or joining a cookery class can be more about personal development than a particularly group activity, togetherness and friendship being a bonus rather than a focus. Developing our own creative thinking and skills is of course an essential first step but, from a Christian perspective, it must reach out and have an influence and impact in the wider community. Christians must join other creative people of good will and 'think outside the box' when building community and engaging with the many challenges that it faces.

### The real thing ...?

When individuals and communities are faced with challenges their initial instinct is to react protectively marked by self-interest. This is understandable but regrettable.

The challenge of teenage promiscuity has led some to respond with the ....

#### ▪ 'Silver Ring Thing' – ring-fencing chastity

This well-meaning idea was begun in 1996 by Denny and Amy Pattyn as a response to escalating teen pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases in Yuma, Arizona USA. It encourages young people to make a vow of sexual abstinence until marriage symbolized by the wearing of an inscribed<sup>3</sup> ring on the third finger of the left hand. This is presented as God's plan for their lives and to avoid the physical, emotional and spiritual effects of premarital sex, which are not addressed by the distribution of condoms and practicing 'safe-sex'. To its credit it

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<sup>3</sup> The ring is inscribed with 1Th 4:3-4, 'God wants you to be holy, so you should keep clear of all sexual sin. Then each of you will control your body and live in holiness and honor'



offers a message of forgiveness and the opportunity to embrace a 'second virginity'. Nevertheless, however attractive the idea to many it is a legalism approach seeking immediate short-term results; it does not address the larger question of being a wholly integrated sexual person, stressing 'don't' rather than 'being'. Its legalism has been shown to sometimes create longer lasting sexual problems in later relationships. While it is superficially creative it does not demonstrate deep mature spiritual creativity. It presents a challenge to find a more authentically creative way to help and support young people.

The challenge of the fear of local crime has led some to respond with the ....

- **'Neighbourhood Watch' – defending community**

This is an organized group of citizens devoted to crime and vandalism prevention within a neighbourhood. The principle is very simple: If I care for my neighbour, and look after his or her needs, he will be safer, and vice versa. They are not vigilante organizations. When suspecting criminal activities, members are encouraged not to intervene but to contact authorities. It builds on an old European concept of 'town watch' and is sometimes called 'crime watch'. In its modern format it dates from the late 1960's following the stabbing and rape of nineteen-year old Kitty Genovese in Queens, New York in 1964 when some 38 people were said to have watched her attack and death and did nothing to help her. While initially seeming an attractive and even sensible idea it actually feeds a 'fortress mentality' and breeds on suspicion and fear. It becomes 'us and them'; it stresses 'insiders versus outsiders' and develops a 'closed community' mindset. It also seeks to deal with problems and difficulties by pushing them away rather than asking why is there a problem? Authentic creativity seeks to build a safe yet open and outward looking community, as we shall explore below.

The challenge of Christian living has led some to respond with ....

- **'What Would Jesus Do?' – focusing morality**

The WWJD slogan was first popular in the USA in the 1890's and has been so again since the 1990's. Charles M Sheldon coined the phrase in his novel 'In His Steps' first published in 1896. The main character in the book is a minister, Rev Henry Maxwell, who encounters a homeless man who challenges him to imitate Jesus in the way he lives his life. The homeless man has difficulty understanding why so many Christians ignore the poor. This leads Maxwell to use the phrase, "What would Jesus do?" in facing everyday life situations. Today WWJD is found on rings, wristbands, badges and much else besides. However, it is also widely parodied, mocked and bought into disrepute. The idea itself has a great pedigree, as Sheldon was actively involved in the Christian Socialist movement and the book did much to spread its ideas. At one level you cannot fault its aim to challenge Christians to make choices that would harmonise with what we believe Jesus would choose to do. That is in fact what Jesus asks us to do. However, the phrase is popularly used and interpreted in a bland and shallow way. It assumes we know what Jesus would do in a given situation and we rarely do (quite apart from the constraints of culture and character). It seems to lead few people to the creative Jesus, spontaneous, unpredictable yet always appropriate that we have



discussed; someone energised by values and deep spirituality. What this might mean in practice is what we now wish to explore.

## **VIBRANT CHALLENGES**

### **‘Any Town’ exercise**

Imagine a medium sized town, as average and typical as possible, with all the usual community dynamics, nothing extreme but everything as you would expect. There are individuals and families in a range of residential areas. There are the schools, the churches and a range of different businesses and an arts centre. There are the local government offices responsible for housing and other social needs; there is the health centre and recreation centre. Each of these points of focus has an influence and a response when a challenge confronts the community; each is full of creative possibilities if they so choose.

In our exercise we will confront the people in ‘Any Town’ with some typical current social challenges based on real-life experiences. Each small group will be presented with a particular social issue. Using the map provided, suggest ways in which each place of influence (school, church, local government office etc) within the town could act creatively to deal with the challenge to demonstrate that the community is both strong and inclusive. Record your ideas on the sheet next to the image of the particular influential group.

### **Challenging issues**

Any town is likely to face a range of possible challenges with all the social pressures at work today. The challenges could come in the form of ...

- Asylum seekers
- Gun / Knife gangs
- Prostitutes
- Rough sleepers
- Anti-social neighbours
- Disruptive hoodies
- Paedophiles
- Roma travellers (Gypsies)

How would you work with the different ‘influence groups’ in a town you lived in to bring a creative and inclusive community solution to these challenges, one that is marked by a Christian understanding of values? This is the exercise!

### **Challenging responses**

Here are some stories of some positive creative responses made by communities to some of the challenges mentioned above:

- **Rough sleepers**



A Christian community located in central London's wealthy South Kensington area started to open the doors of its building to local rough sleepers. They shared food with them, allowed them to sleep under a roof and use the washrooms and laundry facilities. Around 40 people would regularly come to this church each evening, spending time with the volunteers who were all part of the church congregation. Uncomfortable, and unaccustomed to seeing so many people from this usually excluded part of society in their exclusive neighbourhood, local residents began to lodge complaints both with the church and the local council. They insisted that the project be shut down as the rough sleepers who were now more regularly frequenting their streets had disturbed the atmosphere and peace there.

#### ▪ **Asylum Seekers**

The Kingsway Estate in Glasgow became home for hundreds of families escaping persecution and torture in places such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Algeria, Uganda and Congo. Over time, the asylum seekers were warmly embraced by the resident community. "We had been really going downhill - a lot of antisocial families were being put here. But after a year of the asylum seekers coming, the atmosphere became completely different," local sixty-seven-year-old Jean Donnachie says. "These people couldn't do enough for you, and I thought this was wonderful - it was like going back to when I was a child and you could leave the key in the door and if you needed help someone would come round." Most of these asylum seekers had their request for asylum in the UK turned down by the Home Office.

When the Home Office began coming to the estate at 5am, in dawn raids to remove them to detention centres prior to deportation back to their country. Donnachie and the rest of the residents looked on in horror. "It was like watching the Gestapo - men with armour, going in to flats with battering rams. I've never seen people living in fear like it. I saw a man jump from two storeys up when they came for him and his family. I stood there and I cried, and I said to myself, 'I am not going to stand by and watch this happen again.'"

Donnachie got together with her friend Noreen and organised the residents into daily dawn patrols, looking out for immigration vans. When they arrived, a phone system would swing in to action, warning asylum seekers to escape. The whole estate pitched in, gathering in large crowds in the early-morning dark to jeer the immigration officials as they entered the tower blocks. On more than one occasion, the vans left the estate empty - the people they had come to arrest had got out in time and were hidden by the crowd. The estate kept this up for two years until the forced removals stopped.<sup>4</sup>

#### ▪ **Prostitutes**

In Amsterdam a group of Christians moved into a red-light district and became involved with a network of prostitutes and pimps. They were unable to release women from prostitution without offering alternative sources of income. Many were mothers, and the Christians began babysitting while they were soliciting. The developed into legal work to release the women from the contractual obligations with their pimps; job-finding; and fighting the landlords and politicians who owned

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<sup>4</sup> This story is from the Guardian newspaper



the buildings used for prostitution and who profited from it. The Christians had to develop a political and legal strategy to deal with this reality.<sup>5</sup>

#### ▪ **Gun / Knife gangs**

On 29th July 2002 Damian Cope was shot and killed. He was 22 years old. Since his death, his mother Lucy has set up the powerful nationwide organisation 'Mothers Against Guns'.

It calls for people to set up campaign groups in their communities, to see an end to Britain's rising gun culture and lobby the government to introduce stiffer penalties for people convicted of gun-related crimes. It works to highlight the effects of gun crime on victims, perpetrators and their families.

'Mothers Against Guns' have three key demands:

- Ten-year sentences without parole for people found in possession of a firearm
- Life sentences without parole for those who murder with guns
- A ban on the sale of replica weapons

A short film 'Toys That Kill' has been produced to publicise the campaign. It will be shown in cinemas across the UK.

Alexander Rose (based in Lambeth, south west London) says:

"I go round to schools and youth clubs talking to young people about the issues around gang culture. To make them think about what else is out there. To make them realise that they don't have to join a gang or carry weapons. I want to raise awareness to educate young people to STOP carrying weapons. Friends and family members have died due to this issue. I decided I just had to do something. I turned to what I knew at the time, which was graphic design, and came up with a T-shirt design and a campaign called STOP (Solve This Ongoing Problem). I'm using positive fashion to fight the negative gangster image. I want to inspire others. I'm not special. Everyone can use what they have to do something. I'm telling you: positivity pays off. Talent + Belief = Success."<sup>6</sup>

"I never knew just how deeply the issue, which I have become accustomed to seeing in London, has effected the wider communities outside London. The main thing I wanted to let you know is there are MORE young people like myself who are using their own talents to address the issue. For example I recently met a young barber who gives half price cuts to anyone that wants 'stop the shootings' written on the side of their heads.

I wouldn't class myself as doing anything extraordinary, all I'm doing is applying what I'm learning in graphic design' towards what I see in gun and knife crime, I'm not

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<sup>5</sup> See R Bakke '*The Urban Christian*' IVP 1987 p154

<sup>6</sup> There is a video diary of him at <http://www.vimeo.com/stopcampaign> explaining how the campaign came into existence. This is part of a recent interview he had with the Professional Boxing Association. The interview is taken from the Educational Sports Forum website (where Alexander is also photographed with Gordon Brown)

doing this for fame, recognition or the money. I'm not bothered if no one remembers who designed the T-shirt, but all I care about is the message being remembered. I'm using the money raised from the T-shirts which I sell for £5 on Ebay to help other young people start up their ideas to benefit their communities or to spread more awareness in different forms. I'm someone who'd rather be remembered for what I do rather than what I own."

*Are you aware of how young people are responding to issues of gun and knife crime in your area? How can we make space in our communities to allow the voice of young people to speak out? In what ways do you think we can allow them space and give them support to creatively find solutions to problems which they face?*

## Reading and Resources

- R Alter '***The Art of Biblical Narrative***' Basic Books 1983  
E de Bono '***Serious Creativity***' HarperCollins 1995  
C Booker '***The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories***' Continuum 2004  
J Cameron '***The Artist's Way***' Pan Books 1995  
J Cameron '***The Vein of Gold***' Pan Books 1997  
M Csikszentmihalyi '***Creativity***' Harper Perennial 1997  
JE Davies (Ed) '***Stories of Change: narrative and social movements***' State University of New York 2002  
NM Jackson (Ed) '***Right to Dance***' Banff Centre Press 2004  
A Koestler '***The Act of Creation***' Picador 1975  
C Seerveld '***Rainbows for the Fallen World***' Stride Publications 1988



